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The Seedling: Transforming Climate through Art and Awi'nakola

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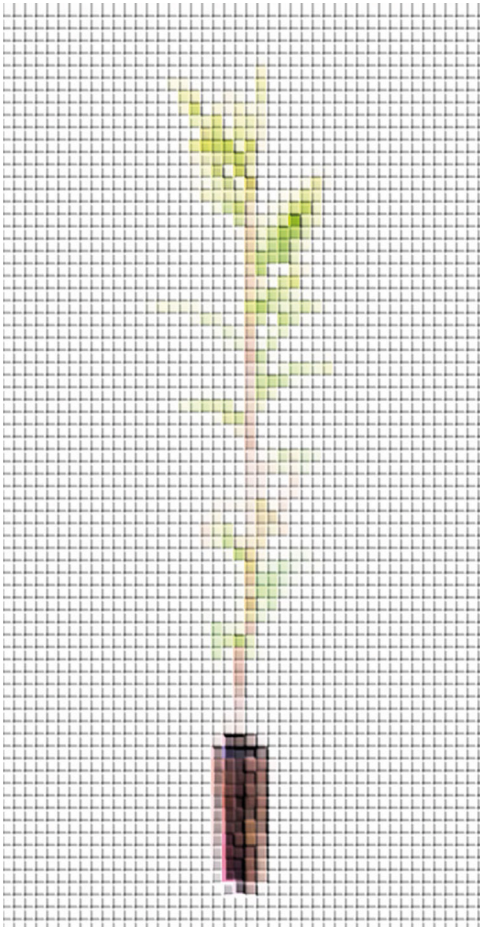


FIGURE 1

Seedling graphic

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Technology is not art – not invention. It is a simultaneous hope and hoax. It does not concern itself with the undefined, the inexplicable: It deals with the affirmation of its own making.

SERRA (2012)

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For Kwakwaka'wakw people from the Pacific Northwest, climate change is existential and felt every day. Our cultural identity is deeply connected to cedar, especially old growth trees, which, having already been decimated by generations of unsustainable logging practices, are now showing vulnerability to drought and rising temperatures (Andrus et al., 2024). With the 2023 and 2024 wildfire seasons in British Columbia being the worst on record (Government of British Columbia, 2025), we are forced to reckon with what losing cedar would mean to our peoples, cultures, laws and the lands that sustain us all, and then do what we can to secure the future of our “Tree of Life” – and, with it, our ways of being.

So, we look to scientific or technological solutions and advocate for changing unsustainable laws and industrial practices in a way that is consistent with the values that have been passed from previous generations to guide our decisions today. But in a world willing to sacrifice planetary health for a robust economy, how do we garner the political will to enact change? In addressing the challenges of transformative change, leading MIT systems scholar Otto Scharmer (2021) suggests that “You cannot change a system unless you transform consciousness. You cannot transform consciousness unless you make a system sense and see itself.” This is where art holds power, because rather than telling people what to think or how to feel, it can be an invitation to question and contemplate, offering the potential to change the way something is seen or understood. Artistic concepts can bring together people and ideas from across disciplines and cultures, uniting siloed or disparate knowledges towards a common goal, thereby expanding the sum of their parts.

The Seedling is a place and time-based conceptual art project that, by enacting Kwakwaka'wakw traditional practices and laws, and embedding them into technological solutions, invites us to transform our relationship with land and technology, examine who and what our governance and economics serve, and radically expand the time frames we use to plan and care for our future.

Although this project begins with planting a Western Red Cedar seedling and designing a totem in digital 3D, its hope lies in the University of Victoria's commitment in its sustainability plan to make the tree into a totem when it is fully grown, 600 years from now. The immediate seeds of that promise germinate transformative economic, legal and technological seedlings, with the potential to weave threads within our social fabric to live by Indigenous laws on Indigenous lands (Cornassel, 2021), and whose growth will upend colonial paradigms. Rooted in the Kwakwaka'wakw concept, legal principle and practice of *awi'nakola*, which calls for us to live in good relationship with and honour the interconnectedness of the land, air, water, spirit worlds and everything in them – and places people within rather than above the cycle of life – the act of planting a cedar seedling and the commitment to care for it in this way call for us to bear witness to our collective and cumulative impacts on the planet. By doing so, *The Seedling* casts and honours the natural world as the ultimate truth-holder that guides our decision-making and the work to come. By initiating ideas bigger than ourselves and enacting responsibility beyond our lifetimes, *The Seedling* invokes multi-generational accountability, connects the past and present with the future, and inspires the hope and actions needed to productively engage existential conversations and take material steps towards reversing climate change.

1 Bearing Witness to the Environment: A Kwakwaka'wakw Process, Practice and Law

From a Kwakwaka'wakw perspective, witnessing is more expansive than passive observation or truth-telling. As Kwakwaka'wakw scholar Sarah Hunt/Thalilila'ogwa writes:

Kwagiulth witnessing is not only a mental exercise but also includes the spiritual and physical experiences involved in a shared community process. Bearing witness in the context of a potlatch involves all the senses, not only the passing on of a story, facts, or information. Witnessing is about the affective, embodied, spiritual role that emerges from sitting among your relations in the context of a sacred place of cultural business.

2018, p. 290

Combined with *awi'nakola* and applied to the context of climate, Kwakwaka'wakw witnessing becomes an active and responsive process of understanding, participating, and interpreting that fosters deep and enduring relationships

between oneself, lands, waters and communities. By activating attentiveness to the subtleties and movements of these natural spaces to draw out principles and standards for behaviour and beliefs, the growing tree becomes a storyteller and teacher that leads, guides and determines our actions according to its own needs to survive and thrive. For example, if it is thirsty because of watershed degradation or begins to wither from contamination, our collective human obligation is to not only heal the water systems but also address the laws, policies and decisions that led to harm in the first place. Being a good witness to the natural world requires a dynamic, intricate and fluid approach to determine appropriate actions, source proper law and shape the ever-unfolding ways to govern respectfully. Bearing witness means being able to discern, then translate into action, what colonial systems render invisible and unintelligible.

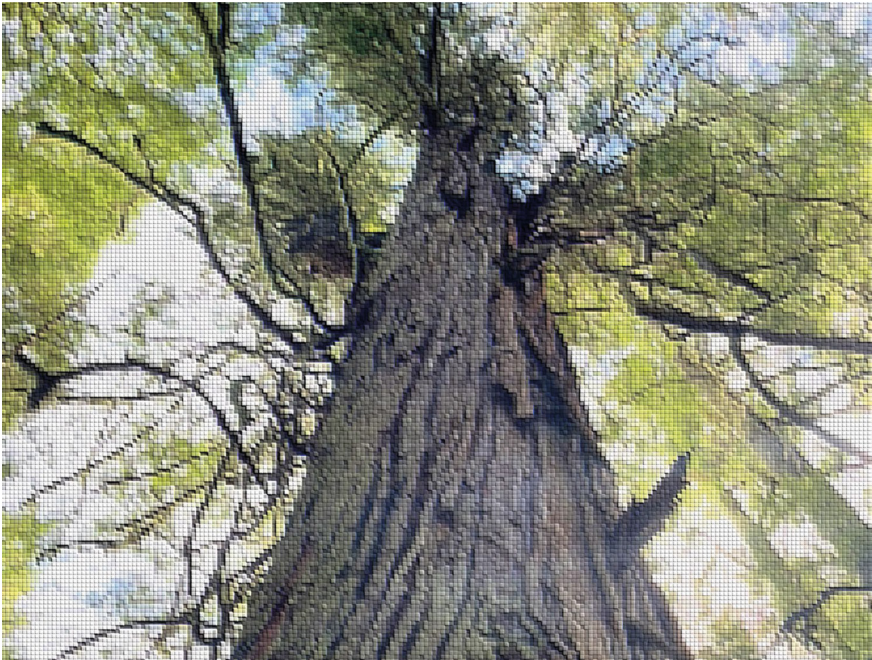


FIGURE 2 Seedling full-grown pixellation

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2 Art as a Means to Change and Transformation

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In the face of accelerating social and environmental breakdowns, how can we build our collective capacities for transformation to bring about a just, inclusive, and regenerative society for all?

SCHARMER (2018)

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People are the eyes and ears, or witnesses, of the systems that structure society, and this is where artistic projects like *The Seedling* take up an important role in the process of systemic change. Each of us is affected by art on our own terms, depending on our individual experiences, familial histories, personal values and the political landscapes that shape our perspectives. Similarly, when we sit, visit and learn with an Indigenous Elder, the teachings do not generally prescribe a determinative way to think or feel. Rather than providing answers, they often ask questions that help us find our own answers.

At its best, the experience of art might awaken a memory, hold a mirror from an angle that unsettles a belief or bias, or enable us to see and understand something we hold as significant in an alternative way. Through these internal thoughts and associations, we take ownership of the connections and realisations we make. This is where art begins to transform consciousness, because when something becomes personal, it becomes important, and once we think or feel even a little bit differently, that shift, regardless of scale, is how art seeds change. Like a conversation with an Elder, *The Seedling* is important not for the answers that it holds, but for the questions it asks.

3 The Work to Come

Lasting and transformative change is achieved across time, at different scales and in different places. Sustained and systemic change occurs by way of re-shaping social, political and legal processes. It culminates through the diverse efforts and methods of many individuals and collectives. By planting a tree and promising to make and raise a totem centuries into the future, *The Seedling* poses numerous and important questions. How do we transcend short-term

political and economic timelines to make decisions that better serve the long-term needs of people and the planet? How do we create and enforce obligations, agreements and contracts that endure for generations? How might we transform our legal understanding of land from one of property and dominion to one of relationship and responsibility? Unsustainable practices like planned obsolescence make digital technologies part of the climate problem, but can they instead be sustainably developed and used as part of the solution?

Some of these answers lie in the power of technology, others in non-state legal orders, cultural perspectives or the land, water and air themselves. Answering these questions will require not only creative solutions that embrace Indigenous knowledges and laws, but the willingness to confront and disentangle the contradictions inherent to many of the timelines, priorities and paternalistic perspectives of colonial systems. *The Seedling* challenges us to think critically about our relationships with land, time, governance and technology, and through Kwakwaka'wakw perspectives, practices and laws, each of us is invited to become a witness and an active participant in a sustainable climate future. What might be seen as a tiny cedar tree that is striving to grow among an imperilled yet vibrant ecosystem brings forward the truth of our interconnected and interdependent relationships to this planet. As witnesses we hold the obligation of sharing and perpetuating the stories we witness (see, for example, Udy, 2008, p. 100), and *The Seedling* is just one of many stories we must reflect and act upon. If we embrace this Kwakwaka'wakw perspective, we then hold cultural, political and legal obligations to the natural world, and responsibility to honour the past and respect the future through *awi'nakola*.

Editors' Note

The Seedling is a process-based work of art that invites people to reconceive and reconstitute their relations with land, technology and time. As a land-based artistic vision, the project's intention and purpose are grounded in Indigenous perspectives, particularly Kwakwaka'wakw knowledge and legal orders, to guide the work to come. The project is already underway, the idea is germinating, and the University of Victoria has made a commitment to raising the totem when the tree is mature. With a time frame that spans centuries, the social and ecological conditions when this totem will rise are unknown. For there to be a healthy planet, values and systems will need to change. For the tree, the digital design and the commitment to survive, stewardship responsibilities must be passed from hand to hand through a series of connected and active choices. To have questions at the beginning and throughout is part of

the project. And it is impossible to know what questions people will be asking at the end.

Andrew Ambers is Kwakwaka'wakw from the 'Namgis and Ma'amtagila First Nations located in Canada. He is a Juris Doctor (JD) and Juris Indigenarum Doctor (JID) Candidate at the University of Victoria, Faculty of Law (Canada). Ambers's recent publications address Indigenous maritime law, aquatic Aboriginal title, Indigenous international law and the nature, scope and application of Indigenous legal remedies. In addition to his publications, Ambers works with First Nations and private and public organizations to integrate Indigenous legal orders into institutional governance.

Carey Newman OBC, MSM, FRSC, whose traditional names are Nulis and Hayalthkin'geme, is a multidisciplinary artist, carver, filmmaker, author and scholar. Through his father, he is Kwakwaka'wakw from the Kukwaka'am, Gixsam and Wawa'aba'yi clans of northern Vancouver Island and Coast Salish from Xwchíyò:m (Cheam) of the Stó:lō S'olh Temexw (traditional territories) along the upper Fraser Valley. Through his mother, his ancestors are English, Irish and Scottish settlers. In his artistic practice he strives to highlight social and environmental issues as he examines the impacts that colonialism and capitalism have on Indigenous people and culture. Newman is the inaugural Impact Chair of Indigenous Art Practices at the University of Victoria. In 2023, he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws by Royal Roads University, and at a traditional ceremony in July of 2025, he was transferred the name Nulis, making him a hereditary chief within the Kwakwaka'wakw nation.

Jeremy Mendes is a Canadian creative producer acclaimed for visionary work in interactive storytelling, digital media and audience engagement. A graduate of Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, he began exploring narrative through illustration and early digital tools – melding art and technology into immersive media. Jeremy has produced and directed award-winning projects for the National Film Board of Canada (2011–2024). His best-known work, *Bear 71*, is an interactive web documentary examining the relationship between humans, animals and technology in Banff National Park. It received international recognition, including a Gold Cyber Lion at Cannes, and established him as a leader in digital storytelling. Jeremy continues to expand the creative potential of emerging media to connect audiences with powerful, story-driven experiences.

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