

Peter von Tiesenhausen and John Hemsworth: *Listen*

In Demmitt, a sawmill ghost town in northern Alberta where he grew up, Peter von Tiesenhausen builds pods, ships, towers, and any number of woven willow forms on site in the landscape. Before becoming an artist, he worked as a labourer, miner, roughneck, and CAT driver in the Klondike, Antarctica, and the oil fields in northern Canada. He lives off the land and his art often explores his relation to that land.

During a stay at the Banff Centre for the Leighton Artists' Colony, von Tiesenhausen carved a boat out of ice, set a rock into it, and sent it on a journey floating down the Bow River. When the work eventually melted into the river, the rock dropped unseen into the river's depths. In another project called *Figure Journey*, the artist toured a collection of carved, larger-than-life figural sculptures. *The Watchers*, as the five sculptures came to be known, travelled over 30,000 kilometres through every province and territory of Canada, and even went by boat through the Northwest Passage. They stood at the edge of the Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic Oceans. The sculptures' journey established a dialogue as people in logging towns, restaurants, and gas stations, in cities or the country, reacted to the figures in various ways. The journey ended at the same point where it began, nearly five years later, in Demmitt, Alberta.

John Hemsworth holds a Masters of Architecture degree from the University of British Columbia and a Bachelor of Mechanical Engineering degree from Dalhousie University. He is currently a Project Architect with the Vancouver-based firm of McFarland Marceau Architects, a leader in environmentally sustainable and culturally sensitive architecture.

John started practicing architecture in 2002 as a lead designer with the distinguished Vancouver-based firm AA Robins Architect. His work at the firm, specifically the Watermark Restaurant and Lifeguard Facility at Kitsilano Beach in Vancouver, was recognized with the 2006 Lieutenant Governor's Special Jury Prize for Innovation. His work

continues to explore the relationship between the urban fabric and the natural landscape through both art and architecture.

As well as John's architectural pursuits, he has been involved in many environmental and community development projects, most notably as the Director of Food Runners (1994), a Vancouver-based food recovery project of the Vancouver Food Bank, and as Field Staff for Youth Challenge International (1995), a not-for-profit organization constructing nursery schools for Amer-Indian peoples in Guyana, South America.



John Hemsworth and Peter von Tiesenhausen preparing the site for the installation of *Listen*. Photo by Paul Colangelo.

John K. Grande (**JG**): Hi Peter. Good seeing you again. The Stanley Park Environmental Art Project largely came about due to the storm that took down thousands of second growth cedar trees here in the park.

John Hemsworth (**JH**): The storm itself was quite spectacular and it really seemed to have devastated the park. I think that most people here in the city were awed by the sheer magnitude of the destruction.

JG: I believe with your own sculpture and approach to art, Paul Hawken has been something of a mentor...

Peter von Tiesenhausen (**PvT**): Paul is a hero of mine because he has been leading the charge for years. He is an entrepreneur but has made money in a conscious and interesting way. He wrote *The Ecology of Commerce* and cowrote *Natural Capitalism*. *Natural Capitalism* is as important as *Silent Spring* was for its day. It is a hopeful book. Paul Hawken is also human.

JG: Peter, you have been working for many years on an art form that has not been in the mainstream of Post Modern or Post-Pop or new media. You live in Demmitt, Alberta and have produced sculpture all over the world. That includes the pods, the towers, and *The Watchers*, the figures that travelled across Canada as a kind of public art in action piece. Nature has something to teach us, don't you think, in all areas of life, but especially in the creative field?

PvT: Nature is the only real teacher that does not have another agenda. We learn what we are willing to learn. Nature is willing to teach us what we are willing to take. I have found living where I do, it only makes sense to listen. Nature provides everything if we are willing to listen. Having said that, John and I decided to use the word "Listen" for the title of our Stanley Park work.

JG: How did you approach the Stanley Park project? How did you come to an idea for the work you are now completing? Was it difficult to begin to find a way of working, given the situation after the storm, when you first came to Stanley Park?

PvT: Well, we went walking through Stanley Park until we came to a spot that we felt had been poorly considered. There was a flurry of activity after all those trees came down and I think some rash decisions were made. One of those decisions was to cut a great big chunk out of this fallen tree off the path. To us, it was a total disregard to what was there. It is an 800-year-old tree.

JG: And they just cut through there?

JH: When the tree fell across the path, they had to cut a piece out to make way for people to get through. It was the second 17-foot piece that they cut out that really stood out and seemed inappropriate. So we started last summer to clear and clean up debris around the tree.

PvT: Just to give you a sense of the scale, that is part of the tree lying over there. That huge section is part of the piece they cut out. They are now cutting it into slices and using them for schools, for developments and so on. Just that section is massive, five and a half feet in diameter, and that would have been forty feet up from the tree's base.

JH: The first summer we did a bit of exploration around the log and an ephemeral piece with tracings of the void that was left.

PvT: We hung around there, rearranged it, cleaned up around the log, cleaning up the debris, exposed the tree and the base of the standing stump there.



Cedar, shown here, was the ephemeral piece created by John Hemsworth and Peter von Tiesenhausen. Photo by Paul Colangelo.

JG: And how did you arrive at the title *Listen* for your Stanley Park piece?

JH: When I first talked to Peter about the piece, the words listen and listening had come up as an early inspiration. As we moved through the process, we began to consider more than just hearing the sounds of the site and towards responding to the materials and listening to what the site had to offer. From there the work just flowed.

JG: And what other projects have you been involved in before this one, John?

JH: Well I am an architect, so I work in a different domain most of the time. I have done a lot of non-profit work and have been involved in a number of sustainable architectural initiatives. The firm I work for is quite prominent for its environmental stance with the projects it engages in. I have known Peter for quite a while and just by word of mouth I learned of this project and we began working together.

JG: It must be a learning experience, coming from two different backgrounds – architecture and sculpture - to work together on the Stanley Park project.

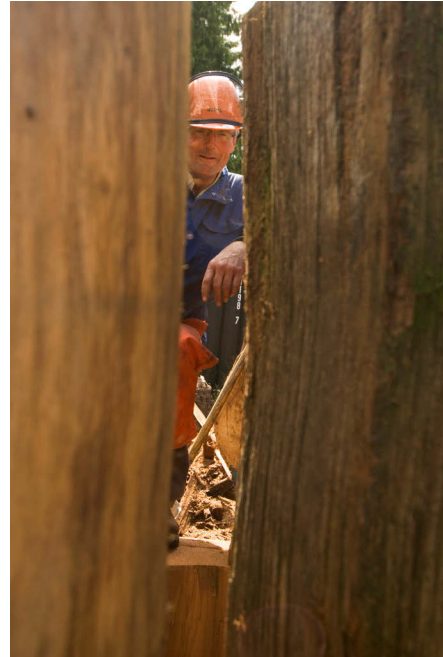
PvT: It is really fascinating. As you know, I usually work alone. In this case it was really interesting to have someone else who knows the space. Though I have been here before, John knows the weather and has a different understanding of the place than I do.

JG: How many pieces of cedar did it take to make the sphere? It must have taken quite a few pieces to fit it together.

PvT: It took quite a few pieces! We took the scraps from wherever we could find them here. A large part of the original chunk had been destroyed. And so the initial idea was to take wood that had come from that gap and to rebuild it. The diameter of that sphere needed to be bigger than the diameter of the tree to give you a sense of presence.

JG: And I can see there are vertical openings around the sphere...

PvT: Originally we were going to make it solid. Then John came up with the idea that it should be hollow. We decided to leave slots in there so you can kind of see in, or press your ear against it and listen, or call into it or whatever. It will have that drum effect. And then there will be another sphere on the inside.



John and Peter during the assembling of *Listen*. Photos by Paul Colangelo.

JH: It was Peter's idea of the sphere inside that really struck me. I was reminded of the Buddhist stupas¹ in Indonesia and the simple intensity of that experience.

JG: Will this sculptural sphere be suspended in the air?

PvT: No. The smaller sphere will be placed inside the larger sphere, which is hollow, and put back into the gap.

JG: And you have told me there will be a burning of the exterior surfaces of the sphere?

PvT: Yes. We will probably do a very controlled burn, because it is a very dry summer in Stanley Park, and we don't want to take out the rest of the park.



Peter blackening the exterior of *Listen*. Photo by Paul Colangelo

JG: Have you had any interactions with the other artists who are working here on the Stanley Park Environmental Art Project?

PvT: We have been hanging around with Shirley Wiebe, who is a Vancouver-based artist. Otherwise most of our time has been spent on the site and in the forest. Also there has been a fair bit of interaction and assistance from park employees.

JG: And will this sphere grow out of a circular looking stump form or will it be a pedestal sculpture?

PvT: Because of the machinery and the mechanics of it, we are not exactly sure if it will stay on the base or whether we will arrange it another way. The site will tell us that as well.

JG: And I guess that *Listen* as a sculpture in situ in Stanley Park is a commemorative sculpture which speaks to nature's evolutive process and should last for some time.

PvT: It could last for a hundred years, and when eventually it pops open there will be this other sphere on the inside that will appear. The other sphere is kind of like a seed within.

JH: Just the idea that it's original form is contained within its original form. You can see this again and again in the natural processes of the forest. New trees growing out of the remnants of the old. What is truly fascinating is the timescale of the cycle. No matter how you look at it, we seem pretty transitory in comparison.

JG: A kind of infinity in life. Doesn't this have to do with nature's perpetual cycles, or birth, rebirth, endless reproduction, process in nature, nature reproducing itself in a continuum?

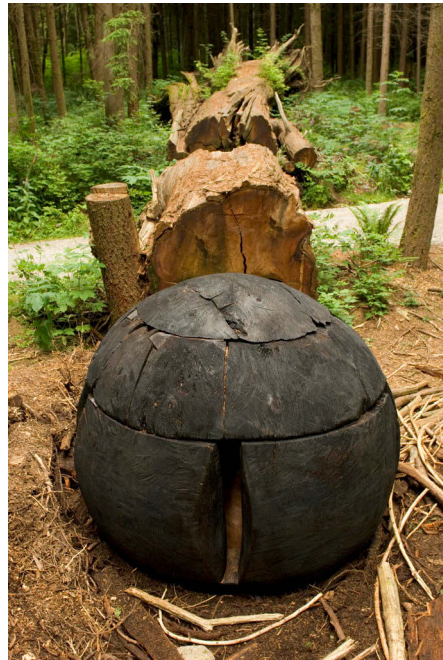
JH: You know it is interesting that you say that. I lived here through the storm and remember thinking the forest here was destroyed, and then we met all the biologists going through our orientation for this project and I realized this is a natural process we are going through. It wasn't really total destruction, just a natural process that is part of the cycle and this is just one of the different stages the forest goes through.

JG: The end of these trees initiates rebirth. The end of these mature trees allows for new growth and a hundred years from now we will have another storm and the process begins again into infinity.

PvT: That's how it works. So I think this sculpture respects that process and cycle in nature.

JG: Sustainability in Architecture has helped Art in Ecology. Now that there is so much interest in sustainable architecture, new fuel has been added to the evolution of land art into earth sensitive art forms in nature. The growth of these art initiatives and forms in natural contexts are going to continue, as reflected in nature sculpture initiatives worldwide. Architecture and Landscape Architecture have played a role in the evolution of earth art, particularly in the last decade. When your sculpture is installed it will be an incredible metaphor for that process of nature. It is as much about process as it is final form.

JH: Absolutely, as Peter said earlier, 'nature is the only teacher'. It shows us the interdependency, complexity and beauty of ourselves within a larger context. Be it in art, architecture, or our everyday life, it is this understanding that is truly hopeful.



Peter and John during the installation of *Listen*. Photos by Paul Colangelo.

¹ Stupas are mound-like structures used to contain Buddhist relics