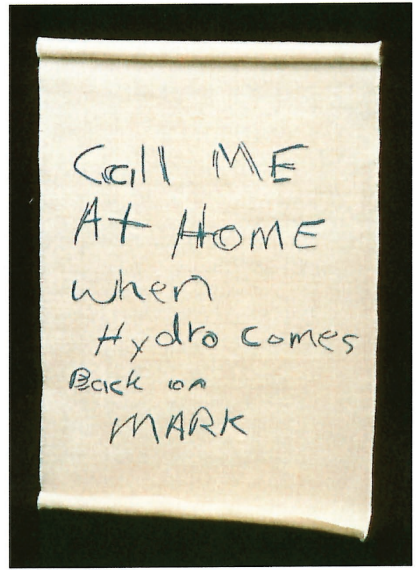
Two Degrees of Separation

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO
art gallery

University of Waterloo

The environment can be seen as fragile and defeated, but Nature has the means to kick back powerfully and unexpectedly. "Blackout" is a vignette from a massive power outage on a sweltering August 14, 2003. This embroidered work is based on a note, scrawled with a chipped blue pencil crayon, found on Central Avenue in London, Ontario during an eerily quiet, star-lit walk that evening. A minor power failure in Ohio triggered a trans-border chain reaction that left 50 million people, including "Mark", in eight American states and Ontario with their electricity-driven, urbanized landscape pitched into disarray. Power lines expand and sag as they heat up. The wind cools them and this is factored into clearance between trees and power lines, but on August 14, wind speed had fallen to below two knots. Lines already sagging from higher flow to supply the demand for air conditioning, drooped and made explosive contact with trees in three separate locations, setting off a crippling blackout. The U.S.-Canada Power System Outage Task Force reported that, "overgrown trees, as opposed to excessive conductor sag" were responsible for the power failure. Untrimmed trees had encroached into the space known as the "transmission right-of-way". "Blackout" is a reminder that we live in a culture increasingly out of touch with our natural environment.

Kirtley Jarvis



Blackout, 2003 Embroidery thread on linen, 12 x 8 1/2 inches