With the arc of colonialism, industrialization, and globalization running us fiercely toward late global capitalism, we have myriad crises presenting themselves to an increasingly anxious global population. Pick your threat: climate collapse, mass extinction, overpopulation, post-industrial joblessness, peak oil, disease epidemics, religious radicalism or ‘terrorism.’ One’s ideological and/or subjective position influences their fear or skepticism. After an era of purported social and capitalist progress, we are witnessing a powerful backlash on multiple fronts. This backlash presents itself in the form of ethnic nationalism, anti-globalization, religious orthodoxy and xenophobic sentiments. Only a few examples in the west include anti-globalization movements like Brexit, the election of a figure like Donald Trump to the American presidency, the legitimization of France’s Marine Le Pen. Each of these examples highlights an anti-immigrant agenda and a firming up of human-drawn boundaries such as the state.

The modern human being projects conceptual boundaries to register meaning upon a complex and entangled world. Often useful and even innocuous, these named boundaries reflect our beliefs about the world we aim to understand, describe and control. Projections of this kind are not limited to the fearful, but in some ways reflect the human thinking apparatus. Taxonomies are the foundation of science, language itself organizes the world into a semiotic system, and by practiced extension, the nation-state compartmentalizes cultures and economies.

It is notable that the geopolitical tightening of boundaries we are witnessing today runs parallel to the environmental and ecological community’s commitment to protecting native ecosystems from invasive plant pathogens introduced through global trade, reckless agricultural and extractionist practices. One can argue that the tightening of ecological boundaries to protect native plant and animal communities - often more vulnerable due to climate change - is a critical step toward conservation. But how may we problematize the way these drawn and reinforced
boundaries echo the fear-laden instincts on display by our current administration and beyond. Do our contemporary crises require a deeper reconfiguration of the aforementioned ontological framework?

**Tanoak**

In March 2016, on the first rainy day after the most extreme drought California had ever experienced, we felled a mature tanoak tree infected with *Phytophthora ramorum*, Sudden Oak Death (SOD). The disease agent responsible for SOD is a member of a group of microscopic, fungus-like organisms called Oomycetes; the most notorious of which was responsible for the Irish potato famine in the mid-19th century. The disease was brought to the United States through the global trade of nursery plants for landscaping. *Phytophthora ramorum* inhibits capillary action within the tree, slowly starving it to death.

The disease falls ancient oaks, leaving conspicuous browned openings in the otherwise verdant forest canopies, ratcheting up the risk of wildfire and threatening future oak stands. Ecologists and governmental agencies in California are scrambling to research the pathogen and protect threatened native oak populations from this invasive and aggressive pathogen. One path toward conservation of the oaks is to halt all migration of the fungus. Trees infected with SOD, both living and dead, are ‘quarantined’ and cannot be moved beyond the human-drawn boundaries of their county except under very specific conditions. *Phytophthora ramorum* is a waterborne pathogen passed through an ecosystem via water. Heat and evaporation render the processed material of wood safe for migration, so lumber that has been milled and kiln dried is free to move across territories.

Over the past year, we have been collaborating with botanist and ecologist Kerri Frangioso of UC-Davis. Kerri is an expert of the SOD pathogen and has been working to salvage the highly threatened true oak populations in the coastal west, specifically within the Landell’s Hill was Big Creek Reserve near Big tanoak Sur, where
our felled. The reserve’s longstanding witness, and steward, Feynner Arias-Godinez accompanies Kerri in clearing carrier trees such as the bay laurel to inhibit the spread of the disease.

Kerri and Feynner, equipped with forestry gear and a sense of commitment, led the way to our tanoak in March. They were motivated by the somewhat ironic possibility that a broad dissemination of knowledge just may lead to the cessation of disease transmission. A local Sawyer, Dave Merchant, joined us that day to rough-cut the tree into moveable logs. His work involves the harvest of local diseased tanoak trees to render into commercial hardwood flooring, a growing market that, for Dave, is bittersweet. The rough-cut logs were loaded into his truck, exposing the discoloration of the disease at the tree’s heartwood to the naked eye. Hauled along the picturesque coastal highway to his mill, the SOD infected tree has since been milled and kiln-dried out of quarantine. It is currently poised for shipment across numerous county and state boundaries of the United States from the coastal west to the midwestern city of Chicago, where it will be transformed into 7000 pencils.

Beuys

7000 Marks is both a reference to and lament for the late Joseph Beuys’ 7000 Oaks, initiated as part of dOCUMENTA (7) in Kassel, Germany in 1982.
Sara Black and Amber Ginsburg
Margins of the Disease (Sudden Oak Death Ring), Digital Photograph, 2016
© Black/Ginsburg
Beuys’ gesture was a call to foster environmental and social change with the planting of 7000 oak trees. It was his belief that the slow growth of the oak tree held deep symbolic power, representing the Earth and its ages. Beuys’ states, “The planting of seven thousand oak trees is only a symbolic beginning,” he goes on, “future goals for the project include: an ongoing scheme of tree planting to be extended throughout the world as part of a global mission to effect environmental & social change and an ongoing process whereby the society would be activated by means of human creative will.” (Joseph Beuys in conversation with Richard Demarco, 1982)

Beuys’ vision that human communities must shape the human and nonhuman world in radical ways through the utilization and manipulation of social and environmental systems is temptingly utopian but also echoes the colonial and anthropocentric sentiments that led to the very crisis in which his work responds. More than three decades later we find ourselves re-naming our current geological epoch, the Anthropocene, marked by human-accelerated climate change. We know the gestural act of planting trees isn’t enough, yet we lack the political will to counter the potentially devastating effects that extraction practices have on myriad levels: human, non-human, geologic, and atmospheric. 7000 Marks reflects on Beuys’ beginning with a hurried call to begin again, but with new questions. What does it mean to be native to a place, whether human, plant, animal or fungus? The boundaries that we draw – on multiple scales (on a cellular level, an object level, to societal and global levels) are in some ways fictions, but our beliefs and rhetoric around them do have real political, social and ecological consequences. How does this question translate to human migration, globalization, its effects on ecosystem stability and our fear or embrace of the Other?
**Marks**

7000 Marks’ inaugural site is SPACES in Cleveland, slated to open in November 2017. Like a planting, this is a beginning and the outcome is purposefully indeterminate. Planting a tree poses a solution. Making a pencil offers a speculative tool. 7000 Marks resists the clarion call to action, rather, places people in a room together, each with a pencil in hand, a tool to trace and perhaps redraw our conceptual boundaries and to debate new margins. The actions that follow will be a diverse and emergent form of discourse, not asserted from a single utopian declaration.

Central to the exhibition and housed in a transparent and sealed case, the SOD infected 7000 tanoak pencils will remain contained until released into curated activity. The pencils will be used in collaboration with activists, scientists, teachers and artists and have the capacity to travel away from the project space to schools, meeting spaces, municipal buildings. The pencils will be used in an ongoing and ever responsive series of events that address personal, local, national and global concerns. Workshops, drawings, and writing will attempt to ‘map’ our enmeshed and occasionally fictive relationships to nature, adaptation, and survival. The pencils allow us to document our coming together as we attempt to cross-pollinate our thinking. As SPACES fills with marks, the pencils will grow shorter, and the topography of the pencil landscape will change, oscillating between sculptural artifact and event.

This site is the first of many points of activation for the pencils and the project will end when the pencils have been fully used up.

**References**


Sara Black and Amber Ginsburg work together on projects that draw a material through-line, pointing to the complexity of ecological systems. Sara’s enduring commitment to the material and history of wood and Amber’s background in ceramics incline them to the language of craft, often employed as a metaphor for the relationship between human endeavoring and non-human forces. Their large-scale projects reach into time on a geologic scale and engage audiences to think forward in their habits and practices. Sara is an Assistant Professor of Sculpture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Amber is a Lecturer in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago.