

# Akimblog - Public Studio at the AGYU / Sarah Anne Johnson at the McMichael Collection



Toronto

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Getting back to nature is an increasingly complex endeavor, not simply because it raises these two questions:

1. Were we ever there in the first place? 2. When did we leave? The simple answers might be 1. Yes and 2. We haven't, but that doesn't do much to clear up our muddled thinking about the world that grows outside our windows (and sometimes on our window sills). There are too many overlapping and deeply entrenched assumptions to be found in our various histories, technologies, biographies, and psychologies of biology to reduce our place as human animals in the world to an "everything is one" ethos.



Public Studio, *Everything is One*, 2016, LED screen, saplings

**Public Studio**, the collaborative art practice of **Elle Flanders**, **Tamira Sawatzky**, and (at least in this particular exhibition) a number of expert contributors, make exactly that suggestion in the central work of their ambitious Art Gallery of York University exhibition *What We Lose in Metrics*. However, their *Everything is One* installation turns the table on purists and inserts a gargantuan LED advertising billboard within the gallery to serve as a source of light for a nursery of saplings. Before reaching this point, the viewer has travelled down a shadowy tunnel beneath overhanging branches, discovered a cabin in the woods, journeyed through the collective unconscious of film memory by viewing a collage of ominous wooded scenes from Hollywood's past, and then walked in step with a series of video game players who promenaded through virtual forests that have had their attack modes largely neutralized in order to allow for contemplation.

Contemplation is definitely in order here because the dense textual overlay, from the scrolling declaration of the Rights of Nature to the poetry incorporated into the gaming works, takes time to unfold and requires parsing. Those not acclimatized to the worlds of *Assassin's Creed*, *Skyrim*, or *Dragon Age* also need to adapt to the uncanny valley realism of the digital realm before they embrace this most recent extension of nature. In doing so, the question of whether all nature is an extension (as in: is all nature unnatural?) can be added to our list.



Sarah Anne Johnson, *Pink Forest*, 2015, chromogenic print

The community of nomadic hedonists who appear throughout **Sarah Anne Johnson's** *Field Trip* series – now on view at the bastion of nature art that is the **McMichael Collection** – might just think they are getting at one with Gaia during the musical events they travel the countryside to experience, but they could probably also be convinced that Gaia is a computer and we're all inside a video game. The costumes they wear and characters they embody are as much a departure from the world of squares (that is: the city) as the places they escape to.

The music is electronic and the colours that Johnson adds to her photographs, over-painting in sparkly blobs and explosions, are out of this world and, in all but the most radical sense, unnatural. The result is something both joyous and depressing, beautiful and filthy, inviting and terrifying. Those contradictions have been around since humans first entered the forest and these two exhibitions just continue the tradition.

**Watch** Terence Dick's video review [Sarah Anne Johnson + Trauma](#) on AkimboTV.

**Art Gallery of York University:** <http://theagyuisoutthere.org/everywhere/?p=4994>

Public Studio: What We Lose in Metrics continues until June 19

**McMichael Collection:** <http://50years.mcmichael.com/sarah-anne-johnson>

Sarah Anne Johnson: Field Trip continues until June 5.

**Terence Dick** is a freelance writer living in Toronto. His art criticism has appeared in Canadian Art, BorderCrossings, Prefix Photo, Camera Austria, Fuse, Mix, C Magazine, Azure, and The Globe and Mail. He is the editor of Akimblog. You can follow his quickie reviews and art news announcements on Twitter

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