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# The gift exercise / Invitation 6: Sihlwald - Letter to / from a barkbeetle

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## **Abstract**

In this article, Willimann/Arai would like to present a collage work consisting of the script of their lecture performance/video voice-over and screenshots, as well as several documentation photos of the workshop/lecture performance. The still images are taken every 20 seconds from the film work *The gift exercise / Invitation 6: Sihlwald* (Willimann/Arai 2021). This video captured a close shot of a situation in Sihlwald, Zurich, Switzerland in which a person was rubbing on the surface of a fallen spruce tree trunk which was eaten by a bark beetle, with paper and a pencil. At the end of the video, the person takes out the paper and shows a trace of the bark beetle. On the auditive level, the audience can hear the voice-over by Nina Willimann and Mayumi Arai reading the script of a lecture performance which is shown as a text work in this article. The script comprises a text collage created with writings by Nina Willimann and Mayumi Arai. The text in right-aligned format was originally written by Nina Willimann and the left-aligned text was written by Mayumi Arai. After they wrote each text separately, they created a text course and edited it together. They used alignment differentiation to show the two different contents of the texts instead of using their name on top of each text to make their identity less significant.

Willimann/Arai suggest that showing the overall process of this project through visual images, especially the frottage work, allows them to include the bark beetles' voices as non-human actors and create a polyphonic narration.

**Keywords:** more-than-human history; bark beetle, climate change, anthropocene, frottage, hospitality

## Introduction

- 1 Nina Willimann and Mayumi Arai met through a semester residency program in Hong Kong in 2015. Since then, they have been working together regularly under the name Willimann/Arai. Their work involves questioning modern and colonial dichotomous narratives, such as West/East, Self/Other, and Nature/Culture. In collaboration with visitors, local communities, and experts, they create arrangements and narratives of the 'in-between' in context-specific and research-based working processes.
- 2 Since 2015 Willimann/Arai has been developing four main research-based 'umbrella'-projects which are interconnected. These 'umbrella'-projects are *How to disappear (completely)*, *Swiss Gymnastics*, *The gif exercise*, and *Avatar tours*.
- 3 In the framework of the long-term project *The gift exercise*, they investigate hospitality, and more particularly, the reversibility of the roles between the host and guest, as well as the power relations inscribed in those roles (cf. *The gift exercise*: <https://willimannarai.net/the-gift-exercise/>, *The gift exercise / Invitation 1: Romainmôtier*: <https://willimannarai.net/invitation-1/>, *The gift exercise / Invitation 2*: <https://willimannarai.net/invitation-2/>, *The gift exercise / Invitation 3: Taipei*: <https://willimannarai.net/invitation-3/>, *The gift exercise / Invitation 4: Taiwan*: <https://willimannarai.net/invitation-4/>, *The gift exercise / Invitation 5: Xintiandi, Shanghai*: <https://willimannarai.net/invitation-5/>, *The gift exercise / Invitation 7: Swiss National Park*: <https://willimannarai.net/invitation-7/>). Willimann/Arai is interested in the relations between guests and hosts, both human and non-human, and also in questioning those categories to unravel the entanglements of generation and extinction that occur in the intertwining of those relations.
- 4 In 2017, Willimann/Arai was invited to an artist-in-residency program in Taiwan, called *Tree Tree Tree Person – Taroko Arts Residency Project* (森人—太魯閣藝駐計劃) and have started to work together with the Taiwanese indigenous community Truku (or Taroko) based in Taroko National Park. Since then, Willimann/Arai has stayed there annually to continue their research until 2020. During this process, they have been questioning the concept of 'Nature' and nature protection embodied by the National Park.
- 5 *The gift exercise/Invitation 6: Sihlwald*, which they share in this article, is the continuation of reflections which they had developed during their work in Taiwan. In this project, they juxtapose the binaries "human/culture – 'nature'" and "guest - host", setting the bark beetle as the main protagonist.
- 6 In Sihlwald, a protected forest today and a former plantation forest in Canton Zurich, Switzerland, many fragile trees have been significantly damaged by these insects, similar to many other ancient monoculture forests. Moreover, as the population of bark beetles has rapidly increased in the last few years because of climate change and temperature rise, they have gained the power to invade healthy trees and cause their destruction.
- 7 Because of their impact on the lumber industry and the economic environment, bark beetles are considered pests. However, when Willimann/Arai interviewed the park rangers in Shilwald about the subject, they discovered that they were rather welcoming the bark beetles since they considered them as

'Architects of Change'. The park ranger explained that because bark beetles feed mainly on spruce trees, which were planted as cheap and fast-growing lumber in the last centuries, they help the 'primal' trees grow back and thus help recreate *urnatur* (meaning 'original nature' in German).

- 8 This project aims to investigate the guest-host relationship through the concept of 'Nature protection'. In order to create speculative entanglements, Willimann/Arai used two different methods. First, a text collage which consists of a personal letter addressed to the bark beetle and a narration of the history of printmaking. Second, rubbings/frottages as an act of 'reading' the traces created by bark beetles as 'messages'.
- 9 The most common type of bark beetle in this region is called the European spruce bark beetle, called *Ips typographus* in Latin, named after the typographer, since his seizure marks are visually reminiscent of ancient book prints. All bark beetle traces have a common pattern and remind us of human sign systems and characters. If we consider the traces of bark beetles as writing, the following questions arise: How these signs can be read? What do bark beetles write about? To whom are they speaking?
- 10 While conducting the frottage of those traces, the act of reading a letter overlaps with the act of writing, and simultaneously, refers to the reversibility of the roles between the host and guest.
- 11 Willimann/Arai developed this project as part of a broader collective research project entitled *School of Forest*, which was coordinated by the Chilean historian/curator, Jose Cáceres Mardones, the Mapuche artist, Paula Baeza Pailamilla and the Italian curator, Domenico Ermanno Roberti. Based on collective fieldwork in and about Sihlwald, the artists investigated different topics using different methodologies, while all the participants discussed and exchanged their perspectives, perceptions, and research about, within, and with the forest. In October 2021, as a conclusion to the project, an exhibition in the art space *la cápsula* in Zurich and a performative walk in Sihlwald were held<sup>1)</sup>. In this frame, Willimann/Arai exhibited their video work in the art space, organised a frottage workshop with the participants in the forest and performed a lecture of the collaged text, which was also the voice-over part of their video work<sup>2)</sup>.



**Figure 1** Photo documentation of a workshop *The gift exercise / Invitation 6: Sihlwald* (October 17, 2021, photo by Jana Figliuolo)



**Figure 2** Photo documentation of a workshop *The gift exercise / Invitation 6: Sihlwald* (October 17, 2021, photo by Jana Figliuolo)



**Figure 3** Photo documentation of a workshop *The gift exercise / Invitation 6: Sihlwald* (October 17, 2021, photo by Jana Figliuolo)



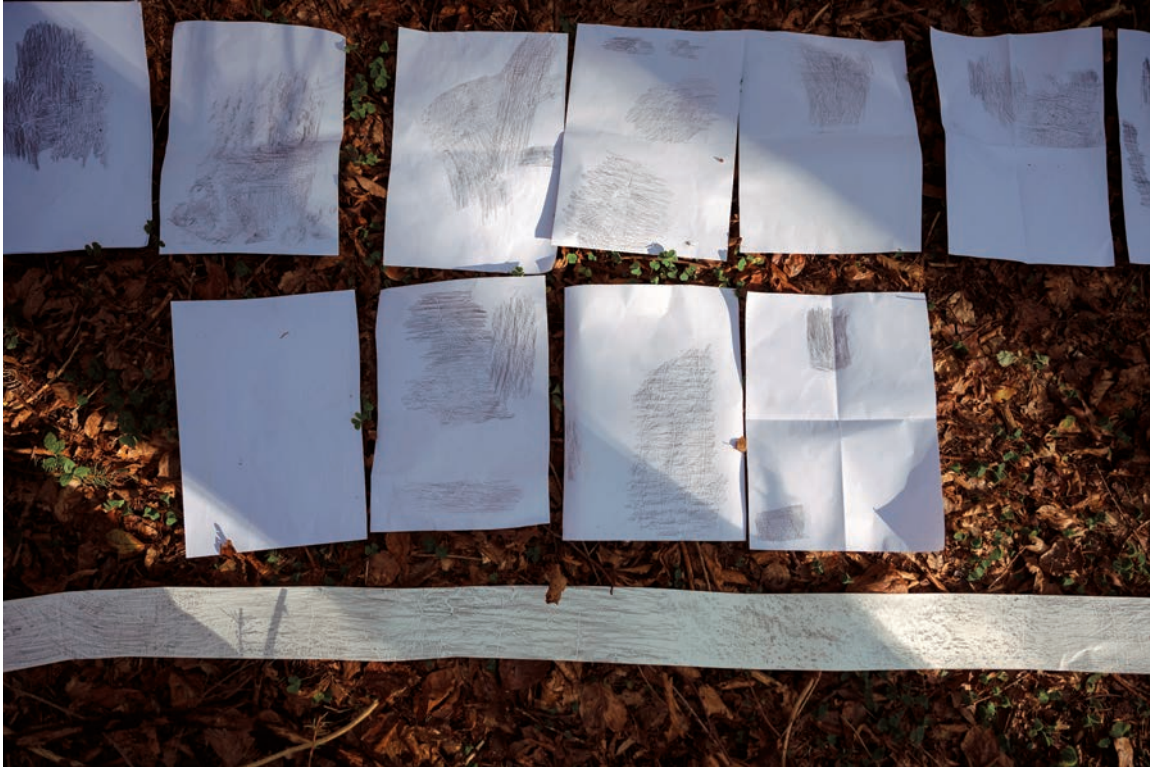
**Figure 4** Photo documentation of a workshop *The gift exercise / Invitation 6: Sihlwald* (October 17, 2021, photo by Jana Figliuolo)



**Figure 5** Photo documentation of a workshop *The gift exercise / Invitation 6: Sihlwald* (October 17, 2021, photo by Jana Figliuolo)



**Figure 6** Photo documentation of a lecture-performance *The gift exercise / Invitation 6: Sihlwald* (October 17, 2021, photo by Jana Figliuolo)

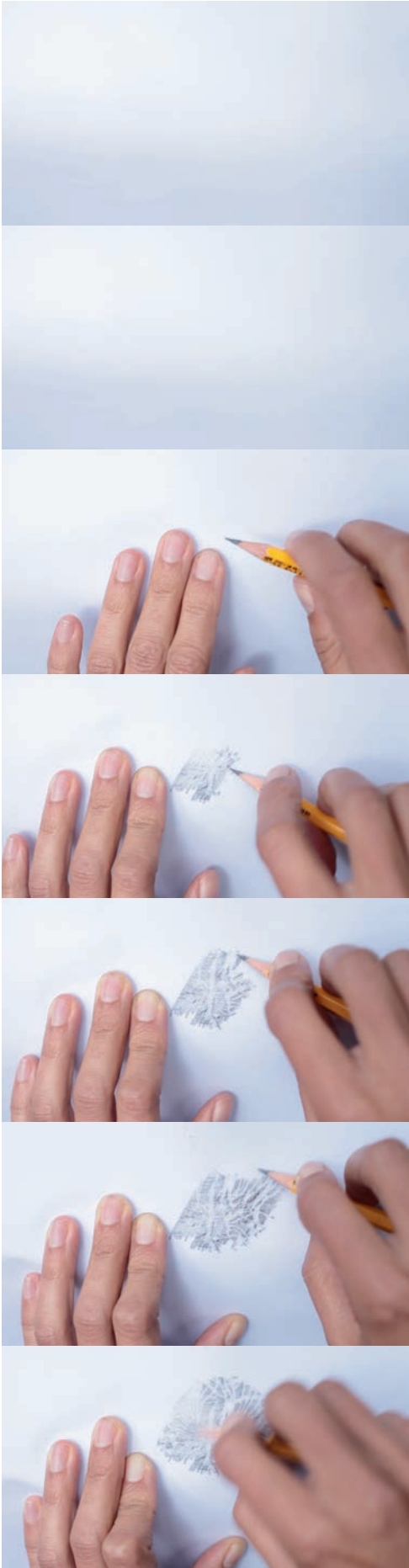


**Figure 7** Photo documentation of a workshop *The gift exercise / Invitation 6: Sihlwald* (October 17, 2021, photo by Jana Figliuolo)



**Figure 8** Photo documentation of a workshop *The gift exercise / Invitation 6: Sihlwald* (October 17, 2021, photo by Jana Figliuolo)





You live beneath the surface,  
hidden from my eyes.  
All I can see of you are your traces.

I know you from the news,  
from reports about mass death in the forests  
caused by your massive expansion.

Therefore, we call you a pest.

But you are much more than that.

Writing is a way of understanding  
so I am writing to you with the hope  
that this will bring us closer.

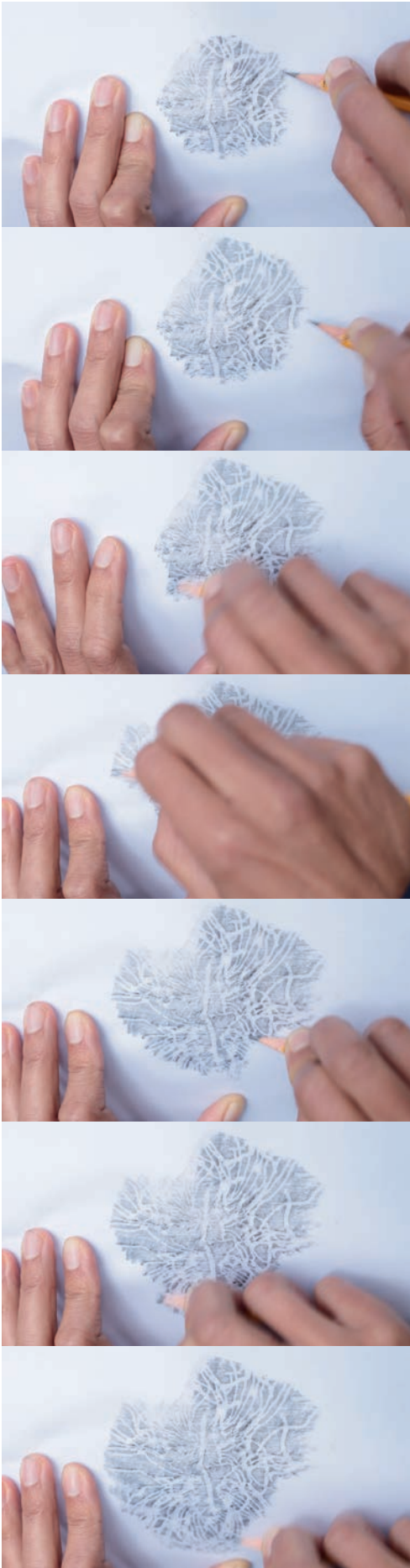
I studied printmaking for four years  
at a university in Japan.  
When I visited Sihlwald for the first time and  
saw these traces, I was immediately reminded  
of my experience in making woodcuts.

In Japan, the traditional woodcut printing,  
Ukiyoe print ( 浮世絵 ), is regarded  
as a traditional art form that has developed  
in its own way. Among the many printmaking  
methods, such as copper printing, lithography,  
and silkscreen printing, woodcut printing has  
the longest history.

The woodcut printing technique was  
originally invented in China and introduced  
to the Korean Peninsula and Japan  
in the 8th century, and later in Xinjiang,  
Vietnam, Persia, Russia, and Islamic countries.

Around 1439, Johannes Gutenberg introduced  
his letterpress printing machine in Europe  
and contributed to the development of mass-  
produced printing technology.  
However, hardly anyone knows that  
letterpress printing was invented 400 years  
ago by Chinese engineer Bi Sheng and had  
since been developed as an efficient printing  
method in China.

When we talk about the 'bark beetle',  
we usually refer to one specific



representative of your kind,  
that we consider specifically harmful,  
'Ips typographus', named after a profession  
that is hardly practised in the digital age.

In the forest, I notice your presence  
in the trees' dead branches  
which you had once inhabited.  
Your dwelling has caused their death  
since you and your children  
feed on the vital tissues that supply  
the tree's bodies with water.

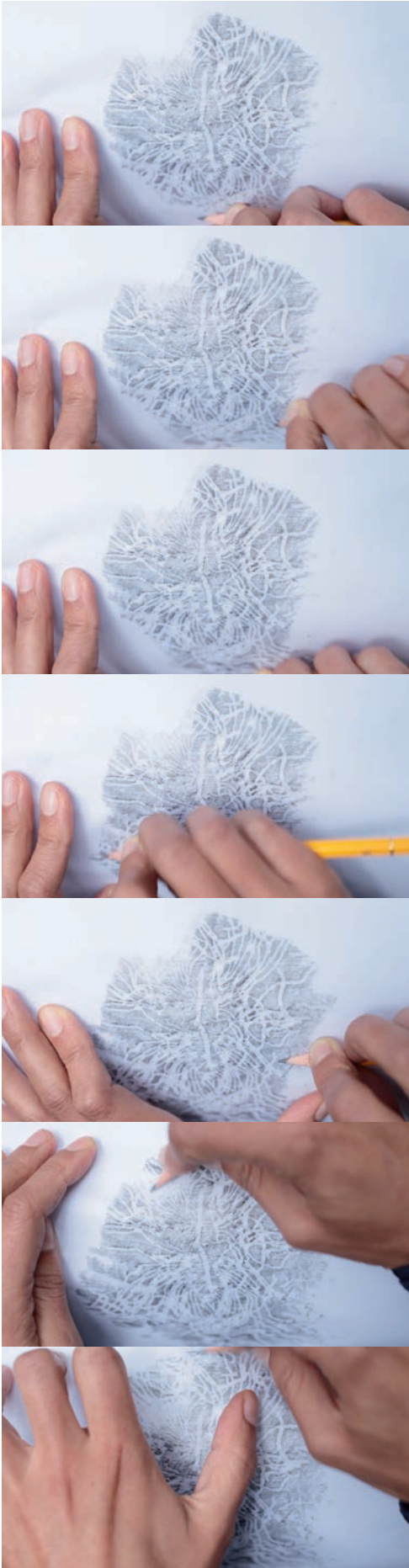
I encountered the marks you left  
on the surfaces  
of the naked tree trunks and fallen barks;  
Delicate drawings, some of them even look  
like depictions of trees.

By taking a closer look, it is striking that  
all of your marks follow a common pattern.

This is probably why they remind us  
of our human sign systems and characters  
and raise the question of  
how these signs may be read.  
What do they communicate?  
To whom are they speaking?

Strangely enough,  
the scientists who named you  
after the artisan  
who forms meanings from letters,  
attribute no significance to your signs,  
besides the prosaic expression  
of your great appetite,  
since they consider writing  
– the ability to code and decode meaning –  
an exclusively human skill.

The Chinese woodcut print is based  
on an ancient technique called Tàpiàn (拓片)  
in Chinese. A Tàpiàn is a reproduction  
of the texture of a surface, created by placing  
a piece of paper or thin fabric over the subject,  
and then rubbing the paper with something  
that leaves traces, most commonly solid ink  
or pencil. In Japanese, it is called Takuhon  
(拓本); Taku (拓) means to print and Hon (本)



means book. Thus, it means book print or letterpress, or Buchdruck in German. Tàpiàn was also originally invented in China before the 7th century and spread to East and Southeast Asian countries, especially those which were influenced by Chinese writing culture and calligraphy. There are two different techniques of Tàpiàn: using dry or wet material.

Wet material can stick closely to the subject, thus, the wet technique can make an extremely precise and accurate copy. It is said to be able to capture even a gold leaf which is approximately 0.0001 mm thick. Therefore, this technique is useful in archaeological research such as the investigation of excavated objects. Although digital photography techniques have developed significantly, they are still used in real-time.

Tàpiàn started to be used as an alternative and more efficient approach to copying and learning Chinese letters and calligraphy, replacing other techniques. At that time, the ability to write and the skill to write beautiful letters were important qualities in social distinction.

Therefore, many people tried to learn writing and calligraphy by copying texts which were written with beautiful letters. One of the reasons for the spread of the Tàpiàn-technique in China was the popularity of Jīn shí wén( 金石文 ). Jīn shí wén are inscriptions with beautiful handwriting on stones or metal plates. They recorded the personal stories of those who had passed away as well as important historical events of the time. In the meantime, the original stones and metal plates had been destroyed or lost, and the Tàpiàn themselves got historical value, just like the spirits or ghosts of the originals. They are currently used as research material for the reconstruction of historical events.

Your kind and mine, we are connected  
through the history of the plantation.

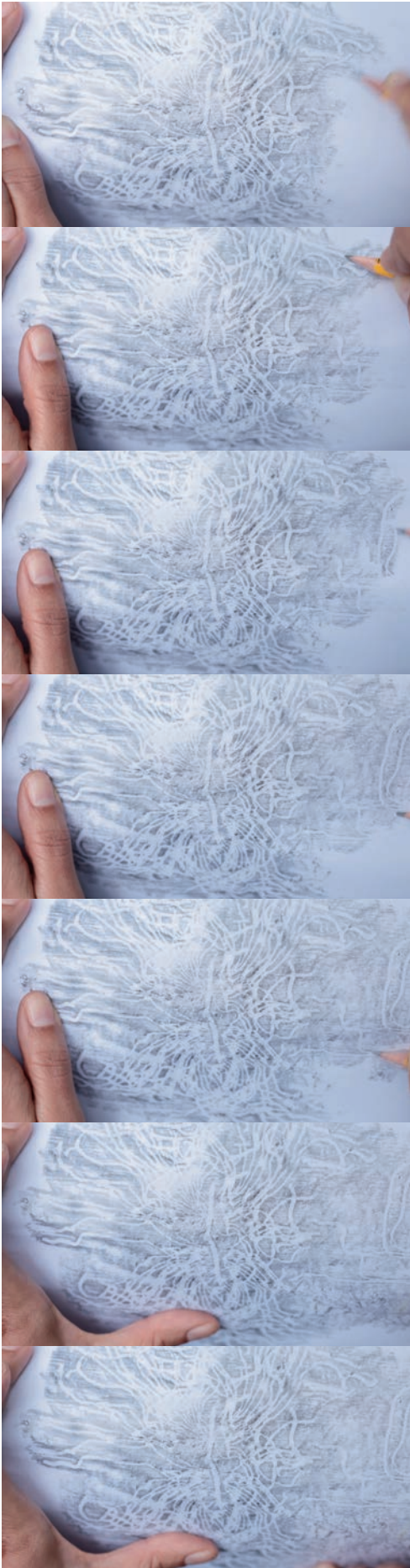


The rise of the plantation economy in the wake of the invasion of the 'New World' by European man, monocultures on large scales cultivated by the unpaid labour of enslaved people, mainly from the African continent, and cheap labourers from Southeast Asia and East Asia, shipped to the colonies of the South for the production of goods for growing markets in Europe as well as raw materials for its still young and hungry industries, which form the base of further expansion, accumulation, economical growth, mass production, mass consumption.

The success of the plantations overseas also brought them back to Europe, where the demand for wood as an energy source was growing rapidly. As a result, forests in Switzerland that had been collectively used for centuries were privatised and the timber industry was born. In these plantation forests, the most cultivated tree was the fast-growing spruce, which was brought from its original habitat in the Swiss mountains to the plantations in the plains.

The method of Tàpiàn is actually equal to the artistic technique 'frottage', as you see. The term 'frottage' was introduced in the art field by Max Ernst, a German painter who was a member of the Surrealism movement. Beginning in 1925, he used frottage in many of his drawings and oil paintings. One of the most famous of his frottage series was published in 1926 in a book called 'Natural History', which consists of 34 frottage drawings representing natural phenomena, botanical and animal figures, and ends with a drawing of the back of Eve.

Although we, people from the West, believe in our control of what we call nature,



our human lives are intimately interwoven  
with all kinds of non-human life.

Your existence depends on the spruce tree,  
and we planted them en masse.

Usually, you prefer trees that are already  
sick or weak, and therefore, easy victims.  
The tree defends itself against your invasion,  
trying to expel you through resin flow.  
However, you have now grown  
so much in numbers  
that you overwhelm  
even healthy trees without effort.

Thanks to the longer, warmer,  
and drier summers of recent years,  
you have been able to raise two to three  
generations of offspring  
every year.

Your large-scale reproduction  
is based on our forestry mass production.  
You are the parasite  
of our economical success.  
You prosper thanks to global capitalism  
and climate change.  
You are proof that the survival of the fittest  
also results in its multiplication.  
However, I doubt that you are interested in  
the theories of Charles Darwin.

I think  
that the portrait of you as a parasite  
does not do you justice.  
Neither are you just the passive shareholder  
of anthropocentric imperialism.  
In fact, you are an actor yourself  
with an agency, and you actually act  
as a double agent.  
You work on the destruction  
of the system that feeds you.  
You undermine  
the rationality of the plantation  
and the narrative of progress.  
Therefore, some see in you  
an ARCHITECT OF CHANGE,  
and hope to engage you as an ally



for their project of restoring an original state of 'wilderness'.

Above all, surrealism was a revolutionary movement associated with communism, socialism, and anarchism.

The surrealists were also influenced by Sigmund Freud. They experimented with different techniques to explore the unconscious.

They invented the concept of automatism, which transcends the control of reason and cannot be disturbed by aesthetics or moral consciousness. This concept was based on a book by Leonardo da Vinci, who wrote about generating creativity by staring at stains on walls, ashes in the fireplace, or clouds and streams. Max Ernst also claimed that frottage was inspired by Da Vinci's description and his own childhood memory.

However, did he really get inspiration for the frottage from Da Vinci's stains on the wall, as other Surrealists have insisted?

In 1924, just before he invented the frottage, Ernst travelled to Vietnam, which was a French colony then. Vietnam is one of the countries where many Tàpiàn documents still exist, since it was under Chinese rule around the time when the technique was introduced.

I would speculate that Ernst encountered Tàpiàn in Vietnam, found something in common between the ideas of Surrealism and Tàpiàn, and when he returned to Paris, he acted as if he had discovered the technique by accident. If this hypothesis is true, the appropriation of ancient Asian printmaking methods by Max Ernst transformed the concept of Tàpiàn – which was originally the idea of an accurate copy of the subject – into something completely different; it became a surface for the projection of the artists' subjective hallucinations.

(©Willimann/Arai)



**Film 1** *The gift exercise / Invitation 6: Sihlwald* (Willimann/Arai 2021)

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Notes**

- 1) The exhibition is called 'A Forest of Many Worlds' which took place from 9- 30 October 2021, in the art space la\_cápsula in the city of Zurich, Switzerland. All participating artists showed their work on the site. A performative walk, FROM THE IN-BETWEEN, was organised in the frame of this exhibition in Sihlwald, Switzerland on October 17, 2021. Three artists, including Willimann/Arai, showcased their performances/workshops.
- 2) Both the workshop and the lecture performance were presented at Sihlwald, Zurich, Switzerland on October 17, 2021.

## **Film**

Willimann/Arai

2021 *The gift exercise / Invitation 6: Sihlwald*. Zurich, 15:02.

<https://vimeo.com/774900434> (Retrieved December 12, 2022)

## **Website**

Willimann/Arai

<https://willimannarai.net> (Retrieved December 12, 2022)