

November 14th - December 21st 2013

# Absolute Countdown

Noa Giniger

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# Absolute Countdown

*Because there is a law such as gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing.*

-Stephen Hawking

On July 3rd, 2013, a crew of seventeen people arrived on a farm in Delta, British Columbia with industrial motion picture fans, in order to raise the branches of a weeping willow tree, and to document this act on film. This event, the culmination of five years of experimentation and planning by artist Noa Giniger, resulted in *The Sorrow the Joy Brings*: a film which depicts this momentary shift in the tree's physical form and questions our associations with its appearance, and its name.

This project is part of Giniger's solo exhibition at the Western Front called *Absolute Countdown*. The exhibition takes its title from Giniger's online artwork, *Absolute Countdown*—also considered part of the exhibition—in which a simple numerical counter begins at ten and drops into negative numbers indefinitely.

In its efforts to put a weeping willow in a good mood, *The Sorrow the Joy Brings* evokes the human will to control nature and our attempts to influence and control our own emotions. The lengths to which Giniger goes to manipulate the tree articulates our human

aversion to displays of sadness. As well, the project is in conversation with the history of the creative manipulation of landscapes, from ancient gardens to contemporary land art and public performance practices.

From pre-history, human beings have seen their own characteristics mirrored in the world around them. In the case of the weeping willow, the plant's name accentuates an emotional connection, as well as a visual one. The willow "weeps" in many languages around the world, including Dutch (treurwilg), Greek (κλαμα ιτω), German (trauerweide), French (saule pleureur) and Spanish (sauce llorón). Giniger's work questions this human desire to eradicate sadness, even perceived sadness, symbolized by the forceful act of influencing the natural tendencies of the tree. The will to control plant life and the endeavor to control people are indelibly linked throughout the history of colonization. Willows are clearly out of place in the B.C. coast's coniferous environment, but punctuating parks, gardens, yards, and farms; they speak their invasive language with determination.

Noa Giniger was born in Israel, but is based in Amsterdam, a city of canals where weeping willows seem to belong; they hang over the watery passages as if their tears have been filling the canals for centuries. Giniger first imagined her intervention when observing the way that the wind would transform these Dutch willows, and she wondered if they could be manipulated to such a degree that their very signification would change.

Giniger went on to place a small plastic

palm tree on a household fan in her studio to observe the results. This playful experiment was the first of many: she made numerous collages of willow illustrations with their branches flipped upside down—one of which is included in this exhibition—and even traveled to London in 2010 to do a test with special effects house Shepperton Studios. The company not only carried motion picture fans, but also happened to have a weeping willow in their back parking lot. At the time of this test Giniger noted: “Testing with one fan. So much air, so little effect. Is that all there is?” Still, in the face of the limitations of available equipment, Giniger remained devoted to the project, and when discussing the possibilities of working on something in Vancouver, *The Sorrow the Joy Brings* seemed like a perfect fit. The city’s natural backdrop, and its reputation as Hollywood North, facilitated the logistics of the project. *The Sorrow the Joy Brings* not only makes sense in terms of Vancouver’s technical resources, but it also reflects on the absurdity of the mediated environment that results from the presence of the film industry in any city.

While computer-generated imaging could have made a willow smile in no time, Giniger was determined to employ mechanical technology, including a 35mm film camera and industrial fans, to explore the space between reality and fiction, and the potential for chance that comes from working in the physical world. Adding another layer of melancholy to *The Sorrow the Joy Brings*, the very medium we were working with is itself nearing oblivion. At the time of the production all processing of 35mm

motion picture film had completely ceased in Vancouver, so the film was processed at Alpha Cine lab in Seattle; two months later, we received an email that Alpha Cine had also stopped processing 35mm film.

When Giniger arrived in Vancouver, we scoured the flatlands and wetlands looking for the perfect tree. The criteria evolved as we went. It had to have a fairly neutral background, away from buildings or electrical wires, and it couldn’t be too young, or too cultivated. As the days went on, location hunting started to feel more like talent scouting. The more we searched the more the trees became anthropomorphized. By the time we had narrowed the search down to one tree, we were calling her an actress. The tree that we eventually chose was a very ‘experienced’ one on a farm that had been recommended to us by professional location scout Kent Pollon. While this sixty-year-old tree had seen film crews come and go, she seemed to have just the right amount of attitude and majesty for this role.

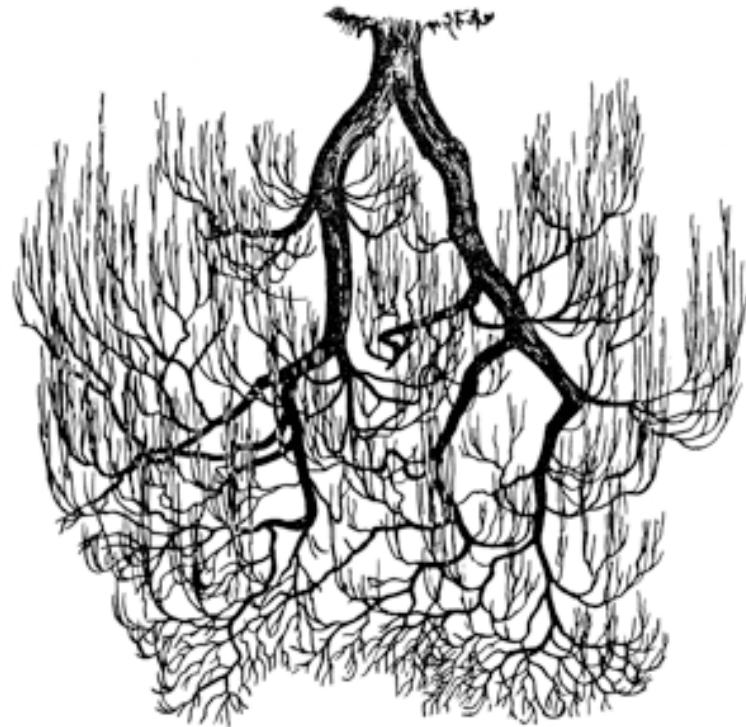
Weeping willows evoke something beyond the simple symbolism implied by their name. Through Kenneth Graham’s *The Wind in the Willows*, an enchanting world surrounding this tree is firmly planted in the imaginations of children the world over, and for children, under the canopy of the weeping willow, imaginary worlds do materialize. In Giniger’s film the full force of nine of the most powerful wind machines in the world are neither able to show this space of the imagination nor completely change the tree’s mood.

The intervention does succeed in exposing the apparatus that powers the attempt, as if part of this magic is to reveal the trick. As the branches are forced upwards, the fans are exposed, and under the canopy we also see human figures in all black. These fan operators evoke *Bunraku*, Japanese puppet theatre, in which the puppeteers wear black robes called *Kurogo* that help mitigate interruptions in the narrative, without concealing their human presence. Giniger's treatment follows a similar logic: by using analogue technology rather than digital manipulation, she reveals the labour that produces the magic, and privileges the idea over the outcome.

The titular work in the exhibition *Absolute Countdown* is, on the other hand, completely digital and determined. While the willow momentarily raises its branches, *Absolute Countdown* drops relentlessly, with no end in sight. When set in the context of this exhibition, this website—depicting a counter that starts at ten and then descends forever—operates as if numerical logic also has to yield to the laws of gravity.

-Jesse Birch

\*See also the artist's blog at [the-sorrow-the-joy-brings.tumblr.com](http://the-sorrow-the-joy-brings.tumblr.com)



# Biography

**Noa Giniger** (b. 1977, Israel) graduated from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris in 2005. In 2003, she received a fellowship from the Collin LeFranc Foundation in France to attend the School of Art at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, USA. Between 2006-2008, she was a resident at De Ateliers, Amsterdam and in 2011 she was a Royal Dutch Institute Affiliated Fellow at the American Academy in Rome. Her work has been exhibited internationally, including at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris; Bloomfield Science Museum, Jerusalem; Galerie Gabriel Rolt, Amsterdam; Sommer Gallery for contemporary art, Tel- Aviv; Galeries d'exposition du quai Malaquais, Beaux-arts de Paris; De Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam; Speedy Wash, Wiels, Brussels; The Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, Herzliya; Attitudes, Geneva and Passage du Retz, Paris, among others. Giniger lives and works in Amsterdam.

# Credits

Film Production Crew:

Jesse Birch, John Woods, Tim Kubbinga, Rob Simpson, Mike Love, Katie Lyle, Ben Wilson, Megan Bodaly, Brian Lye, Todd Barisky, Earl Kjaargard, Amy Fung, Tony Lazarowich and crew, Griffin Louis

Special thanks to:

Jesse Birch, Katie Lyle, Ben Wilson, Megan Bodaly, Brian Lye, Mike Love, Western Front, Jose Granell, Corey Lambert, Kent Pollom, Jeff Tillotson, Wayne Szybunka, Galeforce wind machines, Rebecca Singh, Miri Loven, Rina and Yoki Giniger

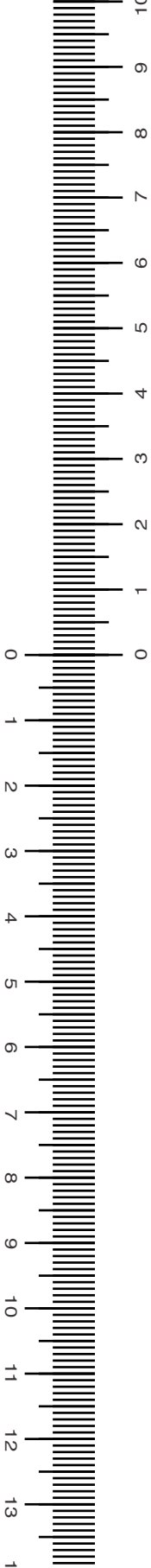
*The Sorrow the Joy Brings* was filmed on location in Delta, British Columbia

All images courtesy of Noa Giniger.

Supporters:

This project was made with the support of the Ostrovsky Family Fund, Mondriaan Fund, Stichting Schürmann-Krant, Israel's Office of Cultural Affairs, Cineworks Independent Filmmakers Society and William F. White.





## List of Works

1. Noa Giniger

*The Sorrow the Joy Brings*

Collage, woodcut print (1950s)

8.5cm x 9cm

2012

2. Noa Giniger

*The Sorrow the Joy Brings*

35mm film transferred to HD video, sound

5 min 57 sec

2013

Offsite:

Noa Giniger

*Absolute Countdown*

Website: [www.absolutecountdown.com](http://www.absolutecountdown.com)

Dimensions variable

Launched December 31, 2008

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