

The Shadow

Esther Shalev-Gerz

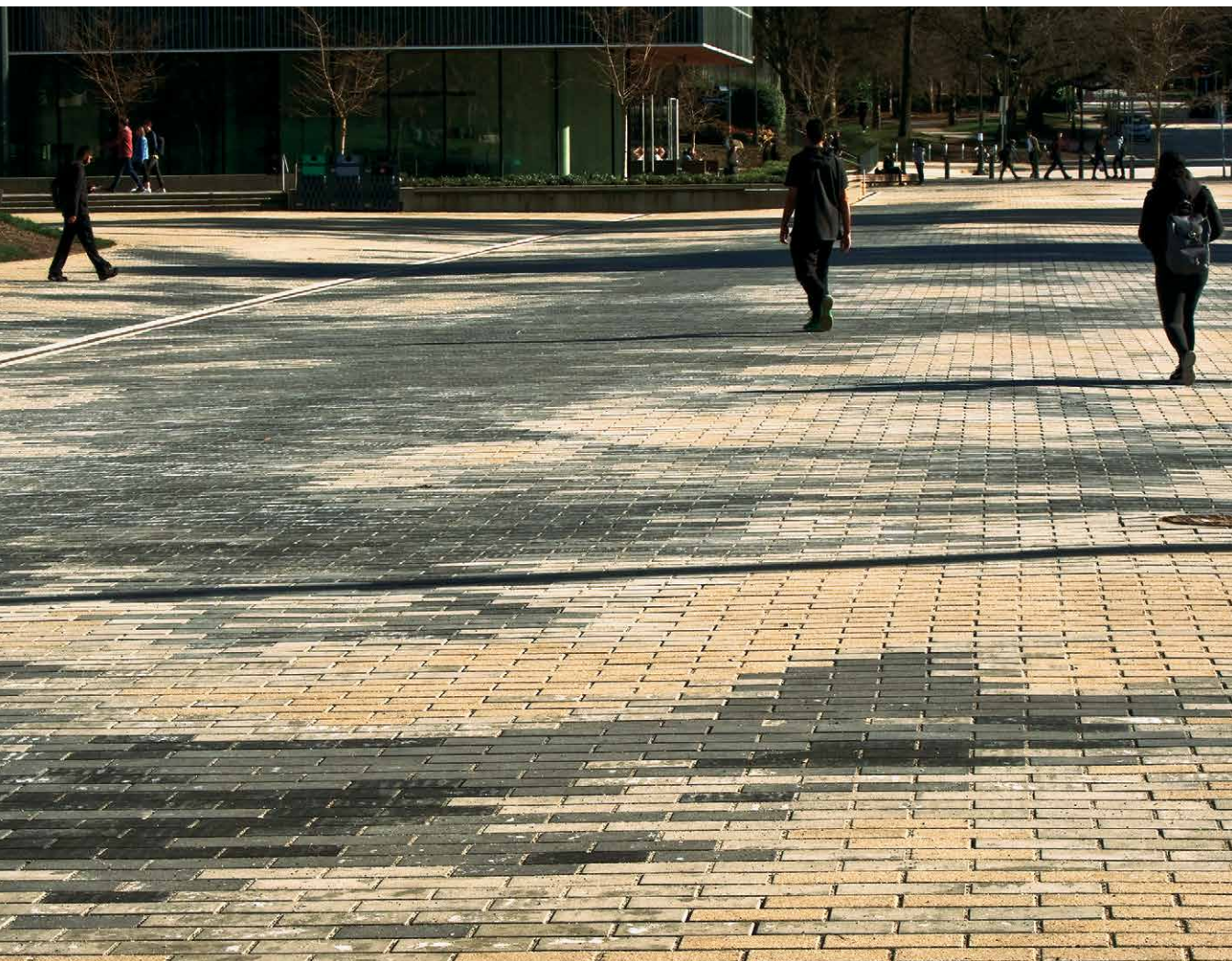
Esther Shalev-Gerz, *The Shadow*, 2018, 24,000 concrete pavers, 100 x 25 metres
Photograph by Barbara Cole



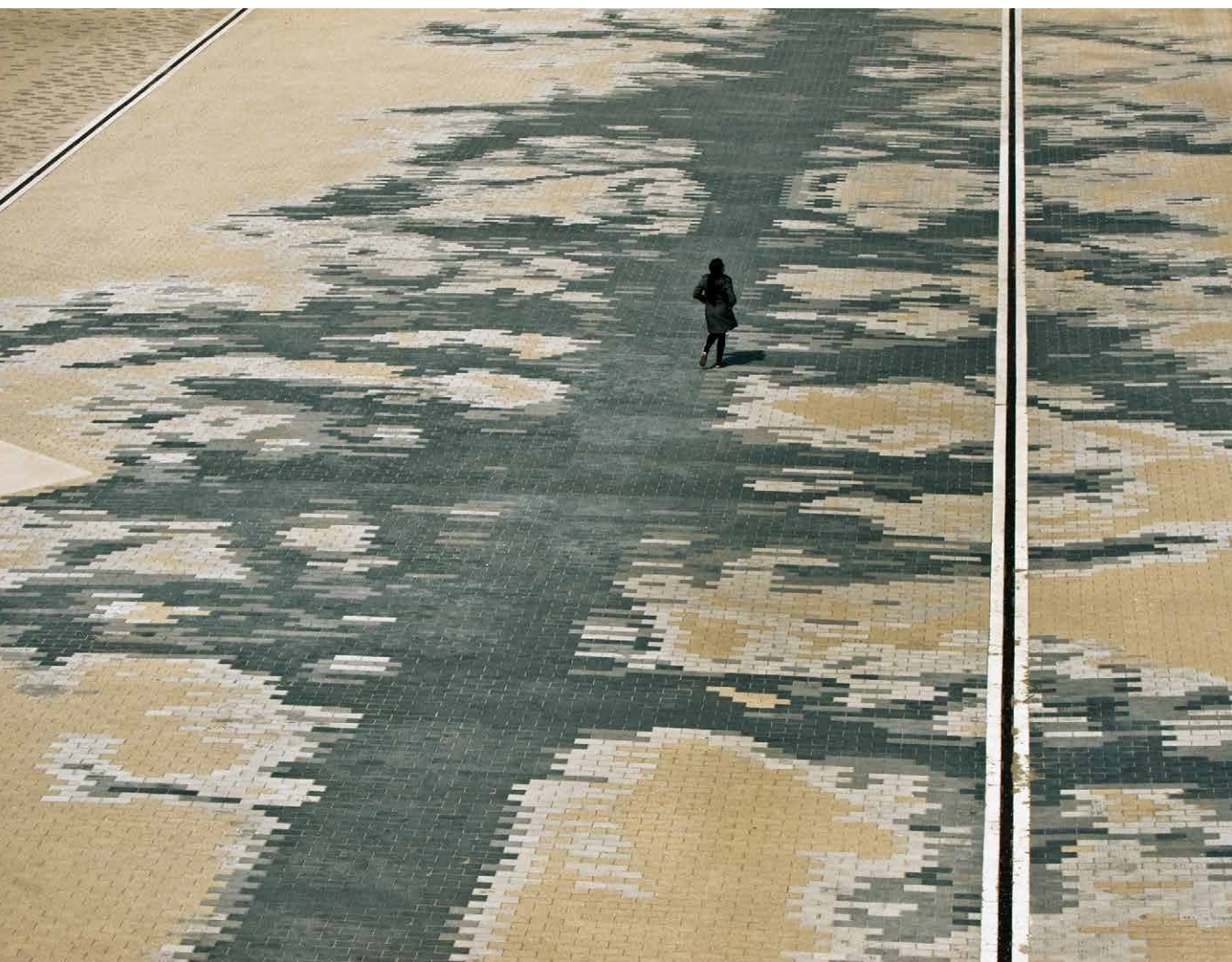
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Esther Shalev-Gerz, *The Shadow*, 2018, 24,000 concrete pavers, 100 x 25 metres
Photograph by Hassan El-Sherbiny



Esther Shalev-Gerz, *The Shadow*, 2018, 24,000 concrete pavers, 100 x 25 metres
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In conversation: *The Shadow*

Colin Browne & Esther Shalev-Gerz

Colin Browne met with Esther Shalev-Gerz on June 4, 2018, to discuss her work The Shadow. This 100-by-25-metre installation, commissioned by the Belkin Art Gallery, depicts the shadow of a Douglas fir across the paving stones of University Commons Plaza, on the University of British Columbia's Vancouver campus.

Colin Browne: Esther Shalev-Gerz, please tell me how *The Shadow* was born.

Esther Shalev-Gerz: It started in 2015 when the Belkin Art Gallery's director, Scott Watson, commissioned me to create a work in public space for UBC. So, I went for a walk on the ground of the campus. I remember walking along the Main Mall in UBC, absorbing the topography at the edge of the continent, looking up at the huge trees that line the pedestrian boulevard. I was struck by the vastness and the pronounced horizontality. It's really beautiful. It's elevating. As I was walking, the image of only the shadow of a large tree began to form in my mind.

A walk is an opportunity to explore the history of a location. I began by conducting a great deal of research about what was on the land before the University was built. I understood that the grounds and forests had always been places of learning for the Musqueam people. I perused photographs of the beginning of the construction of the campus from various archives. I took pictures of the remaining big trees growing on the slopes down to Wreck Beach and explored tree chronology with botanists from the UBC Botanical Garden. In the course of my quest, I also discovered that homeless Japanese sailors once lived in that area and cut trees down to sell the wood to the growing city of Vancouver. I am still very intrigued by the idea of people inhabiting homes made with those same trees. I also was struck by a sense of urgency concerning the speed at which the old growth forests have disappeared.

This is how the work happened. It commanded me to realize it. I use photography a lot, but a shadow is sort of proto-photography, like a beginning. Imagine the shadow is actually there all the time, and, as with exposed photographic paper, when bathed in developer fluid, the image slowly appears. It actualizes what was already in the paper.

CB: Latency.

ESG: Latency. So, this was the main thing. Then came the crucial quest for location. The curatorial team and I needed to find a place to install *The Shadow*. One thing was clear from the beginning: I wanted the materiality and surface of the location to participate in the materiality of *The Shadow*. I think—and I have addressed this point in several previous works—that we are losing track of the real world. We barely know with what materials the real world is crafted. We barely know who's constructing the real world. Images of construction work are not something we photograph at all, although we photograph anything else. We only photograph something when it's finished or when it's destroyed. That we do not know to create or craft anything seems like a dangerous precedent. At one time we were looking at a big patch of grass. So, I said, "Okay, if the shadow is on grass, the grass will dictate the aesthetic outcome. I will work with different colours of grass to create it." The landscape architect of UBC suggested we consider the new university plaza in front of The Nest, where the new home of the Student Union sits. If you walk into The Nest, you'll see it's made of wood. I thought it was so magical that the shadow would be cast just outside, and I decided that instead of drawing the exact shape of this Douglas fir shadow onto the plaza I would introduce an idea of urgency by letting the concrete pavers fragment and pixelate it. This busy monochromatic paved plaza would allow *The Shadow* to fully unfold.

I created a surface on which a walker would progressively be exposed, consciously and unconsciously, to the shape and to the pavers. That allowed the shadow to seep out of the ground with a certain grandeur. It's large, 100 metres long, 25 metres wide, more than 300 feet long and cannot be captured in one glance, challenging the viewer to take in the image slowly while perambulating. There is also a mound in front of The Nest from where the entire shadow is visible, inviting the absent tree to form in the viewer's imagination. I've done quite a lot of work in public spaces, and I've learned that the work should not be made so that it can be consumed all at once and forgotten immediately. You walk on *The Shadow*. You look down, like the philosophers who used to walk the philosophical walk. They'd look down, but they would look and not see. The unconscious would take in the world, and this moment of unconsciousness, when your head is tilted forward—the antithesis of gazing at a screen—is for me the most precious moment. My ideas always come when I walk, not when I sit.

CB: How did you decide where the pavers — the different coloured pavers — were going to go? Did you create a scale drawing of *The Shadow*?

ESG: To create *The Shadow*, I needed the model of a tree. I looked at large trees everywhere, including in museums, where I could see how the large trees survived the big fires, and the ones that were left on the seaside. A tree is a three-dimensional sculpture whereas a shadow is like a two-dimensional photograph. I decided to render the tree using 3D imaging software, with an internal virtual mobile light source, so I could manifest the moment of the day that cast the shadow that formed in my imagination. I wanted it to be as “shadowy” as possible — the nature of shadows is that they shift constantly.

But this one would be frozen in time.

I drafted a scale drawing in order to position the resulting 3D shadow on the plaza and chose to work with three grey tones that would provide a good contrast with the beige pavers on the plaza — the *assemblage* would match my vision. I created one very dark and two different lighter shades of grey. The lighter one on the edge of the shadow suggests vibration and very successfully merges with the monochromatic paved surface.

According to this scheme, the work team replaced 24,000 pavers. It took less than three months to integrate *The Shadow* into the plaza. Now this gigantic mosaic lies under the steps of so many participating students, faculty, and visitors, whether or not they notice their interaction with this monumental piece while walking across these grounds. As an artist this resulted in an important opportunity to create a contemporary myth. I believe this is what artists do.

CB: You have called this a very particular tree, and a very particular sunrise.

ESG: This is the shadow of a particular tree. And when we talk about shadow, it’s also the unconscious — a particular unconscious. Particularity is critical and commands our attention. And this shadow references a particular moment in time, which started when we did. We also looked at the stars, and where the sun rose on a certain day of a certain year. But then I didn’t want to go too far because, when you look at the sunset or sunrise, you don’t really do this to prove something. It wasn’t about proving. It’s about saying it’s a particular moment.

My wish was to create the portrait of a particular Douglas fir as an attempt to posit that each tree is an entity unto itself, an individual life form. As a result of their history, each tree — like each person — is unique.

I've had a cabin on Cortes Island, BC for many years. I regularly walk the surrounding forest where large old growth stumps remind me of the vast spaces the canopies carved out for themselves. The present trees are now mostly second-generation growth. Last year one of the few remaining old growth giant firs suddenly crashed to the ground, probably because of damage that happened a long time ago. Its huge horizontal presence is still very dramatic. It will nourish the forest for many years to come. The haunting horizontal absence of the owner of *The Shadow* works in the same way for me.

CB: Can you remind me of what Ian Wallace said about this project?

ESG: He said, "It makes such a large impact—and without an object!" I think this is true. It was satisfying because I consider myself a sculptor, but on the other hand I don't want to take up too much space. We're already too many. There are too many objects in the world in my opinion. I work a lot with video because video is, for me, a sculptural thing. It brings the work into the world, but it's only a projection. Making use of void is part of my negotiation with sculpture. In this case it is about the presence of absence.

The Shadow is very satisfying in its modalities as it addresses the ground in a new manner. It offers, by being in and on it, an immersive experience. It changes in the weather and in time.

Time is never linear in my art works. A shadow of the past can emerge to crystalize a specific present moment and directly inspire a particular future. But the most mysterious are our own shadows, aren't they? For instance, we can only walk on shadows other than our own. They carry us. It's really at the edge of things that we are propelled away or back into the shadow. The part we don't know we know, that makes memory and history irreconcilable. My work always deals with complexity; I often have to elucidate it. But I don't need to talk much about this work. Everybody dreams his or her own shadow.