

HOW TO BUILD A FOREST
PearlDamour + Shawn Hall
Background Information for Duke University

CORE VALUES

How To Build a Forest is an experiment in performance, installation and duration. Originally inspired by the many losses incurred by New Orleans and the surrounding areas during Hurricane Katrina, and further informed by the ecological and cultural crisis triggered by the BP Oil Spill in the Gulf, the piece uses art and art-making as a platform to discuss the deeply interconnected relationship between the human being and the natural world. In making this piece, PearlDamour + Shawn Hall identified the following core values, which guided their work, and which continue to guide each performance.

1. *Tree Time. Tree time is something experiential – a slowing down to reflect on or feel the amount of time a tree takes to grow. In the amount of time a tree takes to grow, a year can be like a second. Recognizing tree time helps us stay aware that “human time” is just one way of perceiving time. As an artistic team trying to build a meaningful relationship with nature, we choose to stay in “tree time” and take the long view, the patient view.*
2. *No Pretending. This core value evolved as we developed our “building style” for the performance. As we built our forest we found simplicity was best – do your job; do it mindfully; do it efficiently. No need to add on any character or flourish – just stay true to the intent of what you are doing. This core value also expands out into our everyday relationship to nature: it is easy to pretend that we don’t need nature; that we don’t rely on its resources each day. It’s also easy to pretend that we are NOT using up our natural resources at an alarming rate. “No Pretending” is the first step towards action.*
3. *Pay Attention to the Periphery. This also evolved from discovering our building style. Stay focused on your own task, but remain aware of what your fellow builders are doing, and how you are connected to the larger effort. Also be aware of what delicate structures might be to your left or right. If you start to rush, or become unaware of the bigger picture, you can really damage the thing we are trying to build.*
4. *Where Do Things Come From? This started out as a simple question, as we wanted to be able to trace the origins of all of our materials back to the earth. We were shocked by how many of our materials started out as oil. It is so easy to procure the items we use and the food we eat in our daily lives. And extremely easy to not think about where they came from and*

the long journey they took to get to us. This meditation guides our work as we build, and we try to take it out of the performance space into our daily lives.

5. Nature = Culture. *This core value is incredibly local to us, connected to the way New Orleans / South Louisiana life is so connected to the outdoors, to the food that comes from the Gulf of Mexico and its surrounds, to the Cajun / Creole / Jazz music that has evolved from this swamp. As the LA wetlands disappear, a way of life is being threatened, a way of life that can't simply be picked up and put down in, say, Nevada.*

THE COLLABORATION

How To Build A Forest is a collaboration between the performance duo PearlDamour (Katie Pearl and Lisa D'Amour) and the visual artist Shawn Hall. The project began with an early conversation that Lisa and Katie had in 2008. Lisa was thinking a lot about the impact of Hurricane Katrina on her family and her hometown of New Orleans. She was particularly haunted by 100 trees that had been blown down on a piece of property co-owned by family – the property, called L'Esperance, is about 30 miles north of New Orleans. While musing on how much her family mourned those old pine trees, Katie says “wouldn't it be amazing if we could re-build those trees on stage.” And so the dreaming began.

Katie and Lisa began thinking and researching as they finished another PearlDamour project called *Terrible Things*. They conducted two independent experiments in building and disassembling fabricated forests – Katie with students at St. Stephen's High School in Austin, TX, and Lisa at a conference about performance and the environment at the Mitchell Center for the Arts in Houston.

Shawn Hall had worked with PearlDamour before in the capacity of a traditional set designer (on their OBIE-winning *Nita & Zita*, created with New Orleans' ArtSpot Productions). PearlDamour approached Shawn Hall for several reasons: Their shared history as collaborators; Shawn's work as a painter, which springs from naturally occurring forms in nature and the human body; Shawn's deep roots in New Orleans and her own experience of living through Hurricane Katrina. From the outset it was clear to all of us that *Forest* required Shawn's total participation as a visual artist (rather than as a designer), bringing her aesthetic and working process fully to the piece. The early stages of our work as a trio (about 14 months before our premiere) involved research trips to forested areas in Mississippi and South Louisiana, as well as a trip to second- and first- growth forests on Hornby Island near Vancouver, BC. These trips allowed the three of us to think about trees and the history of forests, share books that would influence our work, and begin to talk about the core values of our piece. That

summer, we also spent time with Shawn in her studio experimenting with different materials that she brought in– inflatables, pulleys, translucent fabric and more.

This early work was also about deducing the language of our collaboration, this marriage of installation and performance. Our first work-in-progress showing was in a theater at Appalachian State University. Our premiere performance took place in the Kitchen’s black box theater in New York. All of the technicians assigned to work with us had a theater background, and were used to a traditional theater and load in tech and schedule. We spent a lot of time talking through our terminology – this was an installation, not a “set”, this was a performance installation, not a “play”, this was a space, not a “stage”.

About 5 months before our premiere, we moved into Happyland, a former movie theater in the Bywater Neighborhood around the corner from Shawn’s house. This old wooden warehouse had seen better days and could affectionately be called breezy... during the course of our stay there the temperature went from freezing to sweltering, and we co-existed with termites, cockroaches, wild neighborhood cats and even the occasional tree rat and raccoon. This seemed appropriate for a piece about how the human being is interconnected with the natural world! At Happyland we were able to do consistent, daily work on the installation, laying it out piece by piece, sewing in the delicate details. At the height of production there were 8 embroiderers in addition to 3 general assistants to Shawn and a steel fabricator. In March, our build team started participating in the fabrication process, and eventually started rehearsing the assembly and disassembly of the forest. Many members of the New Orleans art and performance community came through our doors during this time, both to observe rehearsals and help fabricate the forest.

ECOSYSTEMS THAT INSPIRED *HOW TO BUILD A FOREST*

The Louisiana Wetlands

The mouth of the Mississippi is a bird’s foot delta that, at one point in time, held some of the most rich and fertile soil in the United States. A hundred years ago, sediment carried down the Mississippi would flow down river and over its banks, during the river’s natural flood cycles. A large amount of the water flowing from the North United States would flow out into the Mississippi’s tributaries, reducing the amount of flow at the mouth of the river and allowing a certain amount of sediment to settle at the mouth of the river. In this way, the land was slowly and continually being birthed by the earth’s natural systems.

Over the past 100 years, humans have systematically disrupted those natural systems. Today, all but one tributary (the Atchafalaya River) has been cut off from the Mississippi by dams. Levees, built to protect urban areas from flooding and to keep the river from changing course, prevent the natural floods and sediment distribution, sending water towards the mouth of the river with such force that most sediment is pushed off the continental shelf deep into the ocean, where it no longer builds land.

In addition to levees and dams, the extensive oil and gas exploration and production begun in the 1960's has compromised the Louisiana Wetlands ability to create land. Channels were cut straight through many parts of the wetlands to lay oil pipelines and create more direct routes from shore to the many oil rigs in the Gulf. Cutting these channels means pulling up grasses, cutting down cypress trees and dredging mud, creating a "jig saw puzzle" effect. Remaining grasses erode, and salt water from the Gulf begins to intrude into areas that traditionally were freshwater ecosystems, poisoning the trees that once filled the swamps. Today, as you drive towards the gulf from New Orleans, the road is lined with grey skeletons of those trees.

When Hurricane Katrina hit, the Louisiana Wetlands were already eroding at the horrifying rate of 1 football field per hour. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, Katrina, Rita and other hurricanes during the 2005 hurricane season caused Louisiana to lose about 138,000 acres of land to open water. The BP Oil Spill dealt another blow to the ecosystem of the Gulf of Mexico: from April 20 to July 15, 2010, approximately 4.9 million barrels (over 200 million gallons) of oil poured from the Deepwater Horizon oil well into the Gulf. The area of the oil spill included 8,332 species, including more than 1,200 fish, 200 birds, 1,400 mollusks and 1,500 crustaceans. While there is evidence that the Gulf is doing an amazing job of healing itself on its own, a recent study by Dr. Holly Bik shows alarming shifts in the microbial life in the Gulf – the tiniest, most basic organisms in the food change. Essentially, the microorganisms that thrive on petroleum have shot up, while other microbial life has all but disappeared.

Like many other people living in Louisiana and other coastal states, we are concerned with the health, preservation and restoration of the Louisiana Wetlands. Much has been learned in the past 10 years about why the wetlands are eroding and what can be done to heal and rebuild them. This June, Congress passed the RESTORE Act as part of the Transportation Bill, which ensures that at least 80% of the fines BP must pay under the Clean Water Act be set aside for the Gulf Coast States to help restore coastal ecosystems put into peril because of the spill. These projects will include river diversions designed to re-open select Mississippi tributaries in the interest of controlled flooding that can build new land. With *How to Build a Forest*, we'd like to bring awareness to this

miraculous, endangered ecosystem, and how we are connected to its health and well being.

For further research, we recommend visiting the following websites:

[Gulf Restoration Network](#)

[Louisiana's Coastal Master Plan](#)

[Ocean Conservancy](#)

[Surfrider Foundation](#)

[Levees.org](#)

[Wildlife Conservation Society](#)

[Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana](#)

[Louisiana Bucket Brigade](#)

L'Esperance

By Lisa D'Amour

L'Esperance was purchased by my great-great-grandfather, Eugene Andrieu, in the 1920's. It's a large white wooden house built on 7 acres of land on the Bogue Falaya River in Covington, Louisiana, about 30 minutes north of New Orleans. He purchased the home to serve as a summer retreat and an art studio – like his father, he was a landscape painter. Eventually, the home was passed on to his daughter, Amelie, my grandmother's mother. Since then, the home has been a holiday gathering place for dozens cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents and friends. Over the years, my relatives fell particularly in love with the many pine trees on the property – in researching the deeds of the house, we found that one owner along the way wrote into the bill of sale that no trees could be cut down on the property. Hence, there were about 100 Loblolly Pine Trees that towered a good 100 feet above the house, providing, shade, privacy and a beautiful view. During Katrina, many members of my family evacuated to this house – which has 3 bedrooms filled with 9 creaky old beds. When the storm winds were at their height, they started to hear huge cracks, like gun shots, and they ran to the screen porch to see the first trees begin to fall. The wind was tugging them up by their roots, or snapping them in two. For hours the family ran from one side of the house to the other, watching them all come down. In the morning, it looked

like a giant had played a big game of pick up sticks: trees lying on ground everywhere and piled up every which way: a new and surreal landscape.

The trees were a small loss compared to what many people experienced during Katrina, losing homes, family members, entire communities. But it was a direct lesson for me in how long it takes to build something, and how quickly it can go away. For me, *How to Build a Forest* is a kind of awareness training: how can I be more present and intentional in the way I live my life, enjoying, respecting and caretaking the beloved natural resources that make up my world?

Neebish Island

By Shawn Hall

The water is lower than ever. We have 25 feet of shore land that we didn't have 30 years ago. This is a place that has been in my family since the 1940's, and we are among the late settlers. The little island our cabin is on, also known as Rains or Rainsmere Island, connected to the main island, Neebish Island, by a dirt causeway with large drainage tubes in it, is an island first settled by the daughter of daughter of an Ojibwa chief and a Scotsman, and sister-in-law to Henry Schoolcraft, the famous Michigan Indian agent. She sold the plots that our cabins are now on, many built back then. It's a special place right on the Canadian/American boarder on a river that flows down from Lake Superior and around us on both sides of this dot of land off the coast of the Upper Peninsula (U.P.) of Michigan, flowing down into the lower Great Lakes, whose waters we share with Canada but for one: Lake Michigan. When I was a kid I often canoed over to the island across the river in Canada to explore, and at the turn of the century there was much travel back and forth, from rustic cabins on the island to the old hotel across the river in Canada for dinner. But these days homeland security makes sure you can't even be on that side of the water without risking a ticket from the coast guard.

The old cedar forests that ring the little island are dying off slowly because the water is so low, the bedrock so close beneath the surface and because hungry deer eat the seedlings: a classic problem when you have a predator killing policy. The Paper birch suffers from this, too, and also from the bronze borer infestation/disease, which is brought on partially by stress and drought. An old forest has a hard time rejuvenating under these circumstances, particularly lack of predators. My cousin, who hunts and fishes constantly and recently retired from the Department of Natural Resources in the U.P. says those populations are coming back, and that there are wolf and bear, and other big game on the island. But I am not so sure. And I am worried. Every year the island newsletter will say if there's been a sighting – this year it's one wolf. And how can they not be sighted if they are there when the land is so chopped up by roads? In the Gulf near New Orleans, where I've lived for the past 16 years, it's channeling for oil

through the swamp, everywhere else it's roads that scar the land, and everything we do because of roads.

I walk in these woods everyday I'm up there, trespassing into the chaos known as a healthy forest. It is not always easy traveling, as there are no paths except around the water. Michigan was entirely logged off in the 19th Century, so the oldest trees now stand at around 150 years old and I see them interspersed: the white pines, their tops high above the others, a few red pines, cedar, maple and oak. I don't think the birch make it to that age, and neither do the poplar. I am just beginning to know the firs and the spruce and all the trees I used to think were pines, but aren't. And also recognize the non-natives like Scots and Norway pine. During our research for *How To Build A Forest* I was dismayed to witness clear cutting happening on Neebish, which is still ongoing. It's Michigan State University research: they're ripping up the diversity that has come back on it's own to try to restore the forest to what it once was over 150 years ago; predominately white pine. Does that make sense when a habitat has been in place for 150 years since the last ravaging? I can't wrap my head around it. Or the bulldozers, or the hard packed ruts and the destruction of everything, not just the trees. Everything. It hurts to have that happen to a place you love. This is big part of what I want to share with *How To Build A Forest*.

Hornby Island

By Katie Pearl

Hornby is a small, forested island off the coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia. There is a small year round population and a larger summer population. Its ecosystem is called a "Coastal Douglas Fir" zone (or "coastal rain forest"). This is a pretty rare ecological system: the forest health is tied to ocean systems, and the ocean ecology is deeply impacted by the forest's presence. Because of its accessibility and suitability for settlement, Hornby was the site of significant logging throughout the past centuries.

I chose to take Lisa and Shawn to Hornby because I wanted to be in a place of old growth forests; I also wanted to learn about the logging industry. When we first started working on FOREST, most people assumed it was an environmental piece, and that we had a particular political stance around issues of forest sustainability. In fact, the impetus for the piece was less political and much more personal. However as we began our work, it quickly became clear that we needed to articulate our own point of view about the issues surrounding the piece—issues like environmental loss and ecological sustainability. An important starting point for me was to get educated about the complexities of the timber industry and the battles between environmentalists and logging companies.

Our host on Hornby Island was a 65 year old man whose career had been deeply entwined in the logging industry—his experience included charting and clearing roads for the logging companies, living in logging camps, and cutting and hauling timber. Although he'd made his living from cutting them down, he loved the forests—they were his sanctuary and second home. He knew the trees very well, and could tell the story of past logging episodes just by looking at stumps and old ax marks, translating to us what they indicated. He could explain different growth patterns, and shared his experiences within the environmentalist / logging debates in BC. He also took us on a variety of excursions: we met a logging company executive (someone who had strong views on why clear cutting and replanting was a positive thing); we spent an afternoon at a logging history museum; we visited a place on Vancouver Island called Cathedral Grove, which is a beautiful and awe-inspiring stand of first growth firs that continue to live in good health. We also spent many hours collecting specimens on the rocky beaches and plowing through a pile of books we had checked out of the Vancouver library about trees, forests, logging companies, and environmental activism.

It was while at Hornby living in our host's seaside cabin that we discovered our core value of "tree time". The rhythm of our days was slower there, giving our eyes time to see more, our ears time to hear more, and our minds time to think more. The shapes and colors of Hornby definitely made it into our forest—in particular there is a phase of the big tree going up when I think it bears a striking resemblance to the orange and purple starfish plastered over the rocks and logs on the ocean beaches.