

ON SURRENDER AS AN ACT OF INFILTRATION

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Troy Gronsdahl's short video *The Knot* opens in the middle of a forested landscape; a young tree trunk appears in focus among older trunks, small saplings, the stumps of fallen trees, and clusters of leaves, all blurry. The sharp trunk is slightly off centre, leaning towards the edge of the frame, and two or three soft fingers of bright green leaf peek in from the top.

We, as observers, are given time to absorb all of this, as the uninhabited landscape lasts for 16 seconds of the 70-second work. Eventually, a blurry figure emerges from the background, navigating the undulating terrain on foot. In jeans, plaid shirt and glasses, the artist approaches the trunk —and us— and continues just off-camera, from whence he ties a clean white cloth around what we now realize to be a branch, perhaps an inch or so in diameter. A knot is formed by the artist's hands, and they disappear, leaving us with the scene in which we started, save for the addition of the small, white banner.

An art historical context of imaging the Canadian landscape springs readily to mind, and one could easily be tempted to think of Gronsdahl's gesture as Thompsonesque: the artist is a lone wanderer who emerges from and disappears back into the forest, leaving only cloth tokens behind, or so goes the mythology. But the quietude of the artist's performance —and, indeed, his overall avoidance of the camera's lens — suggests both purpose and resignation. This figure is no ecological *flâneur*, no eco-tourist; he is on a mission.

That mission is one of surrender. Gronsdahl marks the young branch with a white flag, and retreats. The solitude of the location and the lingering absence of other bodies suggests that, perhaps, his surrender is to us, an anonymous citizenry —the body of the observer occupies this territory only virtually, by means of the apparatus of the camera. Gronsdahl's camera, in this case, becomes a paradoxical witness... paradoxical because the camera is always *placed*, and captures nothing by accident. But if the camera is the ultimate, universal, secular confessor to whom the artist submits —a stand-in for any and all potential viewers of its public record— then the artist operates from a position of guilt, or culpability, or complicity. The white flag of surrender is placed before us, but not *for* us.

What, then, are the stakes of this surrender? They must be high, for no protest is made, no ceremony nor complaint issued (silence is, after all, reserved for the most profound of sentiments). The work's title, and indeed the knot itself, suggest an ambivalent binding —neither tight nor loose, the band is formed efficiently but gently around the tree, and the

branch bows slightly in submission to the hands' ministrations. It continues to sway, slightly, after the hands have left the picture entirely and it has been left alone with the camera, bowing in a subtle response to its context and its use as collaborative performer. The white handkerchief, for its part, is a personal object made semi-public, or at least unleashed into the landscape, and the tying of a marker on a branch is a way of sectioning and owning a part of that landscape.

We should not be lulled too easily, however, into thinking of this work as an expression of abject shame; it is far more ambivalent than that. Invoking Canadian landscape as he does, and given his position as a white, male, Canadian artist, Gronsdahl is, perhaps, surrendering to *Canada*, as construct or context or concept, without apologizing for it. His hoser-hipster costuming suggests middle-class North American privilege, while he engages in a nearly anonymous declaration of reclamation and relegation—a thankless and, dare I say, almost pointless action that refers to larger political narratives of race, belonging, and Grand National Identity (if only with tongue firmly in cheek). The ambivalent elegance of Gronsdahl's gesture is that it is as much a literal marking of territory as it is a signifier of surrender; the swatch with which he binds the tree is itself the indication of his giving it up.

—Lee Henderson, PAVED Arts, Saskatoon, 2013