

# Clairières

Caroline Gagné

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## CLEARINGS

**I**t is May 2015 in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli. I take a few days off to write, between the immaculate flights of geese and the enveloping rhythm of the tides, in the studio-home designed by Caroline Gagné. Through the long, horizontal window in the kitchen, I glimpse the first rays of the rising sun. I go outside. Walk a bit in its direction. Sit down on the sole step. Sip my coffee. On the second floor, a small, irregular window draws my attention. It frames the river, brings it into the room: its odours of kelp, the cackles of geese, the roll of the rising tide. Moved, I go up to the window and look at the sombre blue.

Very quickly, I realize that the series of gestures, which I thought were intuitive, are actually a response to the choreography imagined by my host; that this sequence of sensitive actions does not evolve randomly but rather in order to capture, over days, the brilliance of quiet events. "What is important," said John Cage in an interview, "is to insert the individual into the current, the flux of everything that happens."<sup>1</sup> Clearly, Gagné likes to put herself in the rustling of the world, on the verge of encountering muffled sensations that nonetheless resonate at the limit of perception. Her creative work arises out of this delicate attention to the world. An attention that we could also call *listening*, an act of *wanting-perceiving* that brings beings, fragile movements, and the slightest vibrations inside oneself. Gagné's works seek out their reverberations; they call for us to be open to what is there, inventing the spatial and temporal conditions that will give us access to it.

At the gallery entrance, the installation *Bruire* (Murmur) sketches a network of subtle interrelations, reaffirming the ability of beings and things to be affected by others and their necessary interdependence. Sounds recorded during deep listening sessions on the Côte-de-Sud are transmitted from speakers-transducers attached to glass panels balanced upright, tracing a few sonic points of an emergent landscape. These aquatic, crystalline, and avian sounds, captured in their purest physical form—the sound wave—induce a subtle movement in the glass, the vibrations of which agitate the digital images appearing on a few iPhones installed in the space. In Gagné's studio-home, the objects—and windows—also vibrate when heavy trucks pass by on Route 132 during busy afternoons. The room welcomes these sound waves, which, in another context, might seem hostile and alien. They are simply present, part of the world. Just like the loaded images on the iPhone screens that, through their agitated

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1. John Cage and Daniel Charles, *For the Birds: John Cage in Conversation with Daniel Charles*. London: Marion Boyers, 1981: 56.

illegibility, tell of something beyond what they represent. Visitors move between these invisible exchanges, perceiving the solid tenuousness of the connections binding them, yet without knowing the rules, which remain mysterious.

To create the work *Autofading\_Se disparaître*, Gagné delved into the world of virtual reality for the first time, imagining for visitors (and for herself) a virtual place where she could wander with delight. By wearing the unusually heavy headset, which allows one entry into the place invented by the artist, the visitor is immersed in a dreamy, painterly, impressionistic space; waves of multicoloured points flood them and recede at the same time; forms-trees, space-forest are in a constant state of appearance-disappearance. A form-tree that stands, we might say, on the threshold of representation; a form-tree that agitates, in the background, the idea of the tree and that of its terrain, the forest. On the edge of this forest, the visitor moves slowly, seeking to grasp the rhythm that will allow them to perceive what they suppose to be the soul of the forest, that is the meaning the forest assumes upon coming into contact with the artist's thoughts.

In contrast to a number of virtual reality projects, such as Lena Herzog's *Last Whispers* (2019), Cao Fei's *The Eternal Wave* (2020), Loukia Alavanou's *Oedipus in Search of Colonus* (2021), Gagné's work does not present a central point of view that a narrative thread encourages us to take. We navigate in all directions, though delicately (any sudden movement instantly plunges us into a virtual storm), in this forest where the indetermination of forms combined with an abundance of sonic textures constantly renews our experience. The space seems infinite to us—to the left, to the right, in front, behind—and in endless transformation despite the repeating forms: trees in shades of green, the ground in shades of violet. The sonic, sylvan vocabulary (creaking branches, gurgling water, wind, noises of birds) connects to the images, qualifying and requalifying them continually. The boulder on which we are invited to sit—a fake boulder modelled on a virtual rock, itself modeled on a real stone and thus artifice par excellence—slows down the rhythm of our movements in the space.

If we slow down and lie in wait, perhaps we might be able to meet the beings of the forest. These beings do not come in realistic forms however. As animal forms without any colour treatment, they embody the idea of animal, its conceptual representation. Woodpeckers, warblers, chickadees, and squirrels become creatures of listening, appearing only when we are silent in both gestures and words. To our great pleasure, Gagné does not play with realism here: she fully assumes the artifice of the visual fantasy that her work produces and thereby defuses the sterility of interactive exchanges whose sole subject is their interactivity.

Gagné's *Clearings* unfolds through quasi-imperceptible shudders, open-ended sensations existing at the threshold of enunciation. In a place in the forest where the sun penetrates; in a place where the space becomes less dense; in a place where we can lie in wait without any fear, the artist establishes systems of fragile connections in which the visitor is called into being.

—Julie Faubert

Translation: Oana Avasilichioaei