

## Floating Arboretum Oto Hudec

*The world we want is a world in which many worlds fit.*<sup>1</sup>

Public civil protests, as acts of disobedience, have made history. We need these stories of transformative imagination and courageous heroes who somehow succeed against the odds and thereby create a new myth.<sup>2</sup> The inspiration for *Floating Arboretum* came primarily from activist protests against deforestation, the indiscriminate felling of trees in various parts of the world. Oto Hudec has created an archive/database of tree stories, narrating the collective effort of a united community of activists in resisting this destruction. The artist himself has actively participated in several protest actions. The stories of trees told on the façade of the Czech and Slovak Pavilion in Venice relate the importance of the efforts to save them, even if not all protests were successful. They have, nevertheless, become an inspiring precedent. Several activists have built a dwelling in a tree and have lived there for a long time, much as the peculiar hero of Italo Calvino's historical novel *The Rampant Baron*.<sup>3</sup> His life in the treetops during the Enlightenment, like the actions of today's activists, speaks of a determination to be an uncompromising fighter for justice and for an egalitarian view of the world for all life. There are other connections with the tree baron – his relationship to authority, his political appeal, and his coexistence with plants and animals. A bending of anthropocentric optics. In *Floating Arboretum*, however, Oto Hudec has also retold the fragile stories of trees that are in a way special to people and should be saved, like the primordial ties that bind all forms of life, to which Ursula Le Guin's poem *Kinship* poetically refers.<sup>4</sup>

The visual of Oto's painting of trees floating on rafts presented on the façade of the Czech and Slovak Pavilion in the Giardini at the Biennale was inspired by the unbelievable but true story of a Georgian potentate who bought the most beautiful trees in Georgia and transported them to his island.<sup>5</sup> In our project, too, trees float in an endless sea – perhaps to safety. Oto contemplates an arboretum, a symbolic utopian place, a sanctuary for trees threatened by human expansion and extractivism. The work unfolds in different storylines that balance between reality and fiction, intertwining the present protests against deforestation in various parts of the world, the climate crisis, the state of permanent impermanence, and the imaginary dystopian future of their rescue. The topic has appeared in several of Oto's previous works; in this future, the climate crisis has already destroyed a large part of the world and the only thing left is to save its fragments in some protected space, which in this case is the *Floating Arboretum*. Migration, which is the theme of *Foreigners Everywhere*, the 60th International Art Biennale in Venice, is also a frequent subject of Hudec's work. His *Floating Arboretum* analogously contemplates the migration of trees in turbulent times; in his work, trees travel and, like humans, are strangers in their new home. In this publication, Maja and Reuben Fowkes and Lenka Kukurová describe other projects by Oto that are conceptually related to *Floating Arboretum*.

---

<sup>1</sup> Isabelle Fremeaux, Jay Jordan: *We Are 'Nature' Defending Itself. Entangling Art, Activism and Autonomous Zones*. London : Pluto Press, 2021, PDF version, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Isabelle Fremeaux, Jay Jordan: *We Are 'Nature' Defending Itself. Entangling Art, Activism and Autonomous Zones*. London : Pluto Press, 2021, PDF version, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Italo Calvino: *Il barone rampante*. Torino : Einaudi, 1957.

<sup>4</sup> Ursula Le Guin, *Kinship*, <https://orionmagazine.org/poetry/kinship/>

<sup>5</sup> The subject of Salome Jashi's film, *Taming the Garden* (2021).

A recurring motif in Oto Hudec's work is escapism, flight from the world of permanent intertwining crises, and the desire to save what it is almost impossible to save in a given world, in a given civilizational setting. This is done through flying, swimming, through ships or spacecraft, as evidenced by the artist's pseudonym – flying fish.<sup>6</sup> The trees of the Giardini, as well as Venice itself, are endangered due to climate change and rising sea levels. The changing climate appears to have contributed to the condition of the Czech and Slovak Pavilion in Venice, whose glass roof was damaged by the fall of a huge branch during a heavy downpour in 2019.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, the pavilion was non-functional until the current 2024 edition of the Biennale. Venice, one of the cities most threatened by the climate crisis, was the city with the largest number of botanical gardens in the world from the Middle Ages until the 18th century, reportedly supporting more than 500.<sup>8</sup> These gardens contained rare species of plants that had made their way via sea voyages directly into the palace gardens of many noble families. With his project, Oto Hudec metaphorically, perhaps even homoeopathically, returns the arboretum to Venice, as if saving what began with the plundering of natural resources, animals, or plant minerals, and resulted in the creation of botanical gardens. The arboretum, like the zoo, are ideological power constructs that need to be viewed from a decolonizing perspective. It is in this postcolonial context that Oto Hudec turns the concept of the arboretum on its head, presenting it as a form of salvation in a time of collapse of native ecosystems.

In front of the Czech and Slovak Pavilion, a barge floats allegorically, carrying a cone of the Arolla pine, a native tree protected by law in Slovakia and once abundant in our country, but currently growing only in the Tatra Mountains. In the past, the climate crisis is also likely to have displaced it from its many areas of natural distribution, being felled for its quality timber to make furniture,<sup>9</sup> as related in the many folk superstitions that surround this beautiful and tenacious tree. In Slovakia, for example, it was believed that if a future bride's chest was made of arolla wood, the marriage would be happy, and a cradle made of arolla wood was said to drive away evil spirits from the child.

The stories of *Floating Arboretum* were poeticized by Juliana Sokolová and sung in a sound piece *Songs for Planetary Articulation* composed by Fero Király, the performers reciting/singing the immersive narratives of the trees for one week in each month. The performance was choreographed by Petra Fornayová and the costumes were created by Michaela Bednárová. Anyone can get involved in *Floating Arboretum* via <https://floatingarboretum.sng.sk>, where they can nominate for rescue their choice of any specific tree with an upsetting fate. We believe that *Floating Arboretum's* stories can spark transformative imagination and can be inspirational in our everyday lives.

Lýdia Pribišová

---

<sup>6</sup> The expression "flying fish" is also a metaphor for Oto Hudec's artistic-activist life journey, in which he seeks a way to initiate changes in society through art but also tries to make his art an expression of beauty, striving for a balance between these two directions. In: Like a flying fish, once in the air, once under the water, available at: <https://fishisflying.blogspot.com/>

<sup>7</sup> According to the report of dott. Silvio Stivanello, Venice, 01.08.2023.

<sup>8</sup> <https://blog.gardeninvenice.com/2013/02/ow-exotic-plants-came-to-venice-our.html?fbclid=IwAR2ZUPU6QEIkETGf582dSEMBO7i3e9Dow3lh3gl8uPJgwPUSLnpFBmLTT8o>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.atlasdrevin.sk/druh/38-borovica-limbova>