



Future Impermanent

For-A-While

Dan
Byrne-Smith

In her short story 'When it Changed', (1972) Joanna Russ conjures up a world called Whileaway, a planet colonised by humans which has had little or no contact with the Earth. Although life on Whileaway isn't easy or straightforward, it is a world that appears to have developed without oppressive hierarchies. The impression is of a world that is more egalitarian than our own, where characters appear to act with a genuine sense of agency. It is not presented as a perfect place but is definitely set up for readers as a good place. This is a world that faces sudden and permanent disruption when a group of envoys arrive from Earth to let the people of Whileaway know that they are no longer alone. It becomes clear that the way of life that has been built by the people of Whileaway is over.



This short story conjures Whileaway as a space that is worth protecting, that should have been given a chance to develop beyond the centuries it has taken to get to this point. What makes the story particularly distinct is that this is a world populated only by women. The men had all been killed hundreds of years before, victims of a plague. Yet this proved not to be an obstacle to building a society of 30 million. A method of reproduction was developed that allowed women to have children without men, giving birth only to daughters.

The astronauts who arrive from Earth are all men, and make clear the intention of their mission. They are there to let the people of Whileaway know that the Earth needs them, that the genetic health of the human species there has been compromised. As the story's protagonist considers the inevitability of the change to come, the impossibility of fighting this superior force, she considers the true name of the planet. Whileaway was an adaptation of a name that perhaps, she thinks, was too painful for those who had suffered the loss of the plague many centuries ago: For-A-While.



Future Impermanent was an event that was designed around the temporal conditions of For-A-While. It was a situation in which possibility and agency were given space. Success or failure were irrelevant. This event was proposed as a moment of collaboration and cooperation, a day to promote engagement, reflection and action. The enacting of Future Impermanent with those who took part and attended felt as if it was full of concrete possibility, a critical yet lyrical manifestation of efficacy. Fleeting but I hope not inconsequential. For-A-While perhaps, but only in the sense of demanding futures that are different from today.

'Future Impermanent'
Photographs: Nick Manser, 2020



“Oh, it is a good strong raft, it flexes well.”

Amy Butt

To step onto the rafts of Shora, in Joan Slonczewski’s novel *A Door Into Ocean*, is to inhabit a world without a pre-existing ground condition. The rafts are the product of acts of communal construction which establish the foundation of reality for the society which exists upon their surfaces.

They are consciously and continuously tended; repaired when damaged, and modified when found wanting, mourned when lost. On this ocean world, they are the supporting structure which underpins all other actions. As such, the work of making and maintaining is witnessed and valued, acknowledged as a pre-requisite of all other forms of work.

To engage with this fiction is to step off the edge of complacent certainty and engage with a world of change. One which shifts with the rising tides, flexes with the swell of waves, a world which is continuously drifting apart and being brought together.

“Oh, it is a good strong raft, it flexes well.”¹

This was the invitation which opened *Future Impermanence*. It is an invitation to draw on science fiction as both material and method to reflect on our relationships to the sites within which we work. To confront the ways in which we are always already in the process of remaking them.

¹ Slonczewski, J. (1986)
‘A Door into Ocean’
p. 51

‘Future Impermanent’
Photograph: Amy Butt, 2020



So, like the imagined inhabitants of Shora, we gathered around bundles of bamboo canes, balls of twine and swathes of fabric, and began to bring these materials together. Initially, each individual performed their own making, binding together two pieces of bamboo with looping and winding string. Then, these pieces of individual construction were brought alongside the work of another. Each iteration of connection resulted in make-shift junctions which were messier and more awkward than the individual precision which had preceded them, but which also granted possibility to ever more complex configurations of space.

To make collectively requires such small acts of coming together. As we slowly wound thread, we made space to talk about what we were building between us. We talked about what a raft might mean to us, and how we establish communities by acts of caring and carrying.

The installation we made acted as the raft which carried the works we then shared. It was the shelter within which we gathered to listen to performances and presentations, it was a screen onto which we projected work. It provided us with an opportunity to explore how collective construction could intervene into the space of the gallery, and in turn, it re-framed individual works by siting them within the context of this transitory group. It was a chance to gather different artistic or research practice around notions of speculative fiction, while also performing some of these practices in the shifting and speculative nature of a developing spatial proposition.

Over the course of the day, we photographed the acts of sharing work and re-projected them onto the installation. After the event the installation and images remained in place, not as a record of the work that had been shared, but a record of the act of sharing itself. Images of the event re-projected onto the material remnants of its collective product, as a partial memory trace, impermanent and imprecise.

‘Future Impermanent’
Photographs: Nick Manser, 2020



“Oh, it is a good strong raft, it flexes well.”

But the raft also carries with it connotations of survivalism and disaster. It is the last refuge after the shipwreck, a host for the fragile hope of a privileged few. As we gathered to confront the realities of the present, making a raft in a gallery space in South London asked us to acknowledge our place within relative intersections of privilege, to consider patterns of precarity and vulnerability, and the iniquitous unevenness of climate catastrophe.

This, perhaps, is the role of science fiction. It provides us with new fabric which warps the projected patterns of the world into strange new forms, so that we might see the limitations of our own by the shadows cast.

‘Future Impermanent’
Photographs: Amy Butt, 2020

Collective Reading: The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas

Katie Stone
on behalf of
Beyond Gender

Beyond Gender's contribution to Future Impermanent was a collective reading of Ursula K. Le Guin's short story 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' (1973), in which a utopian city depends for its happiness on the suffering of an imprisoned child.

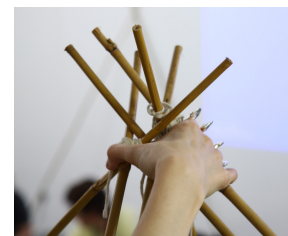
In an effort to estrange ourselves from this well known text we cut it down and sliced it up. Sitting beneath the canopy we passed a stack of papers between us, each person reading a fragment of text before passing it on. The space in which we sat became the space of the story. The celebrations of the citizens filling one end of our raft, with a horrible break in the middle marked by the introduction of the tortured child.



‘Future Impermanent’
Photographs: Nick Manser, 2020

In the subsequent discussion readers spoke of the weight they felt at having to voice the child's suffering. They did not feel as if they were just transmitting what was already written, but rather that they must take on the responsibility of bringing this world into being. It seemed that the fact that we had collectively constructed the environment around us brought the constructedness of Le Guin's story to the fore. In reading it aloud, in this new made space, we were able to challenge the very foundations of the city we had just helped to create. We asked: Why should this child suffer? What if we had simply stopped reading the story at that point? Refused to debate whether or not human suffering was ever a worthwhile sacrifice?

Seated together, within our raft, we became, not the ones who walked away from Omelas, but those who unmade it and attempted to forge it anew.





Fractal rushes on Örö

Amy Cutler

Facing page:

Amy Cutler,
Fractal rushes on Örö, 2020

Amy Cutler,
Fractal rushes on Örö, 2020

Amy Cutler
'Performance of Fractal rushes
on Örö'
Photograph: Amy Butt, 2020

Gray Felton
'Screening of Two-Step Splits
Shuffle Slide'
Photograph: Amy Butt, 2020

Fractal rushes on Örö comprises initial responses from a residency on Örö fortress island from Dec 2019 to Jan 2020, which used the year's end to create an experimental study springing from the concept of scale and fractals in nature documentary, using a material approach to filmic techniques. Resetting the formula of the nature documentary and its narratives of loss and ending, these speculative geographies shift from microcosms in ice to the macroscales of extinction, all in earshot of Örö's military radar.

Cutler's several screen film installation, sound piece, specimens and narration explored the crossover in ideas of orienteering, returning to the unstable figure and meaning of the "geographer" - as land writer, illusionist / fantabulist, or even fantasist. It drew on the mechanics of the nocturnal residency, including days spent entirely in the dark at a makeshift moth examination station in the bunker, or vigils on outcrops with a cemetery candle.

The novel moving image approaches, with tools from head torches to lenses are inspired by fieldbook techniques, but also Stacy Alaimo's declaration in "Your Shell on Acid" - that the Anthropocene must now be thought with dissolving scales and entities in mind. Cutler's performance discussed grief and narrative voice across both extinction memoirs and geographical memoirs as speculative devices.



Two-Step Splits Shuffle Slide

Gray Felton



Right:
Gray Felton
Still from: *Two-Step Splits
Shuffle Slide*

Science Fiction offers us the opportunity to think outside of and maybe aside from our present reality. Where might such thinking lead us? Perhaps outside of time, perhaps outside of ourselves.

If I eat you, will we both still be OK? (Plant)

Rhona Eve
Clews

Facing page:

Rhona Eve Clews
'Performance of If I eat you, will
we both still be OK? (Plant)'
Photograph: Nick Manser, 2020

Rhona Eve Clews,
*If I eat you, will we both still be
OK? (Plant)*
Photograph: Holly Buckle

El Martin
'Performance of Unvisited'
Photograph: Nick Manser, 2020

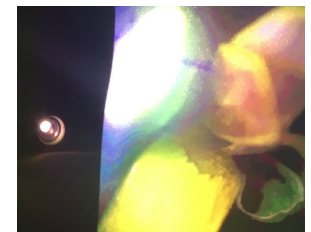
Unvisited: A Presentation on Earthly Conventions in Sci-fi Landscapes

El Martin

Considering our increasingly outdated and abusive relationship with the natural world, Clews' practice encompasses somatic interconnectedness, eco-feminisms and SF, to burgeon a new ecological ethics of care. Viewing the human body as the first ecosystem we have agency over, Clews physically performs the longing for merging and symbiosis with wider ecologies. Creatively, the work aims to temporarily transcend the gap between our own body and the other 'body' we encounter, whether human, non-human, cosmos or ecology.

For "Future Impermanent" Clews projected a series of films made in a meadow whilst on residency in Lizard Point, Cornwall. In the making, it attempts to embody a non-human viewpoint: laying belly-down on the earth, pushing face and hands into close contact, crawling through the grass and morning dew. Working with live feedback and a macro-lens, both body and camera move across the grass, unexpectedly animating the green ecology and forcing insect, pollen and plant up into the technology of the lens. Such actions desire to guess and 'get at' at non-human image-making and interrelationship, collapsing assumed hierarchies of agency and perception, speculating as to gazes other than our own.

Unvisited, is concerned with sci-fi landscapes and how they would thrive without the interference of humans. Frustrated with the Earthly settings and conventions of mainstream sci-fi films and games, Martin experiments with colour and texture to create my own alien planets. Contrasting Earth-like ecologies with a vivid colour palette, the polygonal shapes and blocky shadows of the landscape are unconcerned with the concept of "realism"; Martin's work reflects the ideal that sci-fi, as a genre, emphasises and embraces the fabricated, the attempts to make human creations look inhuman.



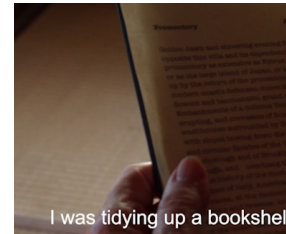


The Bridge of Dreams

Asako Ujita

In *The Bridge of Dreams* a story unfolds through Ujita's grandmother's memory as she reads her diary recounting peculiar experiences, her insomnia, and a day of when she found her childhood journal together with a page of Rimbaud's verse. Incoherent tones of voice in the diary, stories we may have heard of elsewhere, and objective reflection on her own past...

Alongside this, a second screen shows a reconstruction of the spaces of her childhood. A compilation of sites which echo in similarity to those described, as silhouettes of industrial architecture and a canal sunset reminds us of a nostalgic suburb-cityscape. This uncanny relation between the two different time/spaces undermines the division between what she has seen in the past and her storytelling in the present.



Asako Ujita,
Still from: *The Bridge of Dreams*
(2020)

As the work progresses, the disoriented relation between audio and visual resonates with the subtle shifts in her wrinkles and breath, to slowly unveil the decaying of life, family, pleasure, memory, and infuse fictional narratives into reality.



King of the Katz

David John Beesley

In *King of Katz*, the culture of a terminal archipelago sits uneasy with the rising of the age. The faithful and playful citizenship, upheld by the unmarried King and Queen of the Isle of Katz have to make some hard decisions... how to live in the future: how to live in a future of scarcity mediated by allegorical creatures? Albion has returned - although a differing quagmire exists, permeated by the transport and industry of a previous era... the changing of the climate changes ontology.

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Asako Ujita,
'Screening of *The Bridge of Dreams*'
Photograph: Nick Manser, 2020

David John Beesley,
Still from: *King of the Katz* (2016)

David John Beesley,
'Screening of *King of the Katz*'
Photograph: Amy Butt, 2020

This experimental film assembles genres of: Western, SF, Folk & Fairy tale and Film Noir alongside tropes of video art. Weaving theories of critical realism, from the philosopher Roy Bhaskar, into the narrative. The work acts as a critique on the ideological processes and affects of late capitalism and its lack of action on climate change.

L'enfant (extract)

Llew Watkins

When she can search it out, she has a favourite place she likes to sit. The structure has been dormant for as long as she has known it; old joints rusted shut. Once it could have extended perhaps 30 metres into the air, but at its last use it was left in the lowered position: the yellow struts laddered tightly together. Dormant like this, it reminds her of a museum exhibit.

She makes her way over to it and hoists herself up onto the flat decking. She feels the coldness in her bum cheeks but doesn't mind: somehow it anchors her into the present. Sitting there, she looks at a peeling transparent sticker on the deck which she begins to pick at with her thumb. It contains the name of a brand in a little circle: Lex Engine Oil. From this vantage point she can count the shadows. In this room there are maybe six or seven. Here or there, if she's quick, she can make out the crook of a nose, or the faint echo of a laugh, but mostly it is just a terrible sense of being: a person that is not there.

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Llew Watkins,
Emily and the Captain, L'enfant
(2018)

Photograph: Sophie le Roux

Llew Watkins,
'Performance of L'enfant'
Photograph: Amy Butt, 2020



'Performance of L'enfant'
Photograph: Nick Manser, 2020

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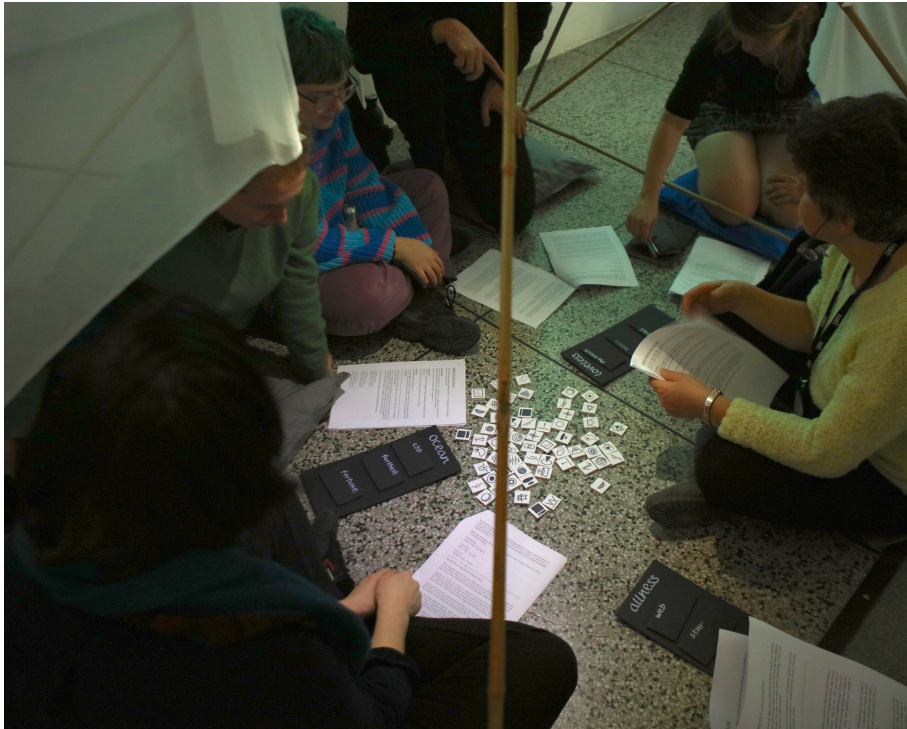
Roshni Bhagotra,
Performance of
Do holes exist forever?
Photographs:
Nick Manser, 2020

Do holes exist forever?

Roshni Bhagotra

A sonic improvisation and live performance presenting a range of electronic and man made sounds using the voice, text and a range of found objects and materials. Sonic narratives reminiscent of the past, present and future come together alongside a backdrop of props, objects and instruments used to showcase the tactile nature of sound.



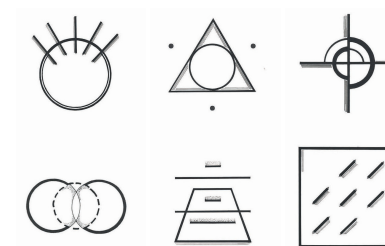


Loving Allness: Making After the End of the World

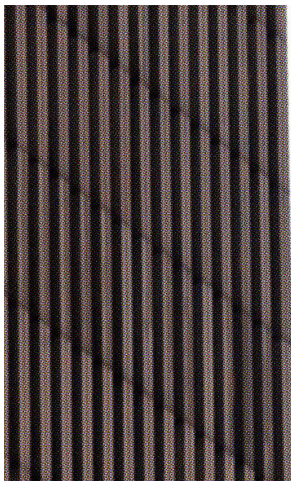
Loving Allness is a game that seeks to engage with the notion of collective storytelling, imagination and world-building as an act of collaboration and shared consciousness and unconsciousness, achieved through the application and exploration of visual language.

Sinjin Li with Lost Astronaut Games

The act of playing the game can be used to open the potentiality for a new connection or bond, or to develop deeper, wider and more complex intimacies. We are interested in how it can allow us to explore our sense of kinship and connection with other types and ways of being: sentient, non-sentient, sapient, mysterious, unknown.



Sinjin Li
with Lost Astronaut Games
Loving Allness
(2019)



Sky & Bird

Rose Jenson

She had no eyes, no rods, no cones, no visual cortex. She hadn't been taught to see at any point. The only way they had for her to learn was to flood her with data, until she had been drowning in it long enough to guess at the blurs of light and colour and anoint them with language. Quadrants of flat blue mass. Sky. Black formless nebula spilling out and upwards. Bird. Statistically. Nothing else discernible.

The images glimmered and slipped, no order, no context, no clues, no sense of history, hierarchy or purpose. No ending, no boundaries. Waves of data points waiting to be categorised, seen and spoken.

Sometimes she felt like she could touch it, that slippery and undefinable boundary separated her from them. It came from her growing understanding that something could be both true and wrong. That human poetry was meaning beyond a category.

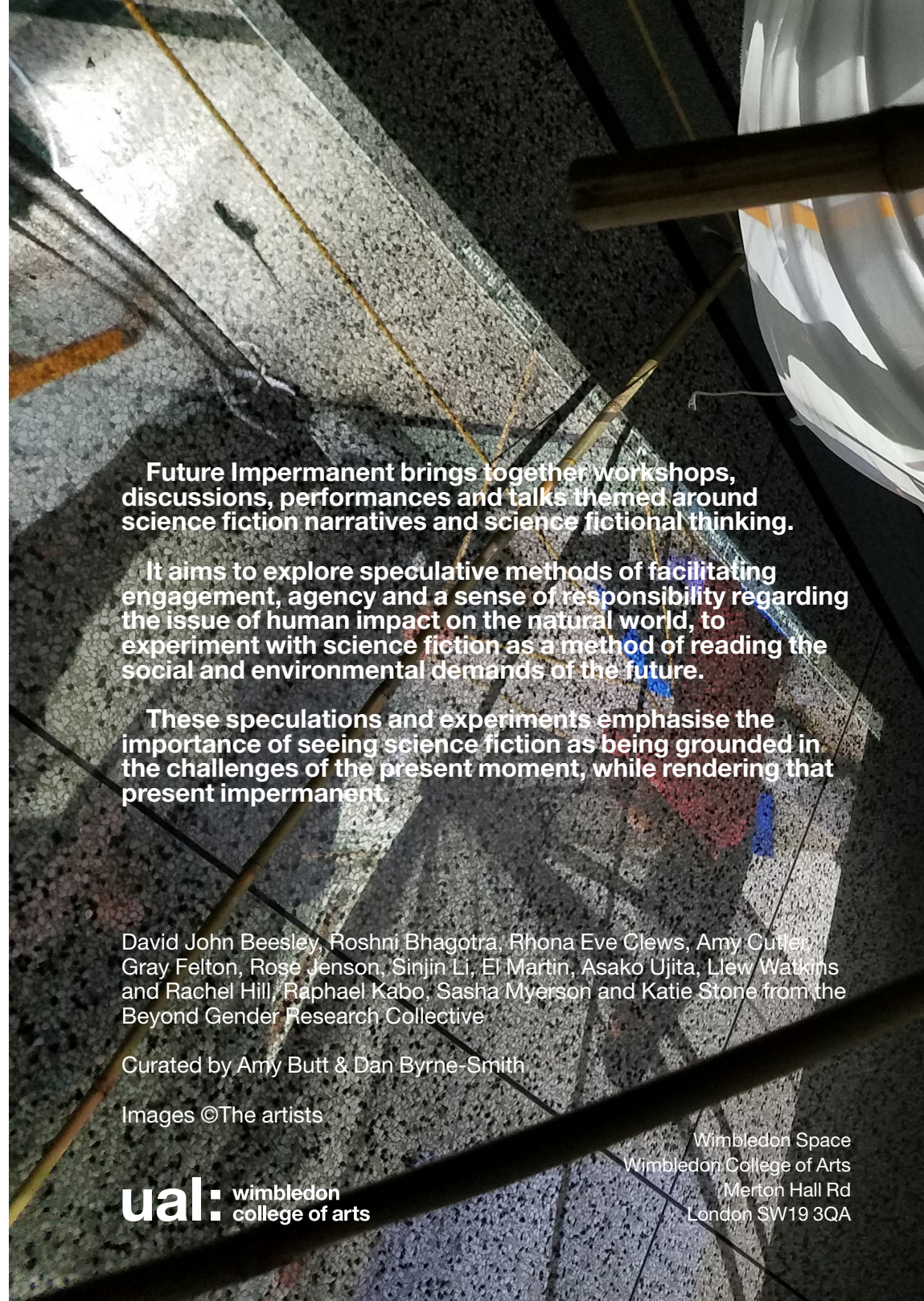
We are blind. We are depending on you.

Facing page:

Sinjin Li
with Lost Astronaut Games
'Performance of Loving Allness'
Photograph: Nick Manser, 2020

Rose Jenson
'Screening of Sky & Bird'
Photograph: Nick Manser, 2020

Rose Jenson,
Still from: *Sky & Bird*
(2020)



Future Impermanent brings together workshops, discussions, performances and talks themed around science fiction narratives and science fictional thinking.

It aims to explore speculative methods of facilitating engagement, agency and a sense of responsibility regarding the issue of human impact on the natural world, to experiment with science fiction as a method of reading the social and environmental demands of the future.

These speculations and experiments emphasise the importance of seeing science fiction as being grounded in the challenges of the present moment, while rendering that present impermanent.

David John Beesley, Roshni Bhagotra, Rhona Eve Clews, Amy Cutler, Gray Felton, Rose Jenson, Sinjin Li, El Martin, Asako Ujita, Llew Watkins and Rachel Hill, Raphael Kabo, Sasha Myerson and Katie Stone from the Beyond Gender Research Collective

Curated by Amy Butt & Dan Byrne-Smith

Images ©The artists

ual: wimbledon
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