

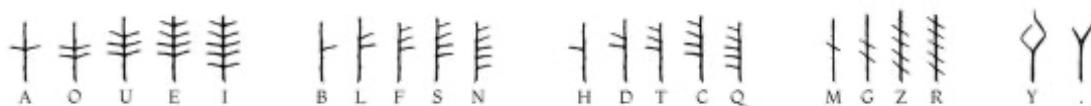
## Monika Fabijanska and Katie Holten in Conversation

**Monika Fabijanska:** *An essential aspect of your practice is the translation of storytelling into the physical act of writing. Why is storytelling so important, and what does writing mean for you?*

**Katie Holten:** Storytelling and writing are entwined with what it means to be human. Humans are storytellers. Storytelling makes us human. Our capacity to produce language is innate, like a tree's ability to produce leaves. Buds burst, stories emerge. Words, like seeds, are alive and create meaning. Words can be planted. We can seed stories, watch them take root and grow. Tangled, vine-like gossip sprouts tangentially; evolving. We keep score, we write history, we rewrite the future.

Writing evolved as human societies emerged. Scratching marks in clay or stone or bark was a way to create a collective sense of community. I don't know how long we have kept score, or when we started record keeping, but my whole life has been shadowed by a sense that everything meaningful to our species is contained within our stories. I have always loved books because they encapsulate everything, our entire past, present and future. Writing lets us codify knowledge, compile lists (I love lists!), store and share foundational knowledge, organize and govern societies through the formation of contracts, deeds, taxes, and more. Then there's computer coding, a whole new world of writing that is rewriting our reality in real time.

I don't know when I first felt language, writing, stories, as an organic organism. But it feels inevitable to me now. Ancient languages like Latin and Sanskrit have words for "writing" that are based on tree names (Birch and Ash, respectively). The French *livre* "book" comes from Latin *librum*, originally "the inner bark of trees." Ireland's medieval Ogham, sometimes called a "tree alphabet," used trees for letters. The characters were called feda "trees," or nin "forking branches" due to their shape. Astonishingly, this ancient alphabet was "written" from the ground up – each character sprouting from a central line, like leaves on a stem or branches on a tree. Language is alive.



Being Irish I grew up with stories that meld humans with animals, birds, landscapes, faeries, other parallel worlds.

For years I've been trying to find ways for myself to slow down. Everything seems to be moving too fast (at least before the pandemic slowed us all down!) I created a *Tree Alphabet* as a way to illuminate the paradoxes of the Anthropocene. Translating letters into Trees, and vice versa, slows us down, creating a gap in knowledge where there's the possibility to decipher words in the woods. It is an invitation to start thinking about inter-species communication, multi-species storytelling, and our ancient entwinement with trees. It's a simple way to slow down.

By transforming a Latin character into a digital Tree, I wondered, can we expand our understanding of knowledge, typography, books, and stories themselves?

Words are the smallest units of language that stand alone. They are central to our experience of being human. The languages we speak profoundly shape the way we think, the way we see the world, and the way we live.

What if we slow down and turn our words inside out and translate them into something beyond the human? Will that create a sense of empathy (that I find lacking in today's written news cycle)? Can we rewrite ourselves by looking beyond ourselves?

**MF:** *You are making the packets of LOVE seeds for Snug Harbor. How did planting LOVE emerge from your Wildflower Alphabet?*

**KH:** Everything I'm working on at the moment is part of a project called "Learning to be Better Lovers." As in, we need to learn to be better lovers of the Earth if we are going to save our species from annihilation. We are in a Climate Emergency. When the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recently published their 6<sup>th</sup> report the UN Secretary-General António Guterres declared CODE RED FOR HUMANITY. **CODE RED!** Where are the flashing lights and sirens? Everyone is trying to "return to normal." I'm sorry, but we have completely lost touch with reality. It seems (to me) that we urgently need to retreat to basics and turn inwards to the core of ourselves, individually and collectively as a species; we need to learn to love ourselves and everything connected to us that we share this precious planet with.

During the first lockdown in the early days of the pandemic, I made an *Irish Tree Alphabet* for VISUAL Carlow, an arts space in Ireland. We hope in the future to host public actions that will create accessible, fun and safe ways for the community to gather and enjoy the Tree Alphabet. The

plan is to share “bundles of love.” Bundles of tree saplings for the “L” “O” “V” “E” trees! We wanted to share a positive message, so a short word with just a few letters that we could hand out to people in the form of a living being; tree saplings that can be planted and grow a secret message. LOVE was an obvious first choice. So, when I made the *NYC Wildflower Alphabet*, it was inevitable that I should share the LOVE wildflowers. They are; Lovegrass, Orange Milkweed, Vervain, and Early Goldenrod. Patrick Over at the Greenbelt Native Plant Center kindly gave me seeds and I packed them, with love, into seed packets. Visitors to the exhibition can take away a gift of “LOVE” wildflower seeds that they can sprinkle next Spring, sowing love in their garden or neighborhood.



Katie Holten, *New York City Wildflower Alphabet*, 2021, wildflower seeds, drawings, limited edition of 300

**MF:** *What is a local plant alphabet in the global world of invasive and modified species?*

**KH:** Great question! This gets to the heart of it all. Language is innate to humans, but we have different languages which get broken down again into different dialects, accents and styles. Like a fractal, or the coast of Ireland, the more we zoom, the more what appeared at first to be different turns out to create an infinite sense of togetherness stretching to infinity. Since the Enlightenment, western philosophy has told us that Nature is a passive backdrop to Man. But now we're listening to non-Western and non-civilizational storytellers and remembering interspecies entanglements. We're all zooming now! During the pandemic we use the digital platform to communicate. But another, earlier, meaning of the word, zoom, is what we're desperately in need of, to zoom in and examine things close to home. The more global our species has become, the more disconnected. Living as we are now, through Covid-19, the Climate Emergency, the Biodiversity Emergency, and looming sixth-mass extinction caused by ourselves – we are slowly, too slowly, realizing how vital it is to live locally and slowly. I hope that my Tree Alphabets, and the Wildflower Alphabet for New York City offers an invitation for viewers to slow down and enjoy the beauty on our doorsteps. Anna Tsing has written beautifully about the friction between local and global interactions and the dangers of moving “things” and species mindlessly around the planet.

*“Both in forests and in science, spores open our imaginations to another cosmopolitan topology. Spores take off toward unknown destinations, mate across types, and, at least occasionally, give rise to new organisms—a beginning for new kinds.”*  
Anna Tsing, page 227, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*

**MF:** *Why is the history of plants important?*

**KH:** We wouldn't be here without plants. For hundreds of millions of years, Earth was an uninhabitable rock in outer space. Slowly, algae evolved in pools of water and then plants emerged. Over millions of more years, plants and trees absorbed Carbon Dioxide from the toxic atmosphere, breathing in CO<sub>2</sub> and breathing out Oxygen, creating an atmosphere that literally gave life to us Humans. We are nothing without plants. It's vital that we remember this, that we slow down and appreciate our collective history. “Trees transformed a barren planet and turned the world green” says David Beerling of the University of Sheffield (*Making Eden*, 2019).



During the pandemic, I've been lucky to have a friend lead weekly meditation. Since March 2020 we've gathered every Friday, on zoom of course. Last week I joined a meditation with my teacher's teacher. She said something that resonated so powerfully with me. "Our species is threatened by our own ignorance. We are being asked to evolve." We must do this through love. We need to become intimate with one another, human and non-human, remember our common histories and rewrite a new future.



Katie Holten, *Love Letters*, 2021, ink on paper and fabric paint on cotton, installation view, Snug Harbor.

**Monika Fabijanska** is an art historian, contemporary art curator and art appraiser based in New York City. She specializes in women's and feminist art, and is a member of College Art Association's Committee on Women in the Arts.

**Katie Holten** is an artist and activist living in New York City, USA and Ardee, Ireland. She co-founded Friends of Ardee Bog and is campaigning for the Rights of Nature.