



# Art, Trees, and the Enchantment of the Anthropocene

Caroline Wendling's *White Wood*

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**Abstract** The objective of this article is to think through the concepts of deep time and enchantment with Caroline Wendling's *White Wood* (2014), a living artwork in northeast Scotland. The first part of the article establishes the relationship between deep time, ecology, and enchantment and the role of art in exploring this relationship. Concepts that enfold deep time and ecology like the Anthropocene and Timothy Morton's "mesh" have the power to enchant because, in Mark A. Schneider's terms, they expose us to "something both real and at the same time uncanny, weird, mysterious, or awesome." Allied to this, Jane Bennett's claim that an enchanted sensibility can be cultivated strategically, combined with Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin's assertion that artistic strategies offer an important way of engaging with the Anthropocene, establish the context for approaching *White Wood*. The second part of the article then offers an extended reading of the artistic strategies employed in *White Wood*. *White Wood* is a small deciduous woodland conceived by Wendling and created in collaboration with the community of Huntly. Among the many hundred trees planted were forty-nine oak saplings grown from acorns produced by trees planted as part of Joseph Beuys's *7000 Oaks* project in Kassel, Germany (begun 1982). I consider Wendling's project through the interrelated themes of regeneration, participation, and the layering of temporalities that it likewise inherits from *7000 Oaks*. In this way I demonstrate how the temporal and participatory openness that inheres in *White Wood* can cultivate the sense of enchantment that Morton identifies as one of the conditions of thinking ecologically across vast spatial, temporal, and agential scales—a thinking that is demanded by the Anthropocenic reframing of humanity.

**Keywords** enchantment, Anthropocene, the mesh, participation, regeneration, social sculpture

## Introduction

If there is enchantment, it lies in the future. The ecological "enchants the world," if enchantment means exploring the profound and wonderful openness and intimacy of the mesh. What can we make of the new constellation? What art, literature, music, science, and philosophy are suitable to it?

—Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*

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In March 2015, artist Caroline Wendling led the planting of *White Wood*,<sup>1</sup> a living artwork and permanent installation situated at Hummel Stone in the Bin Forest on the edge of the small Aberdeenshire town of Huntly, in northeast Scotland. Seven hundred trees, including oak, birch, rowan, and hazel, and many hundred more native plants were planted over a weekend with the support of a large group of volunteers, most of whom were residents of the town and its surrounds. The event marked the culmination of Wendling's Oaks and Amity residency with Huntly-based Deveron Projects, which wove together ideas about pacifism and conscientious objection, amity, memory, community, and ecology. Timed to commemorate the centenary of the First World War, *White Wood* is a "peace wood"; a monument to the fragility of peace between nations and a memorial both for soldiers from the local area who died on the Western Front and for those who refused to fight and were vilified for their choices. This is, however, only one aspect of the complex layering of temporalities that underpins *White Wood*. It also has art-historical significance. Among the seven hundred trees planted in Wendling's project were forty-nine oak saplings grown from acorns produced by the trees planted between 1982 and 1987 for 7000 Oaks, Joseph Beuys's iconic "social sculpture" in Kassel, Germany.<sup>2</sup> With the community planting of seven thousand trees (not all oaks), Beuys's environmental art-activist gesture sought to instigate both a global reforestation and a shift in ecological consciousness. Wendling's project knowingly inherits Beuys's desire for regeneration through social sculpture. So, while it looks back to the catastrophe of the First World War, *White Wood* is ultimately an act for the future. However, it is into an increasingly fragile and uncertain future that *White Wood* projects, and it does so with its own uncertainty, an in-written fallibility through which its eventual "completion" rests on contingency and the cooperation of countless as yet unknowable participants. This is one respect in which Wendling's work explores the "openness and intimacy" of ecological interdependence or what, in the epigraph above, Timothy Morton terms the "mesh."<sup>3</sup> And as such, it is how *White Wood* fosters a sense of enchantment.

When Morton claims that enchantment "lies in the future," he is rejecting a discourse of reenchantment and the implication that something—an enchanted sensibility—has been lost in the past and can somehow be regained. "People commonly criticize science for disenchanting the world, making it both utterly flat and highly profitable," writes Morton, adding that "the more we know, the less certain and more ambiguous things become."<sup>4</sup> The increasingly refined understandings of the mesh attained by science—along with the various insights, questions, and uncertainties that arise with

1. See Oaks & Amity, *The White Wood*, [www.deveron-projects.com/caroline-wendling/](http://www.deveron-projects.com/caroline-wendling/).

2. *White Wood* thereby joins several other artistic ventures that have perpetuated Beuys's vision for 7000 Oaks. Beuys-inspired tree plantings by artists and art centers have taken place in Bolognaro (where Beuys participated in the planting), New York, Minneapolis, and Baltimore and on the hill of Uisneach in Ireland. Dan Harvey and Heather Ackroyd have also created a mobile installation composed of 250 seedlings germinated from Kassel oaks. See Antliff, *Joseph*, 139. See also Cooke, *Joseph Beuys: 7000 Oaks*.

3. Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 28.

4. *Ibid.*, 14.

such understandings—in fact have the power to enchant. In *Culture and Enchantment*, Mark A. Schneider expresses a similar view, arguing that enchantment “is part of our normal condition, and far from having fled with the rise of science, it continues to exist (though often unrecognized) wherever our capacity to explain the world’s behavior is slim.”<sup>5</sup> Jane Bennett also takes issue with narratives of disenchantment. For Bennett, “the very characterization of the world as disenchanted ignores and then discourages affective attachment to that world.”<sup>6</sup> Instead, she finds in enchantment an affect that rather than belonging to a premodern age is produced across diverse contemporary phenomena, from advertising to assemblage theory. And just as the notion of disenchantment involves both a subjective state marked by disappointment and meaninglessness and “the impersonal historical condition of the flight of the gods,” for Bennett enchantment occurs both as affect and as a condition of what she terms the “liveliness” of matter.<sup>7</sup> Within this discourse on enchantment, then, we find the potential for the cultivation of a more attuned and responsive awareness of ecological interconnection.

In the first part of this article I position this renewed attention to enchantment in relation to the reframing of humanity’s position within the mesh that comes with the designation *Anthropocene*. My ultimate intention here is to argue, in answer to Morton’s question quoted at the start of the article, that Wendling’s *White Wood* offers an example of an art that is “suitable” to exploring this “new constellation.” I begin by positing a relationship between enchantment, art, and the Anthropocene. In the second part of the article I follow this with a close reading of *White Wood* that focuses on three interconnected themes in Wendling’s project: regeneration, participation, and the layering of temporalities.

### Art and Enchantment in the Anthropocene

Describing the process by which he arrived at the term *mesh*, Morton explains that as well as being shorthand for an expansive sense of ecological interconnection, *mesh* has the added benefit that by extension it can also mean “a complex situation or series of events in which a person is entangled; a concatenation of constraining or restricting forces or circumstances; a snare.”<sup>8</sup> It is a definition that also readily describes the Anthropocene. Indeed, if the mesh describes interconnection across vast space and vast time,<sup>9</sup> then we might think of the Anthropocene as a particular historical moment within its system—an all-encompassing system with a spatiotemporal beginning or end that is coterminous with the history of the universe. But that final term, *snare*, speaks directly to the uncanniness of the Anthropocene—the “constraining [and] restricting

5. Schneider, *Culture*, x.

6. Bennett, *Enchantment*, 3 (hereafter cited in the text).

7. *Ibid.*, 61, 64.

8. Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 28. Here Morton is quoting the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

9. *Ibid.*, 42.

forces” by which we find ourselves (and our Earth-dwelling companions) trapped, having been laid for us, by us. As a proposed new phase in geologic time defined by human-induced impacts on the “Earth System” that will remain in the fossil record millions of years hence,<sup>10</sup> the Anthropocene imparts its own shade on the mesh. It is colored by the entanglement of human and geologic timescales and by the explicit focus on and reframing of humanity as a geologic force. Like the mesh, the Anthropocene radically changes our thinking, prompting Timothy Clark’s apposite labeling of it as a threshold concept.<sup>11</sup>

Because the material, cultural, and psychological implications of the Anthropocene are only now beginning to be mapped and speculated on, it could be fair to say that our growing awareness of the Anthropocene brings enchantment in tow. Enchantment arises, for Schneider, “when we are confronted by circumstances or occurrences so peculiar and so beyond our present understanding as to leave us convinced that, were they to be understood, our image of how the world operates would be radically transformed. To be enchanted is thus . . . [to be] faced with something both real and at the same time uncanny, weird, mysterious, or awesome.”<sup>12</sup> Here Schneider could be describing the Anthropocene. Interestingly, however, Schneider locates contemporary sources of enchantment not in the natural world but in human cultural production. Practices like deconstruction and psychoanalytic literary criticism exhibit traces of enchantment, in Schneider’s view, because they rely on “strange intenders,” that is, “intentional agents that work in peculiar and mysterious ways.”<sup>13</sup> One such example is the common practice in literary and cultural criticism of finding “the etymological histories of specific words to be presently operative in the constitution of textual meaning,” which Schneider reads to mean that “features of the communicative apparatus not previously thought to possess signifying power are found to have acquired it, with the consequence that texts appear ‘strange’ or ‘uncanny.’”<sup>14</sup> Anthropocenic events like global warming produce similar effects. Morton, for instance, has written about the newly realized signifying powers of a previously disregarded entity like weather: “You can no longer have a routine conversation about the weather with a stranger. The presence of global warming looms into the conversation like a shadow, introducing strange gaps.”<sup>15</sup> The weather conversation, which Morton describes as a “neutral screen” against which we are able to enact our small-scale human dramas, has been ruined.<sup>16</sup> Here the

10. Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R McNeill define “Earth System” as “the suite of interacting physical, chemical and biological global-scale cycles and energy fluxes that provide the life-support system for life at the surface of the planet” (“Anthropocene,” 615).

11. Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*.

12. Schneider, *Culture*, 2–3.

13. *Ibid.*, 46.

14. *Ibid.*, 51.

15. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 99.

16. *Ibid.* See also Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 28, where he uses the phrase “neutral-seeming backdrop.”

previously a-signifying backdrop of weather has been endowed with an ability to signify something—global warming—that is both “real” and “weird,” to use Schneider’s terms; something that has local effects, where we can feel the raindrops on our hands and see them dotting the street, but that also signifies an entity at a much larger scale, in terms of both spatiality and complexity, of which it is an effect: climate, something that, as Morton notes, “you can’t visualize.”<sup>17</sup>

The impact on something as banal as the weather conversation exposes a crucial factor in the reframing effects of the Anthropocene. As David Farrier has noted, the deconstructive quality of the Anthropocene draws attention to the fact that “[deep] time is not an abstract, distant prospect, but a spectral presence in the everyday.”<sup>18</sup> Farrier underscores this claim with an account of that most ubiquitous material—plastic:

[A]lmost every piece of plastic ever made remains in existence in some form, and their chemical traces are increasingly present in our bodies. . . . Although ostensibly inert, like Chernobyl’s “undead” isotopes, plastics are in fact intensely lively, leaching endocrine-disrupting chemicals. Single-use plastic might seem to disappear when I dispose of it, but it (and therefore I) will nonetheless continue to act on the environments in which it persists for millennia.<sup>19</sup>

Identifying “man-made” materials that are likely to remain in the geologic record as traces of our existence in the deep future, Jan Zalasiewicz’s Anthropocene stratigraphy committee has posited plastics as being “ideal for forming fossils that would date this epoch as different from all before it.”<sup>20</sup> Such knowledge has the potential to radically alter perception. My toothbrush, my spectacles case, and my child’s toy duck are all suddenly invested with inconceivable time frames and unknowable futures. (“Sudden,” of course, only with respect to my own cognition.) All of which resonates with Bennett’s claim that “to be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday” (Bennett, *Enchantment*, 4). To experience enchantment, Bennett suggests, is to “notice new colors, discern details previously ignored, hear extraordinary sounds, as familiar landscapes of sense sharpen and intensify” (5). It is clear, however, that many of the details and defamiliarized landscapes of the Anthropocene inspire anxiety and dread rather than a “fleeting return to childlike excitement” (*ibid.*) Species depletion, mass extinction, ocean acidification, nuclear and toxic waste, global warming—such phenomena can provoke a sense of dissociation and helplessness and an inability to act meaningfully. Enchantment in the Anthropocene thus treads a fine line with disenchantment. The realization of the “liveliness” of matter that Bennett and Farrier assert produces both wonder and fear. Indeed, as Bennett argues, fear has its place in enchantment, but “fear cannot dominate if enchantment is to

17. *Ibid.*

18. Farrier, “How the Concept of Deep Time Is Changing.”

19. *Ibid.*

20. Quoted in Robin and Muir, “Slammin’ the Anthropocene.”

be (*ibid.*)” It is here that what is perhaps most crucial for our consideration of the relationship between the Anthropocene, enchantment, and art arises. That is, Bennett’s claim that while enchantment “is something that we encounter, that hits us, . . . it is also a comportment that can be fostered through deliberate strategies” (4). We can adopt ways of being, thinking, or feeling that place the emphasis on enchantment rather than on fear and that help cultivate an enchanted sensibility. Arguably some of the most effective of these strategies are those utilized by artists.

In *Art in the Anthropocene*, Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin argue that art offers a valuable means for aiding in the articulation of Anthropocenic complexity:

Art, as the vehicle of *aesthesis*, is central to feeling with and thinking through the Anthropocene. . . . [It] provides a polyarchic site of experimentation for “living in a damaged world,” as Anna Tsing has called it, and a non-moral form of address that offers a range of discursive, visual, and sensual *strategies* that are not confined by the regimes of scientific objectivity, political moralism, or psychological depression.<sup>21</sup>

Davis and Turpin address a key concern here when they delineate the “central” role that art can play in relation to the Anthropocene. Clark argues, for example, that the “Anthropocene names a newly recognized context that entails a chastening recognition of the limits of cultural representation as a force for change in human affairs” when those affairs are challenged by forces—including biological, meteorological, and geologic ones—very much beyond human control (if not, to some extent, influence).<sup>22</sup> On one hand, as Davis and Turpin suggest, it is in “thinking through” the complexity of the present and its relations to both past and future that art offers itself. For Clark, likewise, “cultural representations” can assist in comprehending the problems. However, while understanding “must be a minimal condition” for action that moves beyond comprehension toward mitigation or resolution, Clark remains skeptical as to the potential that cultural representations hold for instigating such action.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, however, Davis and Turpin assert that their collection reaches “urgently beyond its paginated form” as a “conceptual centrifuge for . . . future action.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the focus on art as a “site for experimentation” reminds us that the art discussed in the pages of *Art in the Anthropocene* exists “out there,” as *practice*. That is, we are reminded that art involves *doing* rather than or as well as *showing*. And while this is by no means to undermine theory or thought as in itself a mode of practice or doing, it is to draw attention to the material, physical side of art practice—that is, the condition of possibility for art to present an intervention in the physical *as well as* in the theoretical and conceptual realms. And this physical or material intervention is fundamental to *White Wood*, as we will explore shortly.

21. Davis and Turpin, “Art and Death,” 3–4; emphasis added.

22. Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, 21.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Davis and Turpin, “Art and Death,” 3.

Davis and Turpin also draw our attention to art's affective potential when they suggest that art is central to "feeling with" the Anthropocene. *Feeling* evokes both emotion and tactility and so suggests the response produced in spectators or participants by an art object—something with which they come into *contact*. Enchantment, of course, is one such affect. The ability to assist in "feeling with and thinking through the Anthropocene" might be read here as synonymous with Morton's call for an art "suitable" to the mesh; an art that has the capacity to attune us to the Anthropocene emotionally and tactilely as well as intellectually; and an art that, through a means of "discursive, visual and sensual *strategies*," can cultivate enchantment. As I have already noted, in Bennett's thesis cultivating an enchanted sensibility is desirable because enchantment may be a particularly useful affect both in countering the threat of despair and disenchantment that a growing awareness of the Anthropocene can induce and in the development of an ecological ethics that can aid in the adoption of less destructive modes of existence (157, 174).

To conclude the first part of this article, then, we may distinguish two spheres of enchantment. First, we can identify the sphere of empirical foundations for our awareness of the Anthropocene, or, more broadly, the mesh—the scientific data that point toward the changes in the Earth System produced by anthropogenic effects and the resultant reframing of humanity as a geologic agent. Our lack of ability to fully discern, understand, or predict the implications of our historical epoch and the corresponding unsettling transformation that our perception must undergo when confronted by such "weird" realities can produce a sense of the world as enchanted. This manifests in the uncanniness we experience through the weather, the deep longevity of plastics, and the dizzying sense of spatial and temporal scales that are induced, in our growing awareness of the Anthropocene, by even the most mundane of things. Second, we have the sphere of art, which can be characterized, following Davis and Turpin, by its utilization of diverse aesthetic strategies. Here we find creative strategies that may help cultivate a sensibility in their spectators, practitioners, or participants that opens them to enchantment. One way this may begin to take place is through the employment of strategies that draw attention to the first sphere, whether by conceptual, affective, or tactile means or, more likely, combinations of these. In turn, then, the second sphere of enchantment might be characterized by its potential not only to assist in "feeling with and thinking through the Anthropocene" but also to generate an ethical imperative to transmit feeling and thinking into action or even to enable the former precisely *through* action and participation, as is the case in *White Wood*. Franklin Ginn has pointed out that the Anthropocene "demands a kind of depressing redemption: realizing the question is not how to continue present ways of life, but the deeper challenge of crafting new ways to respond with honor and dignity to unruly earth forces."<sup>25</sup> Artistic strategies that develop an enchanted engagement with the Anthropocene may assist us in this task.

25. Ginn, "When Horses Won't Eat," 357.

### Caroline Wendling's *White Wood*

Wendling's *White Wood* achieves this by weaving together a variety of conceptual threads that foreground, imply, and produce interconnections between a host of human and nonhuman "participants" across multiple layered temporalities. One such thread, as already explained, was the perpetuation of Beuys's artistic legacy through the planting of forty-nine oak saplings grown from acorns collected from his *7000 Oaks*. But *White Wood* does not only inherit from *7000 Oaks* in the biological sense, through the intergenerational use of acorns from the "parent" trees in Kassel. Wendling is also influenced by Beuys's vision of "social sculpture," embodied in *7000 Oaks*, which combines an ecological regeneration with the regeneration of "humankind."<sup>26</sup> With this in mind we can look at *White Wood* through the intersecting themes of regeneration, participation, and temporality, taking each theme in turn to develop an understanding of how Wendling's artistic strategies can help us to attune to the complexity of our ecological constellation.

Regeneration can be considered in terms of the physical renewal of the *White Wood* planting site, whose crop of commercial Sitka spruce had been felled fifteen years earlier. This act is regenerative in the sense that it brings new tree growth to a clear-felled area. However, that it does so on a site previously given to commercial forestry resonates in other ways with the idea of enchantment. In "A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook," Robert Macfarlane makes a case for language as "vital to the possibility of [the] re-enchantment" of an earth disenchanted by the commodification of the natural world.<sup>27</sup> While Bennett and Morton resist the idea that the world has been disenchanted by the rise of scientific method and rationalization, Macfarlane argues that "as we have enhanced our power to determine nature, so we have rendered it less able to converse with us." As a result, "we find it hard to imagine nature outside a use-value framework."<sup>28</sup> It is this commodification of the natural world that Martin Heidegger identified in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology" in 1954, where he observed "that the rise of technology and the technological imagination had converted what [Heidegger] called 'the whole universe of beings' into an undifferentiated 'standing reserve' (*Bestand*) of energy, available for any use to which humans choose to put it."<sup>29</sup> It is this process that, for Macfarlane, has resulted in the disenchantment of the earth. Heidegger uses the forester, subordinated to the demands of the timber industry, to demonstrate how "standing reserve" applies not only to what we might typically consider "natural resources" but also, and perhaps "even more originally," to man.<sup>30</sup> The commercial forest thus offers a pertinent example of standing reserve as it relates across natural-cultural configurations. In his essay for the *White Wood* catalogue, forester Steve Brown,

26. Quoted in Antliff, *Joseph Beuys*, 126.

27. Macfarlane, "Counter-Desecration Phrasebook," 118.

28. *Ibid.*, 117.

29. Quoted in *ibid.*, 325.

30. Heidegger, "Question," 323.

who collaborated with Wendling on the practical aspects of woodland creation and care as well as helping to coordinate the planting, reminds us that the Forestry Commission was established by the British government precisely to “create a national *reserve* of timber” after the First World War “stretched timber resources in Britain to [the] breaking point.”<sup>31</sup> The Bin Forest on the edge of Huntly, within which the *White Wood* sits, was “one of the first man-made forests in [Scotland] to be created with the sole aim of producing commercial conifer trees for this reserve of timber.”<sup>32</sup> Such a site could be considered an apposite symbol for a disenchanting world. However, as Bennett argues, “[one] way to loosen the hold of the disenchantment tale . . . is to keep an eye out for practices and experiences that are anomalous within a world understood to be wonder-disabled. In other words, to foreground cultural sites that . . . ought not to exist in the way they do, within a disenchanting world” (84). One example Bennett gives is “the emergence of surprising and beautiful ideas and eventually social movements amidst the enormity of human stupidity” (ibid.). The intervention of *White Wood* as an aesthetic project on this site—within a stand of commercial forestry—seems to fulfil these criteria.

As an artistic intervention, *White Wood* replicates Beuys’s intention to combine ecological and sociocultural regeneration. That is, it seeks to renew humanity’s relationship with, or treatment of, the earth; to cultivate a relationship that is not based on the instrumentalization of the natural world, that does not seek or impose a “use value” on a future “product” or “commodity.” *White Wood* does have uses, just not of the commercial variety. It has aesthetic use, and it has a use as a memorial to the tragedy of the First World War. However, it may be more accurate to suggest that the value attributed to *White Wood* comes precisely from its nonuse: standing trees rather than timber or reserve; and “standing” not in the sense of waiting, bracketed off, or static but in a vital sense that incorporates a multitude of other verbs such as *growing*, *seeding*, *propagating*, *sheltering*, *ageing*, *dying*, *falling*, *decomposing*, and *nurturing*. In this sense, *White Wood* reflects a common trope in socially engaged art practice, for which Beuys offers an early precedent. In his statement on “social aesthetics,” the Danish curator Lars Bang Larsen notes how an “artistic attitude . . . [that] experiments with the transgressions of various economies” is a key feature of art that embraces the social practice he is outlining.<sup>33</sup> *White Wood* transgresses the economy of standing reserve by imposing a *nonuse value* on the wood, one not based on profit or commerce and in direct opposition to the notion of war utility; a value that is instead based on meaning derived both from the symbolism with which the wood is invested through the multiplicity of conceptual threads driving the project and, crucially, from the materiality of the wood in and for itself.

31. Brown, “Creating the *White Wood*,” 39; emphasis added.

32. Ibid.

33. Larsen, “Social Aesthetics,” 172.

Aligned to this is the concept of participation that underpins social sculpture, or social aesthetics, and that found an early articulation in Beuys's claim for social sculpture as an art practice involving "every living person . . . [as] a creator, a sculptor, or an architect of the social organism."<sup>34</sup> Claire Bishop has usefully elaborated the role of participation, identifying three recurring agendas that motivate participatory art practices:

The first concerns the desire to create an active subject, one who will be empowered by the experience of physical or symbolic participation. . . . The second argument concerns authorship. . . . Collaborative creativity is . . . understood both to emerge from, and to produce, a more positive and non-hierarchical social model. The third issue involves a perceived crisis in community and collective responsibility. . . . One of the main impetuses behind participatory art has therefore been a restoration of the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning.<sup>35</sup>

Each of these issues pertains to *White Wood*. Wendling notes how *White Wood* represents "a truly communal artwork" in this respect, one that embraces and involves the local community.<sup>36</sup> As such, it reflects the centrality of community engagement in Deveron Projects' approach to curation and facilitation. Director Claudia Zeiske remarks that an artist's project "must touch the community as well as working artistically."<sup>37</sup> Wendling presented the project in public arenas around Huntly during the early stages of her *Oaks and Amity* residency to canvas support for the proposed wood and to elicit suggestions from residents regarding possible sites for the planting. She also worked with the local secondary school, enlisting the help of students who were going on a field trip to the First World War battlefields in Northern France, asking each of them to bring back a pebble that could then be symbolically planted with the oak trees. However, it was the planting event itself, involving dozens of volunteers over the two days on-site, that epitomized the idea of direct participation in *White Wood*. The seven hundred tree saplings and hundreds of native plants were carried to the site by the volunteers, walking in procession with the artist from Huntly town square. Following a brief workshop on how to plant the trees and place the protective guards around them, planting teams of two or three were provided with tools and trees and directed to an area of the site, which had been pre-staked to ensure the trees were adequately distributed. Here Zeiske's comments about the project's "touching" the community can be taken quite literally; likewise the sense of art's capacity to aid in "feeling with" of which Davis and Turpin speak. Participation here involved a physical contact with the artwork; the production of the artwork necessitated the participants' touch. The silver birch and rowan saplings that we were planting (I participated—as did the pupils who had collected the pebbles)

34. Beuys, "I Am Searching for Field Character," 125.

35. Bishop, "Introduction/Viewers as Producers," 12.

36. Wendling and Zeiske, "White Wood," 8.

37. *Ibid.*

were no thicker than a pencil, so great care had to be taken not to damage them, especially when placing the protective guards. The oaks, requiring even greater care, were planted by those with more experience. Moreover, the act of handling these insipient lifeforms coupled with the responsibility to put them correctly in the earth in order that they might grow and thrive produced a powerful affective connection both between the participants—as collaborators with collective responsibility—and between the participants and the plants, with which there was a momentary sense of intimacy.

By engaging the community in the planting of the wood, Wendling sought to activate a sense of shared ownership entailing a degree of both responsibility and entitlement. Years in the future, it is hoped, the *White Wood* will be a site with multiple (human) uses beyond the mnemonic and symbolic ones already mentioned, including for recreation, education, and the hosting of future events. Participants are thus involved directly in the production of a cultural and ecological resource for their town that they will be able to return to and use in the future. The nature of the project also appeals to a community of participants who may not otherwise actively engage with contemporary art. The same could be said of Wendling's inclusion of children in the artwork's production, indeed affording children and young people a significant role in the creation of *White Wood*. As a result, *White Wood* inaugurates a community of active subjects and reconfigures the "social model," creating a momentary opening in how human relations are perceived in terms of organization and labor; even if this reconfiguration is temporary, it takes place as a *real* material and conceptual intervention in public space and so gestures toward the possibility of future, longer-term reconceptualizations or even realizations of what more progressive, "sustainable" models of social organization might entail. This in turn leads to thinking around Bishop's third agenda for participation concerning "crisis in community and collective responsibility."

These notions of "crisis" and "collective responsibility" speak directly to the environmental predicaments that characterize the Anthropocene and so lead us back to a more direct consideration of how *White Wood* helps us to feel with and think through our present ecological moment. Here we can expand the concept of participation beyond the human participants as I have outlined them so far. In conversation with Volker Harlan in 1979, Beuys spoke of "co-workers" in the creative processes that shape the world around us: "real agents or agencies," "competent collaborators in the world that, under certain circumstances, can accomplish far more than we can."<sup>38</sup> In this respect he seems to offer a prescient articulation of what Bruno Latour would later describe as nonhuman "actors, or more precisely, *participants* in the course of action waiting to be given a figuration."<sup>39</sup> Where Beuys remains enigmatic concerning the shape his "co-workers" might take and alludes to the possibility of both physical and spiritual entities, Latour presents a variety of possible participants in his reconfiguration of the social,

38. Beuys and Harlan, *What Is Art?*, 72, 71.

39. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 71; emphasis in original.

which include kettles, hammers, rails, lists, a cat, a mug, soap, baskets, remote controls, and speed bumps.<sup>40</sup> As Latour asserts, the object of presenting such a diverse and apparently interminable list is to demonstrate the extent and range of participants that may be required to “account for the durability and extension of any interaction.”<sup>41</sup>

Following Latour’s lead, the list of potential collaborators in *White Wood* appears endless. Who or what participates in the growth of a wood? What determines its success? For starters we might consider (over and above the human participants and the trees) the spades and hammers we used to plant the trees and make good the stakes, or the deer and vole guards that protect the saplings from browsing fauna. Both directly reflect that sense of “durability” highlighted by Latour. The humans who participate in this artwork also have a role to play beyond the planting—to ensure that the planted trees are not threatened by an overabundance of naturally seeding plants such as conifers from the neighboring plantations and to ensure that the guards remain in place until the young trees are strong enough to survive without them. But the health and growth of the wood ultimately depend on a multitude of less visible participants, from the basic life-giving elements—the nutrients in the soil, precipitation levels, and sunlight—to the innumerable animals, insects, birds, invertebrates, microorganisms, and fungi that pollinate the plants and trees, break down the soil, and enact the ecosystemic processes that will enable the wood to grow and mature.

Following Latour, Owain Jones and Paul Cloke have argued that moves toward a broad view of agency such as that described here (i.e., one that extends agency beyond the human) may have the potential to “destabilize the anthropocentric weightings within ethics and politics,” potentially leading to a shift in “the alarming course of modern capitalist/industrial society,” centrally implicated in the conditions giving rise to the Anthropocene.<sup>42</sup> Here they echo Bennett, who finds, in the hybrid networks of Latour, a “potential site of [contemporary] enchantment.” Indeed, for Bennett it is “[in] the mood of enchantment [that] we sense that ‘we’ are always mixed up with ‘it,’ and ‘it’ shares in some of the agency we officially ascribe only to ourselves” (98–99). To think in terms of this expanded sense of participation is therefore to delve into that mode of enchantment that Morton identifies as belonging to the exploration of the mesh, and, as such, it is to return to the tension that I mentioned at the very start of this article that underpins *White Wood*: its inbuilt fallibility, the reliance on contingency to ever come to completion in the future.<sup>43</sup>

40. Ibid., 72.

41. Ibid.

42. Jones and Cloke, *Tree Cultures*, 67. Their chapter titled “The Non-human Agency of Trees” (47–71) offers a comprehensive overview of theoretical positions on nonhuman agency, viewed particularly in relation to trees.

43. Though there is a clear similarity between the “network” of the Actor Network Theory championed by Latour and Morton’s “mesh,” I do not intend to equate the two. Morton remarks that *mesh* can mean both “the holes in a network and threading between them” (*Ecological Thought*, 28).

The strategy in *White Wood* that exemplifies this condition most acutely is also the one that offers an explicit reference to geologic time: the burial of limestone blocks. Every tree planted in Beuys's *7000 Oaks* has a basalt stele standing beside it. Beuys intended these quasi-crystalline blocks as monumental symbols that in their stasis would serve as temporal place markers against which the development of the tree could be made visible:

My point with these seven thousand trees was that each would be a monument, consisting of a living part, the live tree, changing all the time, and a crystalline mass, maintaining its shape, size, and weight. This stone can be transformed only by taking from it, when a piece splinters off, say, never by growing. By placing these two objects side by side, the proportionality of the monument's two parts will never be the same.<sup>44</sup>

In *White Wood*, Wendling sought to replicate Beuys's strategy, but restrictions placed on the planting by Forestry Commission Scotland, who own the *White Wood* site and who partnered with Deveron Projects in the venture, meant that she was unable to leave stone blocks exposed next to the trees. To get around this restriction, Wendling instead opted to bury her stone markers at the foot of each of the Beuys oaks. Wendling has spoken of wanting to source the stones from France to create an assemblage of British earth, German trees, and French stone and so to symbolize amity and community among nations that played a significant role not only in the First World War but also in the artist's own life.<sup>45</sup> She chose to use rough blocks of white Lutetian limestone covered with the fossilized remains of gastropods more than forty million years old. In this way, markers of deep time are woven into the fabric of *White Wood*. Fossils have the power to enchant because like the Romantic sublime they confront us with a (temporal) magnitude that reflects our own small existence. Yet their presence touches us, produces a contact, prompting us to feel and think with deep time. Morton offers the example of a discovered fossilized dinosaur footprint to help illustrate the mesh, noting: "There is some sensuous connection . . . between the dinosaur, the rock, and the human, despite their vastly differing timescales."<sup>46</sup>

Wendling's hope is that, in time, as the trees grow and the root systems develop, the blocks will be pushed back up out of the soil, becoming visible again within the mature woodland. In Beuys's gesture, the tree and basalt column, although codependently constituting the "monument," are positioned in opposition to one another to evoke a binary around stasis and mobility, or life and death, albeit one that alters continually with the proportionality of the monument. But Wendling's arrangement insists on a greater intimacy, a cobecoming that entangles "tree time" and deep time. Again, it is a question of tactility. Here, though, it is the prolonged touch between the tree roots and the

44. Quoted in Cooke, *Joseph Beuys: 7000 Oaks*.

45. Wendling is a French national, raised in the historically contested region of Lorraine on the German border, who has made her home in Britain.

46. Morton, "Poisoned Ground," 41.

limestone blocks that will result in the reemergence of the stones, or not. If the trees do bring the blocks back above ground, it may take the duration of their maturation—oak trees can mature over a period of six hundred years. This image of a slow return, a symbolic marker of deep time, placed by human hands, returning to presence, echoes rather appropriately the uncanny or spectral aspect of the Anthropocene, compelling us, in turn, to consider the speculative future of *White Wood*.

Steve Brown ends his essay on the creation of the *White Wood* with a vision of this future: “With luck, and a warm summer,” he writes, “hazelnuts will form which can be enjoyed by wildlife and the passer-by,” while the blossoms of shrubs—hawthorn, blackthorn, and wild rose—planted alongside the trees will also be pollinated “and quickly turn to nourishing forest fruits.”<sup>47</sup> As Brown notes, the north of Scotland, “with its cool and windy climate,” comes close to the northernmost edge of the oak’s growth range limit in Europe, and in ideal conditions an oak tree can live for one thousand years. But these measurements are based on a current climate. A climate, we do not need to be reminded, that is undergoing anthropogenic alteration. Imagining the short-term (let alone deep) future of *White Wood* thus entails speculation on how climate will alter in the Anthropocene. As Richard Bradshaw notes, “the primary driving force for the distribution of oak has been climatic changes.”<sup>48</sup> Paleocological studies of pollen show that the oak reached its northernmost distribution about six thousand years ago; since then it has been ebbing gradually southward. As Bradshaw suggests, a warming climate may reverse this recent trend, meaning that the *White Wood* site becomes less peripheral in terms of suitability for oak growth.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, of course, in a warming climate, melting ice could impact the Atlantic Gulf Stream that tempers the Scottish climate, making for colder, less predictable seasons and stunted oak growth. Against Brown’s idealized version of *White Wood*’s future, there are other, less reassuring possibilities, other variable threats, like the increased spread, voracity, and variety of tree diseases and impacts on insect and animal populations. Who can say what the future will bring for *White Wood*? In either case, it is by opening onto these speculative futures that *White Wood* enchants and encourages us to feel and think with the Anthropocene, because it opens our minds and touches our bodies with the mesh; it exposes our thinking to futures measured out in years (the first blossom), decades (a canopy we can walk under), millennia (the future generations of oak), and beyond to the deep futures that we are reminded of by the presence, however hidden from view, of those fossil-covered blocks.

### Conclusion

In an essay written in response to another future-oriented forest artwork, Katie Pater-son’s *Future Library* (2014), Lisa Le Feuvre begins by asking: “What is the time of an

47. Brown, “Creating the *White Wood*,” 41.

48. Bradshaw, “History of Oak in the Scandinavian Landscape,” 10.

49. *Ibid.*

artwork? When does the process begin and when does it end?”<sup>50</sup> Le Feuvre’s questions may apply just as appositely to *White Wood*. Indeed, it is the indeterminacy of the answers that demonstrates how *White Wood* is an artwork that can help us feel with and think through the Anthropocene. I began this article with a quote from Timothy Morton, who suggested that enchantment could mean “exploring the . . . openness and intimacy of the mesh.” My intention in the first part of the article was to demonstrate how these projects—thinking through the Anthropocene and exploring the mesh—are connected and to show that enchantment, as an affect or sensibility, has a hand in making this connection, because we can find enchantment in the uncanny facticity of the mesh, in the weird facticity of the Anthropocene, but enchantment can also be cultivated through the artistic strategies employed to help our thinking, feeling, and exploring of these conditions. We find these strategies operating in *White Wood*—through the interconnected themes of regeneration, participation, and temporality, or temporal layering. These strategies have the power to enchant by rethinking use-value as nonuse value; by embracing a radical sense of participation; and by remaining open to future contingency. Morton describes the process of exploring the mesh as thinking “the ecological thought,” which, he says, “is difficult: it involves becoming open, radically open forever without the possibility of closing again.”<sup>51</sup> It is precisely this openness that *White Wood* embraces. And yet, even as the time of the artwork remains radically open, *White Wood* is present: a real, concrete intervention into the very mesh that it helps us to think; a living artwork that is continually participating and becoming.

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50. Le Feuvre, “Time of an Artwork.”

51. Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 8.

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