Esther Shalev-Gerz

THE SHADOW

Esther Shalev-Gerz
The Shadow, 2018
24,000 concrete pavers
100 x 25 metres

Commissioned with support from the Burrard Arts Foundation, Rick Erickson and Donna Partridge, Brigitte and Henning Freybe, Phil Lind, the Morris and Helen Belkin Foundation, the Rennie Foundation and UBC’s Matching Fund for Outdoor Art through Infrastructure Impact Charges.
The Shadow is an enormous work, a silhouette, a to-scale image of the shadow of a giant fir tree laid out in black and grey pavers on one of the main plazas of the University of British Columbia, which is located on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Musqueam people. It is a paradoxical artwork in more than one sense. While “monumental” in scale, it lacks a monumental presence as it is literally embedded in the paving stones. It is walked on, not gazed up at. Probably for the most part, people are unaware of its overall shape; rather they are “inside” the piece, seeing a partial pattern. In spite of being almost one hundred metres long, it does not call much attention to itself. The Shadow is neither an object nor a picture of one. Instead, it represents the shadow cast by an object. Because a shadow is a “drawing” made by light (or the blocking of light), Shalev-Gerz even advances the idea that it is a “photograph” and treats the plaza pavers as “pixels.” It is totally integrated into the fabric of its environment.

The Shadow is especially provocative as a piece that is at once present and absent. It both surrounds the walker/viewer and also disappears as walkers entering it recede into it. We walk
on it without tripping. It is unusual to make a work of art to be walked on. It calls attention to the ground as it involves the body of the viewer. It is simple but also elusive, as it is hard to grasp the entire image unless it is seen from above.

It might help to know that the artist, Esther Shalev-Gerz, has experience in making monuments that disappear. In 1986 in Hamburg, she and Jochen Gerz produced a commissioned work, *The Monument Against Fascism*, that was a large square pillar on which the public was invited to write their names. Every year it was lowered a couple of metres into the ground until it disappeared. Shalev-Gerz’s “anti-monument” stance is a response to history and a call to locate historical memory not in “monuments” but in our own sense of responsibility and agency. What sense of history and agency are addressed, then, in *The Shadow*?

In an elegiac way, *The Shadow* evokes the forest that no longer stands on the campus. We are, after all, as Shalev-Gerz notes, still surrounded by trees. But these mighty creatures have largely been felled with no thought to what might happen after they are gone. They are the basis of a resource-extraction industry that has accompanied the colonial appropriation of the land. The giant firs are not extinct, but fully grown firs are now rare when they were once ubiquitous. British Columbia (could you dream up a more colonial name?) is no longer known as “the Brazil of
the North." But the damage to the old forests has been extensive and furthermore largely a matter of political indifference.

The idea that there is a moral issue, or even an aesthetic one, involved in maintaining old forests is incomprehensible within the present discourse.

*The Shadow* is not cast by a living tree. Is it cast by the memory of a tree that once stood in this plaza? Or by the historical forces that removed that tree? *The Shadow* involves a procedure of displacement. It is an image of something absent; it can be seen and it can’t be seen. It is the shadow of a phantom, a kind of memory trace that despite its being laid out prostrate on the plaza is a restless image. It is literally still, of course, but the three shades of grey that are used to draw the high boughs of the tree imply movement. It is most legible from a bird’s-eye view, like the ancient geoglyphs of the Nazca Desert.

Although Shalev-Gerz photographed dozens of trees to make the computer drawing that provided the pattern for the pavers, *The Shadow* has the character of a rebus—that is, the silhouette is more a symbol of a tree than a picture of one. It has an odd resonance, then, with an old UBC Forestry rebus (*4-S Tree*) reminding us again that a tree, in British Columbia, isn’t just a tree. In some image traditions, Chinese or European painting for example, a single tree stands for an individual, for growth through time, for “character.” Despite the work of Emily Carr, one of whose subjects was the forest industry, a tree in British Columbia is an economic unit, always reducible to its monetary value as a raw commodity for export.

*The Shadow* asks us to think about where we are in relation to something like a Douglas fir, or the memory of one. As a result, we begin to encounter an economy which the tree can’t escape. That is unless we do.

Scott Watson
Director, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery
ARTIST STATEMENT

I remember walking along Main Mall at UBC in 2015, thinking about the place and how inspiring it was to look up at the huge trees that line the pedestrian boulevard—behind the trees only sky—and having the feeling that everything was horizontal. I was struck by the vastness of the topography, the pronounced horizontality producing an incredibly strong and elevating feeling. As I was walking, the image of a shadow of a large tree began to form in my mind.

I had already conducted a great deal of research about what was on the land before the University was built. It helped me understand that the land and the forests had always been places of learning for the Musqueam people. After the idea of the shadow had come to me, I continued researching tree chronology with botanists from the UBC Botanical Garden. I also spent time exploring the cliffs above Wreck Beach. Although most of the forests surrounding UBC were logged at some point, there still exists an area of old-growth forest on this sloping beach site where one particular four-hundred-year-old Douglas fir juts out of the ground in a daring manner, as though deliberately seeking the sunlight.
As a result of their history, each person as each tree is unique. I wanted to create a portrait of a particular Douglas fir as an attempt to posit that each tree is an entity unto itself, an individual life. I needed to immerse myself in its history. To create a shadow, one first needs the image of a tree. A tree is a three-dimensional sculpture whereas a shadow is a two-dimensional photograph.

I made the decision to render the tree on a computer using 3D imaging software with an internal virtual light source so I could manifest the moment of the day that captured what had formed in my imagination. I wanted it to be as “shadowy” as possible—the nature of shadows is that they change constantly. Yet we are never able to distance ourselves from them, as they are permanently attached to their source. For this particular artwork, I wanted the most majestic shadow possible since, unlike our own, it would be stationary.

Creating the still shadow of a fir—actually, the tangible absence of a tree—is an invitation for the viewers to conjure the tree in their imaginations.

The curatorial team and I then had to decide where to install The Shadow on the campus. We came upon a large monochromatic, open, paved plaza constantly traversed by pedestrians. It was like the most perfect sheet of drawing paper. I imagined the pencil would be the identical pavers, in three shades of grey specifically crafted for the project. I chose to use standard-sized pavers so that the same paving stones used for the plaza participated in the construction of the work. In this way, The Shadow appears to be pixelated by the materiality and shape of the pavers.

The Shadow’s emergence from the plaza through the pixelation of the pavers is a manner of proto-photography, like when exposed photographic paper soaks in a basin of developing solution and the image begins to appear. Another important idea is the notion of telescoping. It is significant to telescope—or merge—the image of something from the past with photographs and images that belong to the present. The Shadow works like that—a potential tree telescoped with one from another moment in time. In my work, timelines are seldom linear; sometimes I need to summon elements from other eras to envision contemporary mythology in an unprecedented way.

One of my main considerations when working in public space is how to deal with permanency. As an artist embarking on a specific project, I need to ask the question, “How long will this public artwork last?” Someone in the distant future will have to make the decision to destroy it. Embedding this work in the paving stones might allow it to exist for as long as the plaza.
Another consideration is always, “What can this work in the public sphere make the viewer do?” Public art can prompt certain physical, biological and intellectual responses depending on how ready you are to engage with the work—The Shadow encourages you to seek a higher vantage point so you can see the entire piece, as when you are at ground level it is revealed to you only in fragments. Maybe the viewer will climb to the top of the grassy knoll in front of the student union building, the Nest, or to the rooftop garden in the same building to enjoy its entirety from above in one gaze.

Public art can raise our consciousness about what we are walking on and the nature of our constructed world. The Shadow was pieced together by a team of workers who laid the twenty-four thousand pavers. I hope that by walking on it every day, people will think about those who crafted it.

The shadow cast by a tree is a mirror of an absence/presence. There are also mournful and critical aspects to this work, because old-growth forests are endangered but are still being cut down. The Shadow almost serves as a memorial to something that is no longer here.

I believe each work of art is a monument or a memorial with a specific resonance. This is how I consider artworks in museums. They are monuments and celebrations of certain moments in history.

It is always appropriate to come to conclusions that an artist hadn’t considered—to paraphrase psychologists, we are aware of 20 percent and unaware of 80 percent of what we are doing and thinking. My ideas surface from places that I don’t always know about. I have a cabin on Cortes Island in BC, where I visit a certain part of the forest every day to see what has been happening—the unfolding drama, what fell on what. It is a sloping site where younger trees grow out of ancient stumps that are standing even as they decay. Most certainly all of this has impregnated my subconscious—the tree of life and the tree of knowledge are the greatest symbols of higher learning.

Esther Shalev-Gerz, Oil on Stone, 1983
Courtesy of the artist
One of my earliest public works, *Oil on Stone* (1983), was located in Israel, in the mountains of Galilee, on the historic site of Tel Hai. It was part of a large exhibition with artists from all over the world, yet just a few kilometres away the First Lebanon War (1982) was raging. I conceived that work within this context—I wanted a large slab of stone to be brought from Jerusalem because that was where the decision-makers were sitting. As soon as I got the stone, I cut it into pavers from which we built a wall with the cutout of a human figure pointing towards the north. When walking around the wall, the change of perspective makes the cutout person slowly turn into something that looks more like a ruin. This was one of my first public artworks and significantly my first use of pavers.

Another work, *The Monument Against Fascism* (1986), was completed with Jochen Gerz in Hamburg, Germany. This was a real challenge. My proposition was to create something that would disappear. We erected a twelve-metre column, clad in lead, in a public square. We invited people to sign their names on its surface for “in the end it is only we ourselves who can stand up against injustice,” as stated the text next to the column. When the accessible part of the column was filled with signatures, it was lowered into the ground. On the day of the last lowering, as the final section of the column was covered with signatures, the work disappeared completely. It entered a new stage of existence in the public realm, for now the visitors had to look down into the ground.

*The Shadow* also celebrates the idea of the ground. The work changes with the weather and the light. When it rains, the piece is darker and more dramatic and solitary; in the bright sun, it is paler, sharing the ground with other shadows. It is never the same from one day to the next. *The Shadow* is almost like a mosaic earthwork, most legible from the sky above. I wanted the work to resist being viewed all at once, to appear slowly as you walk over it day after day. When climbing up a tree, one cannot see its entirety. Yet you know it. When you can reconcile seeing and remembering, your imagination is opened in a different way.

Over time *The Shadow* will decay, polished by the thousands of feet treading over it, by the gum and detritus that will eventually lend it its patina. *The Shadow* resists and surrenders all at once.

Esther Shalev-Gerz
Esther Shalev-Gerz (née Gilinksy) was born in Vilnius, Lithuania, in 1948. Her family moved to Jerusalem in 1957, where she graduated from Bezalel Academy of Art and Design. Since 1984, she has divided her time between Paris and Cortes Island, BC. Internationally recognized for her significant contributions to the fields of public art, photography and video, Shalev-Gerz investigates questions of memory, history, trauma, cultural identity and ethics in the contemporary world through her practice. Working in multiple media, from photographs and video installations to large-scale public commissions that merge architecture with landscape design, Shalev-Gerz’s monuments, installations and public sculptures are developed through active dialogue and consultation with people whose participation emphasizes their individual and collective memories, accounts, opinions and experiences. In 2010 and 2012, two major retrospective exhibitions respectively displayed ten and fifteen of her installations, first in Jeu de Paume, Paris, then in Musée des Beaux Arts de Lausanne. Space Between Time, her solo exhibition at Wasserman Projects, Detroit, presented nine of her installations between April and July 2016. In 2017, a survey exhibition of her work was presented at the Serlachius Museum, Mantta, Finland. She has exhibited internationally in, among other places, San Francisco, Paris, Berlin, London, Stockholm, Vancouver, Geneva, Guangzhou and New York. From the beginning of her career with monuments such as Oil on Stone (1983) and The Monument Against Fascism (1986), Shalev-Gerz has designed and realized permanent installations in public space in Hamburg, Israel, Stockholm, Wanas, Geneva, Glasgow and now Vancouver. Her work has been represented in over twenty-five monographs. For more information about the artist, visit www.shalev-gerz.net.
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