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The Berkeley Tree Sitters by mary armentrout

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by Mary Armentrout
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So, as I write this, a judge is deciding the fate of the oak trees – and the stadium on the faultline, and the new sports building, and the giant parking garage, the multi-year expansion timetable for the South-East quadrant of the college, and the state of relations between town and gown for the foreseeable future. And in the precious little time I have left, I am scrambling to put together some site-specific artworks commemorating this odd, turning point?, only in Berkeley?, wave of the future, soon to be in your backyard as well? situation.

Update and Low-down:

In the early morning of last December 2nd, the day of the “big game,” (you East Coasters can have no fathoming of the immensity of this rivalry between UC Berkeley and Stanford, since your natural inclination is to assume nothing is as intense as age-old East Coast rivalries – it is huge!) three brave and scrappy tree huggers climbed into the nearly hundred year old oak trees right next to the stadium and managed to resist police efforts to get them down. They have been up there ever since, embodying their protest of the University’s plan to cut down these trees to build a state of the art sports training facility for students athletes (read, the football team and its pushy star coach they desperately want to keep). Those of us drawn into this unlikely David and Goliath situation staged rallies and protests, organized performances and be-ins and food drops and cop-watches to support the tree-sitters. News cameras from around the world came to watch this spectacle – “Only in Berkeley” they cried! 80 of us took our clothes off and risked arrest to take a picture in the trees (see it at saveoaks.com), three venerable old ladies, including Shirley Dean, an ex-mayor, took a turn tree-sitting. In January, the judge issued a temporary restraining order forbidding the University from doing anything until the full case was heard. Since then we have been living in this state of limbo – safe for the moment, uncertain what the ultimate outcome will be.

What does it Mean?

It is a very peculiar and particular situation – the vegan dreadlocked counterculture college kids mixing with luminary Berkeley hippies from the 70’s (Country Joe McDonald of Woodstock fame), an ex-mayor of Berkeley, and local environmental bigwigs, to save a handful of trees, which to its credit, and surely the eye rolling of many, the city of Berkeley would not allow you to cut down, and which the University has every right to cut down on its own land – and yet I can’t help thinking it has wider ramifications. And it is clear it has wider ramifications. As I sent out call after call for help and for people to come perform at ridiculously short notice, I remember hearing back things like “oh, sorry I’m too busy trying to save the trees in my neighborhood (in Oakland).” That really stuck with me. Not all the people too busy to make it out in person, but who still supported the tree sitters – that I expected. Somehow the specter of many more urban tree battles is what I find fascinating and disturbing. I hope this is not the precursor to a new Chipko movement, moved now from the poor villages of the Himalayas into the urban canyons of America – although the radical environmentalist in me say “right on!” – but I do think I am not the only one to see this as part of the larger question of how exactly do we confront environmental concerns in a local, responsible way, and note that the degree of intensity this fight has sparked seems to signal a new era of urban political environmentalism at an incredibly tiny level (that blade of grass right next to you, that weed you just pulled up, that invasive species you just planted in your backyard).