



# “In the Company of Trees”

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## ABSTRACT

“In the Company of Trees” article describes a collaborative project that was undertaken by two first-year Fine Arts program students who have a passion for art and for nature. More specifically, they have an intuitive connection with trees; hence, the name “Tree Installation.” The article focuses on the research techniques artists use when creating a piece, and demonstrates how the application of such techniques combines and employs both artistic and academic knowledge to inform a creative project. The article discusses the research techniques used when the artists decided on what type of installation to create, what shape it would take, what its dimensions would be, and what materials would be selected and used. A discussion regarding creativity and spontaneity that is essential to art is also included. Also discussed throughout the article is the concept that some research that artists do while creating a piece of art, whether it be an installation, painting or sculpture, is done instinctively rather than overtly as the art work is evolving. Considerable effective research is done through experimentation and the “Tree Installation” embodies this method. The “Tree Installation” is not only beautiful art, but is a project that involved influential and meaningful research about the nature of trees.

## The Project

When two first-year Fine Arts students had to decide what type of installation to create, it seemed only natural that Kassandra Harvey and Susan Winters would take on

the demanding task of building a tree that would extend to four floors of Grant MacEwan University's Centre for the Arts and Communications in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Harvey agreed to be interviewed about the process of building the installation and the research involved, speaking for herself and for her creative project partner (Winters). It is difficult to imagine the amount of research involved in the undertaking of such a unique project and even more surprising that some of it is done intuitively by the artists as their art work evolves.

The finished installation, at 18 metres long and made entirely of dark wool fabric (Figure 2), appeared as if it was growing in the school. It was evident how much fabric was needed to create the tree (Figure 1). Its roots spread across the basement floor, the



Figure 1: Tree Installation

strong trunk leading straight up the stairwell, and the intricate canopy woven into the hand railing. When describing the project, it was immediately clear from Harvey's enthusiasm how passionate she was about the "Tree Installation" and art in general.

## The Research

Harvey explained that the main goal of an installation piece is to completely transform the space. A feat the two artists met with unfazed ambition and dedication. She estimates that they both spent about 50 hours in a week working on the tree that would only last a day until it was critiqued by their Fine Arts faculty instructor who commissioned the project as part of their course curriculum. But why create an installation instead of another type of artwork? According to Reiss, “Most museums and galleries are designed to show masterpieces...but many artists today do not make self-contained masterpieces. Rather, their work includes the space it’s in, embraces it, uses it” (Reiss, 1999).

The project began when the two artists were inspired by a previous installation that used hanging fabric and stones as its source materials. From there, the idea to create the tree sparked. The artists wanted to draw their peers’ attention to trees with this project. Dillard wrote in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, “There are creatures under our feet, creatures that live over our heads, but trees live quite convincingly in the same filament of air we inhabit, and, in addition, they extend impressively in both directions, up and down, shearing rock and fanning air, doing their real business just out of reach. A blind man’s idea of hugeness is a tree” (Dillard, 1974, p. 88).

“We need to learn to live around trees, rather than cutting them down,” added Harvey. The two artists also wanted to promote the reuse of fabric and to demonstrate the amazing things you can do with different materials. They share an interest in the areas *Earth Common Journal* specifically focuses on: sustainability, conservation, and global warming. The intrinsic nature of a tree as well as the symbolism behind trees communicates the relevance of the environment.

Harvey and Winters sought out discounted fabrics and stumbled upon the one type they would eventually use for their project. Harvey described the fabric as being “mossy and organic” looking (Figure 2). The fact that they could not determine the exact type of fabric they selected was intriguing to them. Not knowing the fabric type did not affect their vision of the project.



Figure 2: Fabric for Tree Installation



Some variables in research are unknown and therefore cannot be controlled within a project. However, this did not change the overarching visualization of their installation. Also, as artists, they brought a substantial backdrop of color information that they have gathered through research done on other projects, as well as from knowledge they have acquired within their studies. It is this previous research and prior knowledge, which could be as scientific as studying species of trees and their colourings, that were used to influence their choices in fabric and other aspects of their project.



Figure 3: Roots of Tree

Their goal was to make the installation look as much like a tree and as little like fabric as possible. The trunk was formed by roping together lengths of the fabric and the canopy was made of torn sheets knotted together. Figures 3 and 4 depict how much detail the artists put into creating the beautiful and intricate roots and leaves.



Figure 4: Leaves of Tree Installation

Most of the research for the project has come from previous information the artists have gathered at various times throughout their lives. Both have always been interested in nature and the environment and, as Harvey explained, she has carried this information with her wherever she has traveled. For Harvey, her interest in art as well as her affinity to nature came at an early age. High school was when she first began focusing on trees in her drawings and paintings. Based on her comments, it is clear that she is someone who inherently cares about the Earth.

Harvey and Winters collected their information using qualitative research as well as experimenting with different techniques. They looked through pictures and videos of past installations to gain inspiration and to select an appropriate technique. They took time to determine which space would work best and drew out different plans that would articulate the concept of their “Tree Installation.”

Little information exists in a text book that assists artists on how to create an installation; however, everything artists have encountered in their lifetime filters into the creation of a project. For Harvey and Winters, art is their life, and life forms the background for the research needed to create their art. Their intent was to create a line in a real space similar to creating lines in a drawing. Harvey described it as a “learn by doing” experience. She said that about 70 percent of their time was spent trying to make it work and in the last two days everything finally fit together. In the book *Improvisation between Technique and Spontaneity*, the authors concluded that, “we are improvisers every day, without realizing it; most of the time we are unaware of the power of this generative process” (Santi, 2010, p.19). While this particular book referred to the art of jazz, the technique of improvisation can be applied to all of the arts.

According to Harvey, creating this installation involved using a substantial trial and error process until “something clicked.” This type of research is often more demanding than the empirical research typically thought of. “You have to filter your ideas,” said Harvey. Both Winters and Harvey had to experiment with various ways of twisting, folding, and tearing the fabric to make it look the way they envisioned.

Harvey stated that most of the time what you plan for does not happen and you have to move in the direction the art is going. Very similar to the writing process, you have to go through the motions of scrapping certain ideas and moving on from them. “A writer is only as good as the size of their wastebasket,” said Harvey, “and it’s the same with art.”

### The Artists and Collaboration

Both artists can be described as laid-back and down-to-earth in personality and who work well together. Harvey explained that as a team they compare and contrast ideas effortlessly and without conflict. Before this installation project, the two worked on a different project together, so it seemed natural for them to pair up. Harvey said that she hopes to work on future projects with Winters and had positive things to say about her partner.

In his book entitled, *Mastering the Art of Creative Collaboration*, Robert Hargrove writes, “Whether you are a scientist, elected official, business leader, or artist, being creative (or generative) means taking something that perhaps you believed would never come to pass, declaring it possible, and then working to make it a reality. ‘Collaboration’ implies doing something together, and that is exactly what it is. It is the desire or need to create or discover something new, while thinking and working with others that distinguishes the action” (Hargrove, 1998, p. 25).

Harvey is from the Queen Charlotte Islands and brings with her the ideal she grew up with: to enjoy nature. As someone with such a high level of respect for nature, one can understand why her art is focused around trees. She also recently completed an 8-by-4 foot painting of a forest pathway.

“I do not know whether it is possible to love the planet or not, but I do know that it is possible to love the places we can see, touch, smell and experience,” wrote David Orr in *Earth in Mind*, which was a quote presented in *The Nature Principle* by Richard Louv (p.89). The “Tree Installation” is something that creates a new way to experience the campus.

According to Harvey, Winters also spent most of her childhood immersed in art and became interested in nature and the environment at an early age. Both students grew up with great families who supported their interests and encouraged them to pursue their goals. “Once you know what you want to do, you can’t do anything else,” said Harvey when asked why she chose to take the Fine Arts program at MacEwan. She describes her childhood as one where she was constantly creating art, which has influenced her current art as well as her future aspiration to teach art.

## The Artists' Message

The biggest message Harvey hopes their art will communicate is, "Don't waste what you have and enjoy the beautiful earth we live on. Take art to a whole new level."

"It's nice to know that my fellow students are putting this together," said Harvey about being featured in *Earth Common Journal*. She went on to say that as undergraduate students, our ideas and voices about the three environmental topics of conservation, sustainability, and global warming count and need to be heard.

"It's us giving our feedback on what we think should be done and what we want to do about it."

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*\*Author: Courtney Rupertus is a recent graduate of Grant MacEwan University where she completed her Diploma in Professional Writing. She also sits on the Editorial Board for Earth Common Journal as the copy editor. Currently, she resides in Edmonton where she spends her time writing, reading, biking and hiking with her dog.*

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