

making sense of the forest

exploring the atmospheres and practices of a boreal forestry research station in Finland

Andrea Botero & Laura Swett – September 30, 2025

• architecture • biology • ecology • landscape • sustainability • forest • research • art • sensing • data • wood • territory • sensors

How can we begin to make sense of a forest and care about its future?

Forests are a resource for materials, heat, and light, and provide a way for humans to make a living. Forests also act as repositories for the future and memories of the past. Forests are “sinks,” tasked with storing the carbon generated by human activities (Whitehead 2011). They are moving ecosystems (Gabrys 2021), complex data sets (Botero et al. 2022) and thinking beings in their own right (Kohn 2013, Simard 2021).

The question that opens this essay is especially relevant in times of polycrisis. In Finland, where 75% of the country is covered by forest (M&M 2021), it is particularly prominent. As the Finnish poet Zacharias Topelius said, “Forests are the coat of the country” (1876). Here forests have played both a literal and symbolic role in nation building (Laine et al. 2020). They are a key economic force and an important climate mitigation strategy (Lipiäinen and Vakkilainen 2021), thus making them subjects of scientific inquiry.

The Hyytiälä Forest Field Station in Juupajoki is an intriguing place that is attempting to make sense of the forest. The station’s history dates back to 1910, when it began as a practicing ground for forestry students, a role it still fulfills today. As a research station of the University of Helsinki, it provides insights on topics from forest soil depths to atmospheric processes. Both authors have spent time at the station for various projects, and we have been struck by its layers of history and the entanglement of various disciplines in the landscape: Hyytiälä is known for, amongst other things, its research infrastructure that generates data on boreal forests and their interactions with the atmosphere. There is also an art program that since 2011, has brought artists to the station to work alongside the research being conducted there (Climate Whirl 2024). Moreover, the station has recently completed a new building for research into wood construction and human wellbeing in wooden environments.

The station is as complex as the forest it aims to make sense of.

Various stakeholders interact with and make sense of the forest in distinct ways. At the station, ecological, scientific, artistic, commercial, and educational activities are layered upon the site. We take the station itself and its surroundings as a character that plays a part in its own research and aim to describe the spirit of this place. As part of our work, we have had the practice of photographing the surroundings and talking to some of the people who work there.

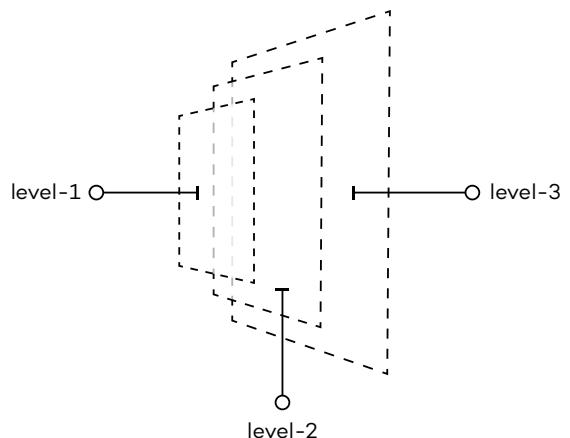
Our visual essay aims to show some of its practices along with the physical and aesthetic atmosphere of the place. We invite comparisons and juxtapositions between them. The first layer presents instances of Collecting, Categorizing, and Containing. The second layer examines ways of Moving, Tracing, and Guiding, while the final layer highlights instances of Measuring, Sensing, and Framing. These categories may describe actions taken by people at the station, but they might also be qualities of the infrastructure and material culture that has built up at the station over more than a century. While these activities are common to a wide variety of actors, the specific manner and purpose of each one differs across disciplines. An artist, for example, may encourage a different type of movement through the landscape of the station than a scientist, or a dog. The layering strategy allows us to visually explore the atmosphere of the station, some of the activities that take place there, and the traces left behind by human, other-than-human, and machine actors in a subtle manner, beyond a single discipline or entity.

Here is a boreal forestry research station at this point in time. A collection of the various forests that contribute different points of view. An old growth forest with mixed tree species, decaying wood, mushrooms, and lichen. The homogenous stands of Scots pine trees typical of Finnish managed forests. The sophisticated sensors that monitor the ecosystems. A landscape scattered with human and nonhuman projects. A forest is more than a collection of trees

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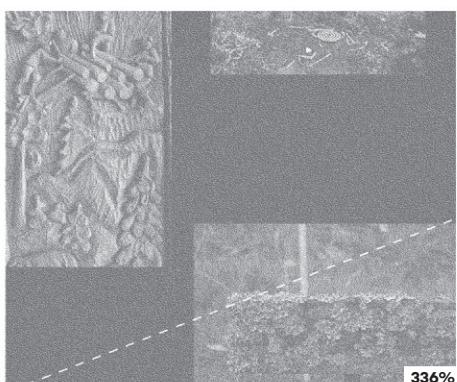
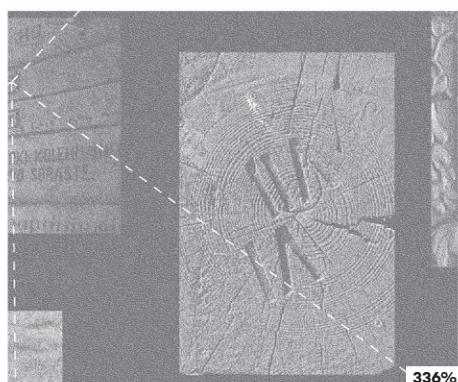
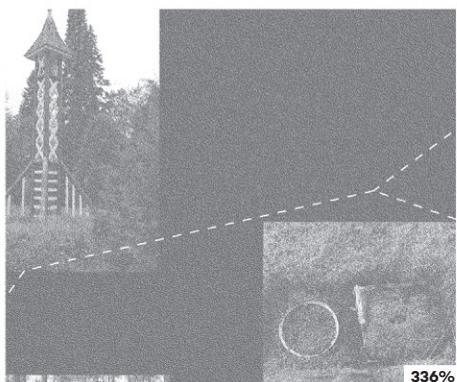
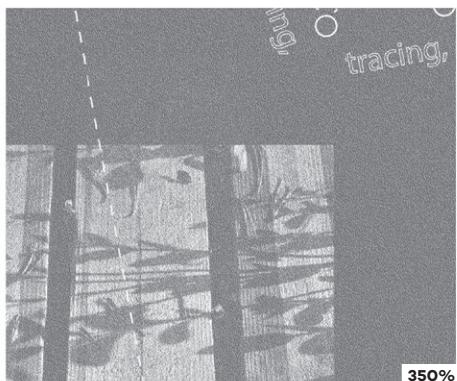
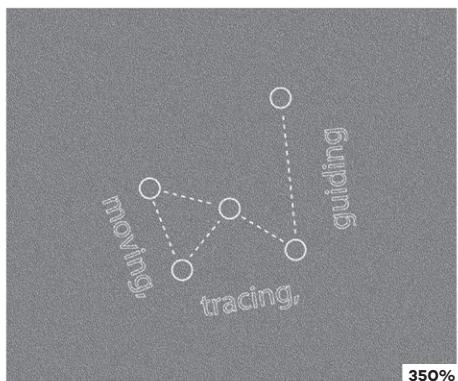
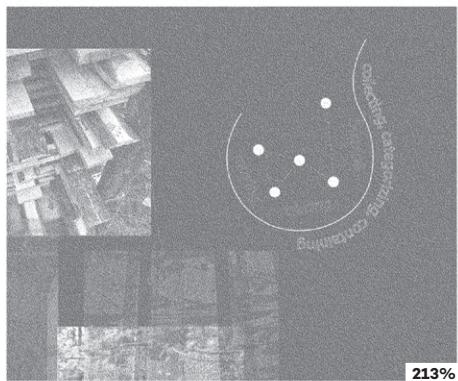
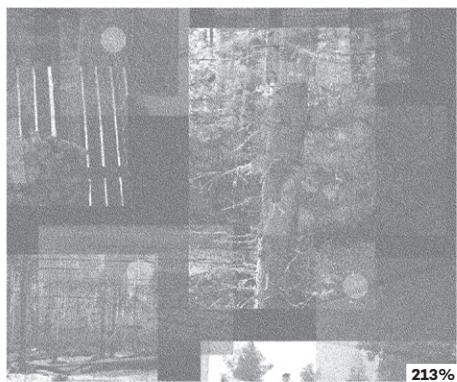
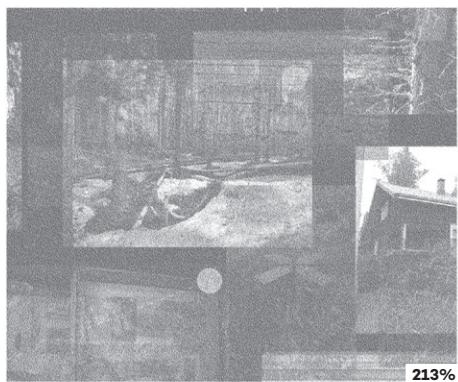
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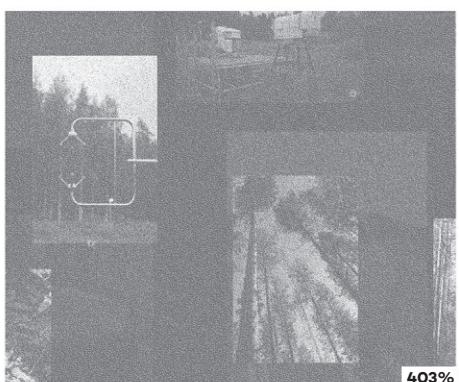
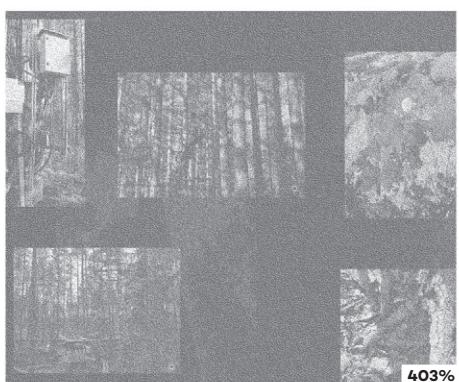
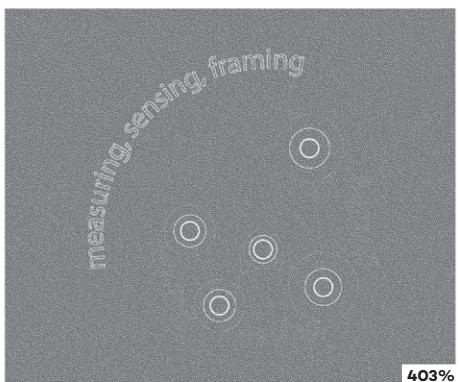
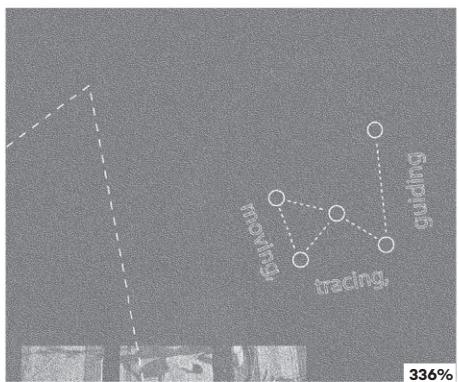
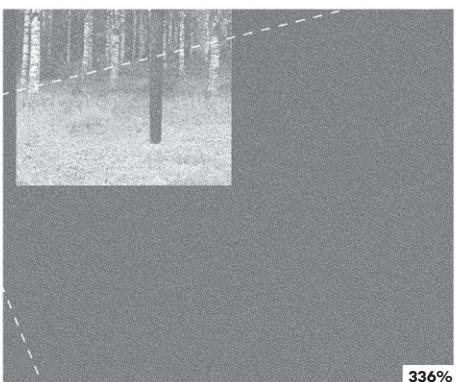
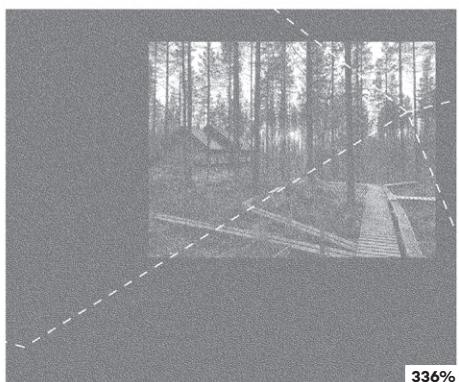
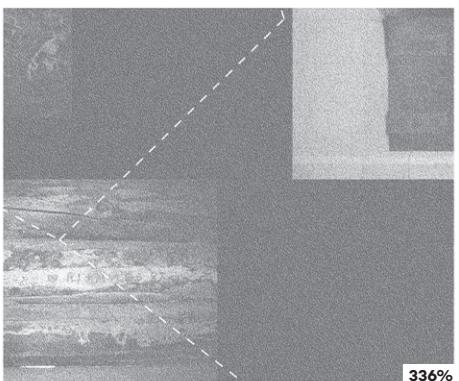
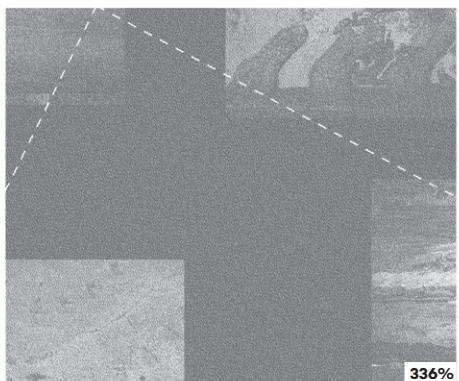
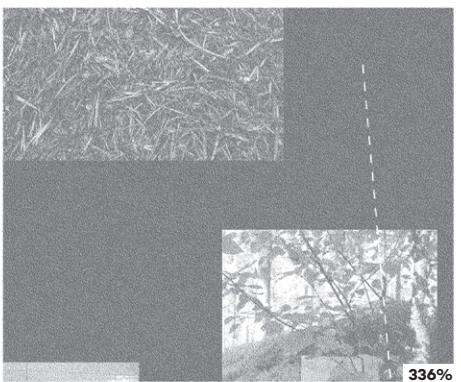
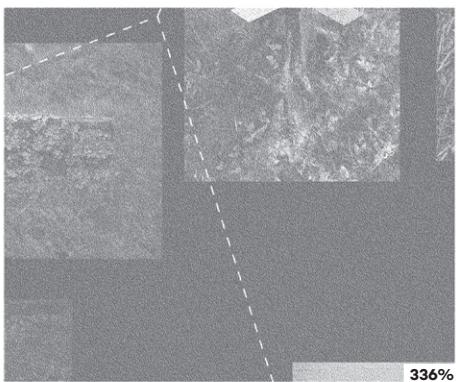
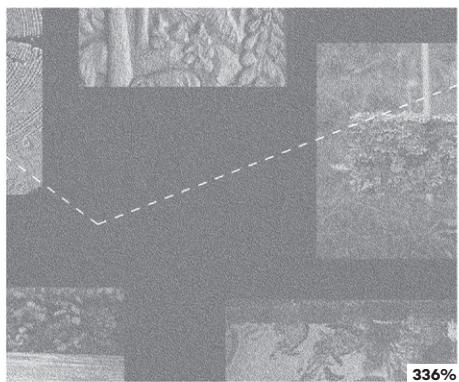
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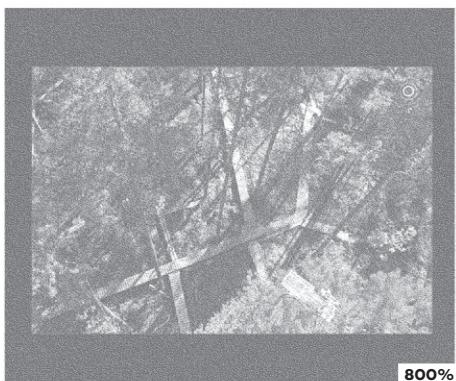
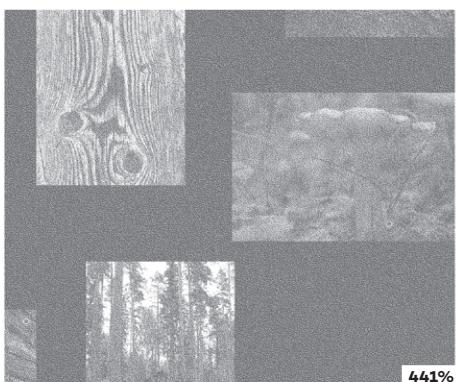
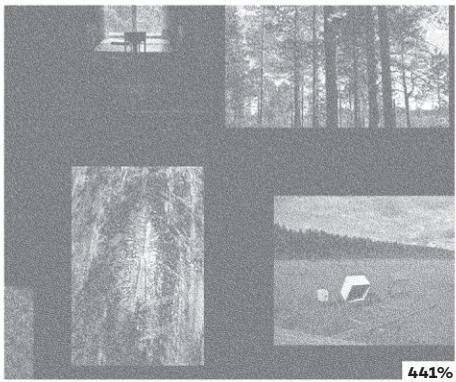
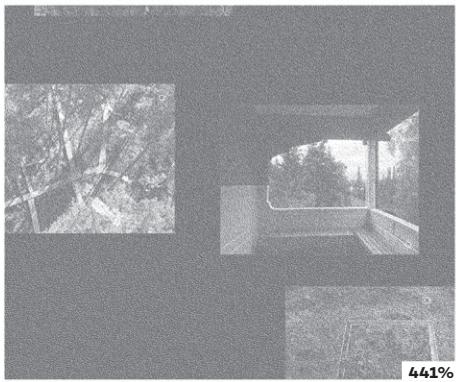
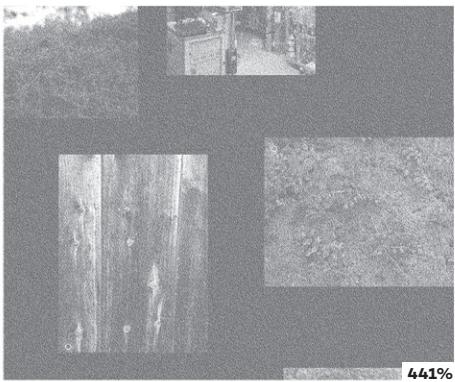
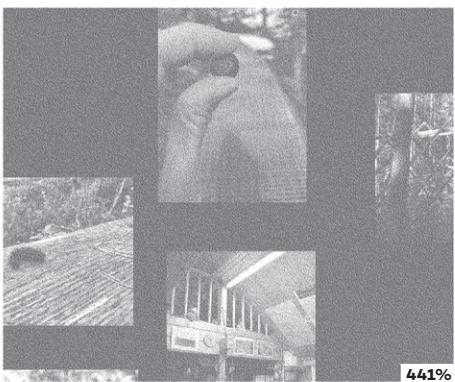
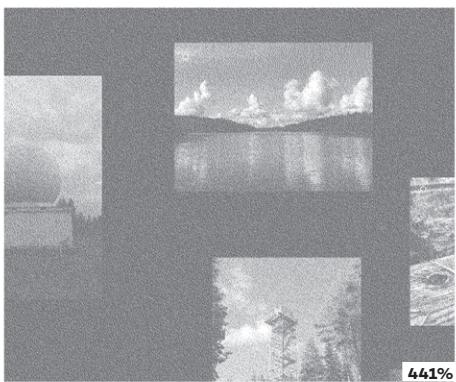
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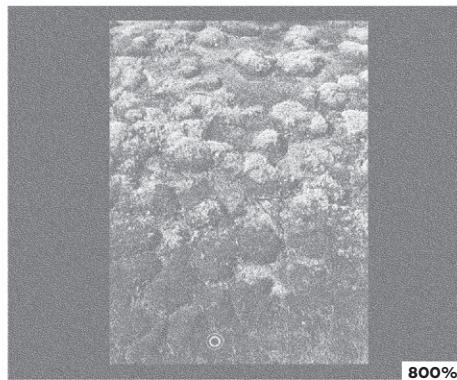
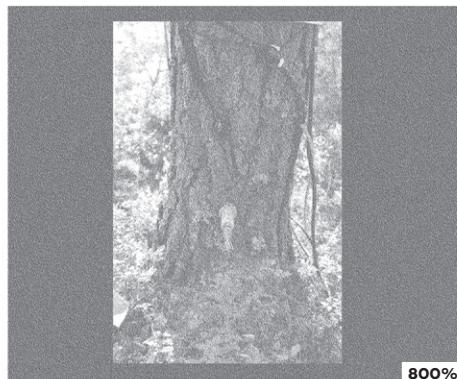
Andrea Botero (PhD) is a designer and researcher working as Associate Professor at the School of Arts, Design and Architecture of Aalto University. Her research looks at how collectives (broadly speaking) come to understand the design spaces available to them, and what that understanding means for their capacity to design livable futures.
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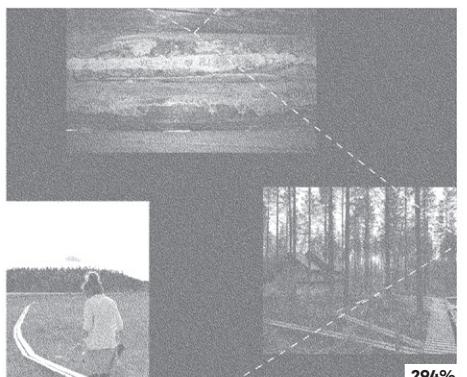
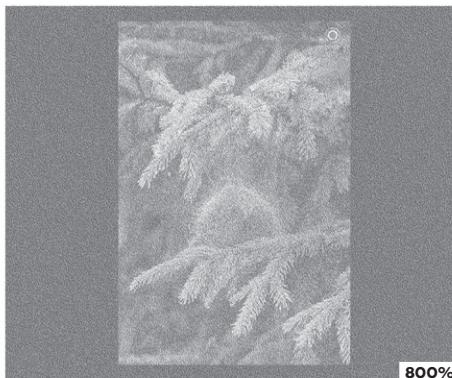
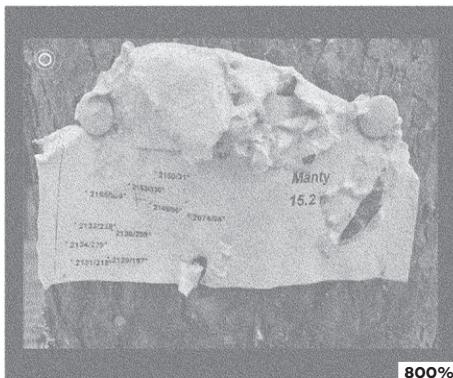
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