

“This special issue of *Paradoxa* astutely interrogates existing protocols and methods in climate fiction studies. It introduces an extraordinary range of creative engagements with climate change (from digital media to visual, conceptual, and performance art, from video games to board games); it approaches these through conventional essays and revealing author/practitioner interviews; and it offers vital perspectives from across the spectrum of race, gender, and geography. In doing so, this issue sets out new approaches and ideas in climate criticism, while exploring these in impressive depth and breadth. Alison Sperling has curated and edited a set of essays that does justice to today’s climate crisis imaginary: this is bold, timely, and vital.”

Adeline Johns-Putra, Professor of Literature, Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, author of *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel* (2019).

“... this is genuinely one of the best-organized special issues I’ve ever seen.”

Sean Guynes, Editor *SFRA Review*

“Defining climate fictions as broadly as possible, in terms of literature and arts, propaganda and everyday practice, Alison Sperling presents counterfactual worlds that are vibrant and young. From the surprising reappearance of cycad cones in Britain to the direct interventions afforded by video games to a beautiful consilience of activism, philosophy, and dance, these climate fictions teach us that contingencies must be activated, eroticized, and leveraged against entrenched power. Never has it been more necessary to claim fictionality as tactic, to persistently endorse fictions that supplant the deadly realisms. This collection offers a brilliantly eclectic, queer, anti-colonial, and worldly perspective of what transition cultures are and might become. A happy corrective to those who’ve mistaken climate fictions for dystopian self-indulgence or literary navel-gazing.”

Stephanie LeMenager, Barbara and Carlisle Moore Professor of English and Environmental Studies, University of Oregon, author of *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*.

“Alison Sperling’s superbly edited *Climate Fictions* wonders which are the stories we tell ourselves in order to live through climate change. Proposing as many answers as raising new questions concerning culture’s engagement with the environmental crisis, this generous and engaging publication is not teaching but thinking with its readers. While introducing simulative, narrative and speculative positions to imagine the times to come, *Climate Fictions* drafts more sustainable, fair, creative and efficient strategies for a different future. The publication relies on a superb roster of diverse, transdisciplinary and deeply original positions. Together, the various authors investigate the potential for climate fictions to exist as a welcoming zone where present-day struggles concerning class, race, gender and species equality meet and ally themselves. If, with Le Guin, we are the stories we tell ourselves, *Climate Fictions* is introducing us to a new, truly intersectional and much urgent version of human selves.”

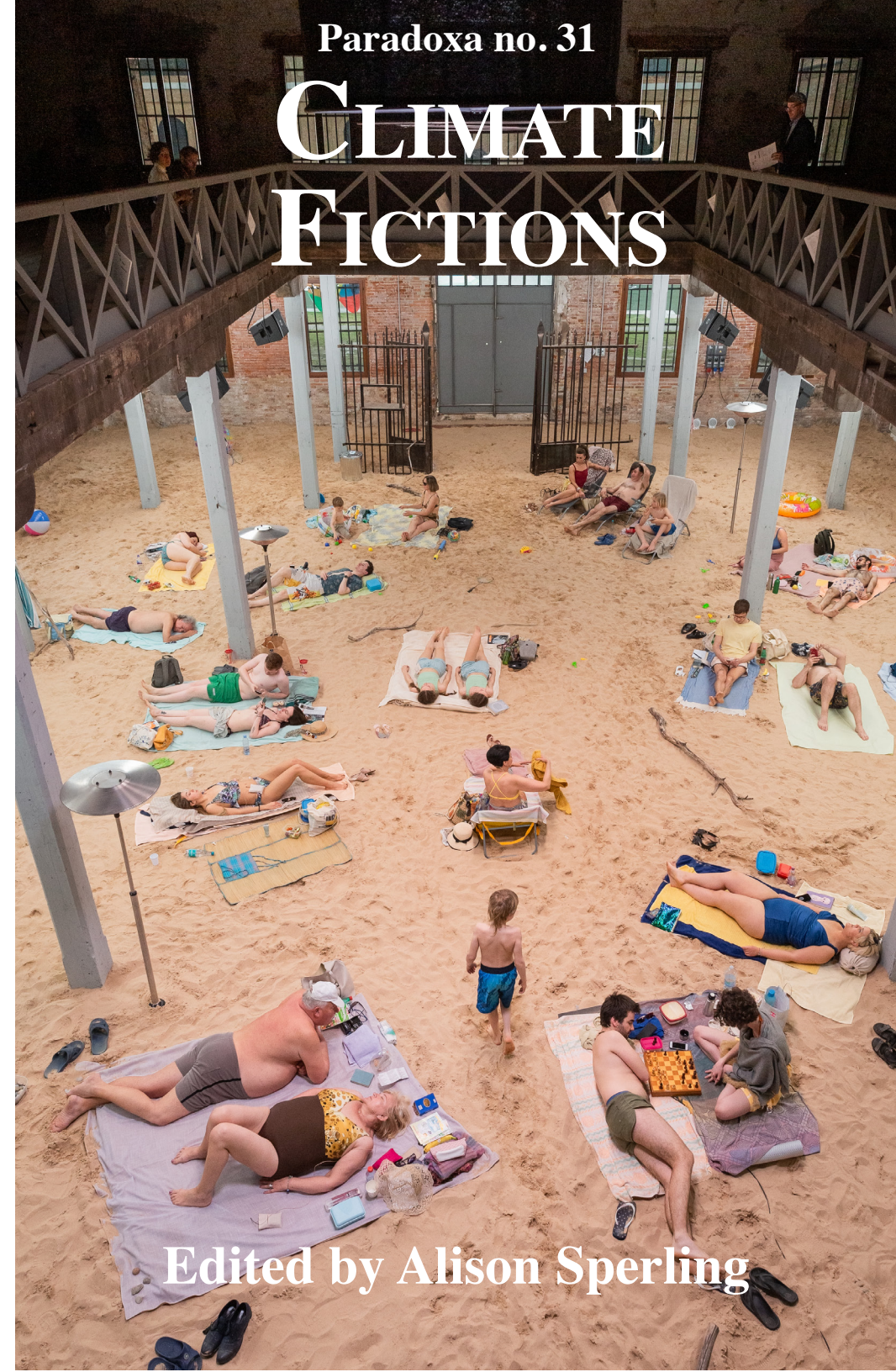
Filipa Ramos, Lecturer at the Art Institute of the Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst, Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz, Basel, Switzerland.

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Edited by Alison Sperling

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The Future was Yesterday

Dehlia Hannah and Charles Stankieveh

Charles Stankieveh is an artist whose research has explored the notion of “fieldwork” in the embedded landscape, the military industrial complex, and geopolitics. He is Associate Professor and Director of Visual Studies in the Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design at the University of Toronto, and an editor of Afterall Journal. In 2011 he founded the art and theory press K. Verlag in Berlin, and in 2007 he was a founding faculty member of the Yukon School of Visual Arts in Dawson City, Canada, under joint governance by the indigenous sovereign nation of Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in. His diverse body of work has been shown internationally at institutions including the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Copenhagen; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna; MASS MoCA; Musée d’Art Contemporain de Montréal; Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal; and the Venice and SITE Santa Fe Biennales, among others. His writing has been published by Sternberg, eflux, Verso, MIT, and Princeton Architectural Press. His comprehensively researched curatorial projects include Magnetic Norths and CounterIntelligence—both critically acclaimed as the top Canadian exhibitions of 2010 and 2014 respectively. In 2015 he won the OAG award for best solo exhibition, Monument as Ruin. Stankieveh has participated in such residencies as The Banff Centre, Fogo Island, Marfa Fieldwork, Atlantic Centre for the Arts, Museumsquartier Vienna, and the Canadian Military.

A deep philosophical undercurrent in Charles’ work has sustained my thought since I first encountered it at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in Halifax, Canada, in 2012, as I was finishing my Ph.D. in philosophy of science and aesthetics. I was not surprised to learn that he also holds a B.A. in philosophy, and had done a thesis on Lacan. It is not only our shared thematic interests (in matters of environmental and technological transformation, the politics of nature, and the Arctic, among others), but also a mutual affinity for the thought experiment as lived experience in and of “the field” that has structured our conversations ever since. I was honored to be invited by Charles to be inaugural Visual Studies Researcher-in-Residence at the Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design at the University of Toronto this winter, which gave us a chance to delve deeper into our engagements with philosophy and science fiction. There, I was teaching a course on curating (with

Dr. Nadim Samman) in which we were preparing an emergency kit to be deployed in the event of a massive electrical blackout—before the world itself took a turn stranger than fiction, forcing us to finish teaching as well as this dialogue via a panoply of futuristic media platforms that felt always already outmoded.

Drowned Worlds

*Dehlia Hannah: You have a longstanding interest in the work of JG Ballard. And your most recent endeavour, *The Drowned World*, a special project of the Toronto Biennial, took direct inspiration from his novel of the same name. Why this novel, now, and specifically—in Toronto?*

Charles Stankieveh: Great first question, as *The Drowned World* is often considered the first cli-fi novel, penned in 1962 (cli-fi, being a portmanteau for *climate change driven science fiction*). I'd argue that a lesser known novel called *The Purple Cloud*, from 1901, could make a better claim to this accolade (maybe we can return to this later in the interview). But as far as mainstream science fiction goes, Ballard's novel was super important for its early imagining of how climate change, in hard science terms, could affect an immediate future. Particularly, global warming floods the planet, returning it to a Triassic period climate. I revisited the novel and used it as structuring device to create an environment for the Biennial. It was a dream project to turn the original home of IMAX cinema—which is housed in Toronto in a 1960/70s geodesic dome called the *Cinesphere*, on a man-made island no less—into a cave-like atmosphere, with video projections, multichannel sound installations, and a scent. The program started off with a dramatization of Ballard's novel and transitioned into historic ocean recordings, cave concerts, vocal screams produced by genetically reconstructed prehistoric animals, footage of the first computer generated images of water, a first-person shooter perspective of a rare earth mine in the Congo, a story about the sprouting of seeds in the Middle East withdrawn from an Arctic seed vault, the sounds of a dying star, and more... concluding with a postscript reading of Clarice Lispector's short story "Waters of the World" (published the same year the *Cinesphere* was built). Over twenty artists, writers, and estates coalesced to create a multisensory Ark of deep time that dived into an evolutionary perspective of our planet.

When asked to create a project by the curator Candice Hopkins for the inaugural Toronto Biennial (which had the general theme of

water), I immediately knew the novel would be the perfect conceptual framework. Not only were architectural terraforming, the novel, and the IMAX system all roughly from the same period, a lot of the ecological questions raised during this time period were surfacing again—only this time around, the ideas feel less like science fiction and more like an imminent reality. I've created a lot of different works on ecology, militarization, and natural resources in the Canadian landscape, and this project allowed me to keep thinking about these issues focusing on the future of water, our complex territorial governance, and how the globe is connected via water. Canada's future will be intimately tied to the management of our greatest future resource: water. And on the shore of the largest fresh water system on earth, *The Drowned World* became the platform to explore these critical issues.

Great Derangement

DH: Amitav Ghosh recently came up in conversation between us, and of course he has been indispensable in thinking about the imaginative limits of particular aesthetic forms in the face of anthropogenic climate change—like the realist novel, and, ultimately, our epistemological and aesthetic grasp on reality. Nothing could have been more unfathomable than the pandemic shutdown that has brought us together in a bio-commune, which is itself something out of science-fiction. How is Ghosh helping you to think through climate change and the present pandemic?

*CS: Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* is such an insightful read, exposing a non-western history of oil and discussing the important role of storytelling in calibrating our reality. But it was actually on his recent visit to Toronto this past year that I observed someone really engaging the serious issue of climate change and the military. Normally, I feel like I'm one of the only people hammering away at this, but he gave an excellent talk that laid out with some hard numbers how, if we aren't talking about the military's carbon footprint, then all the other conversations are moot. Since 2010, I've been using the term "Warm War" to describe the coming conflicts resulting from global warming. It was first to specifically look at the Arctic region (where I lived at the time) as the theatre of war that directly shifted from a Cold War to a Warm War, but obviously the effects are becoming more and more global. It's not just about the control of deep-sea oil patches or the right to use the thawing Northwest Passage, it's about energy policy debates, carbon credit scams, military logistics, state destabilization from famine, and the list keeps*

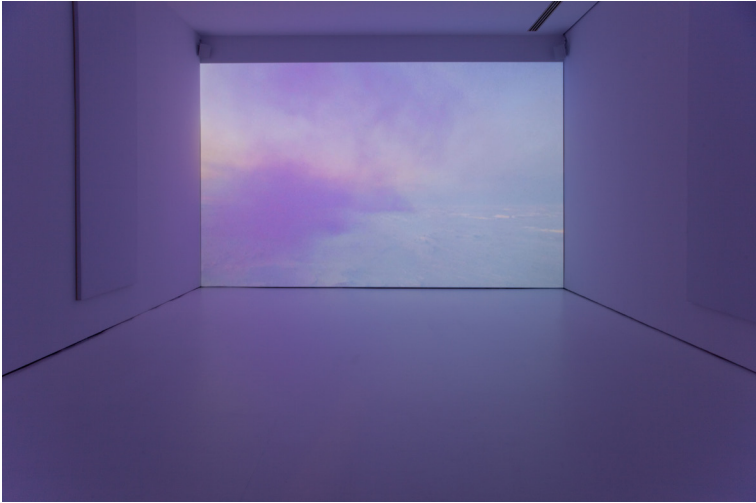
growing each day as conditions compound. Around the time of coining the term Warm War, the US Department of Defence was first quietly making reports that climate change would be one of their key future concerns. Of course, as consumers we need to curb our consumption and lobby for industry changes, but it's the troubling feedback loop of increased conflict and the military's outrageous carbon footprint that is the elephant in the room when it comes to climate issues. The current pandemic shows that even with civilian culture shutdown, the effect is minimal. I realise this reality gravitates towards a pretty cliché science fiction dystopia, but there are some parts of the conversation that need to investigate our blind spots—and the military is inherently protected as a blind spot for national security.

Loveland

DH: I want to return to the opening mention of M.P. Shields's 1901 novel The Purple Cloud, which tells the story of a man wandering the earth, the sole survivor of a toxic cloud emitted by a volcanic eruption in Southeast Asia. I understand that you found this novel after filming the deployment of military smoke grenades issuing purple smoke across an arctic landscape, to create the artwork LOVELAND (2009-2011). Shields's novel ended up inspiring you to add new elements to the project, such as a very historically specific gemstone, which really captured my attention when I saw the installation for second time at Louisiana Museum, in Denmark, in 2014. Can you tell us about this moment of serendipity and how the dialogue between his story and your own vision played out?

*CS: Bunkered away in my studio in the Arctic, in the abandoned gold fields of Dawson City, I was pretty reliant on only two things: fieldwork and the internet. I came across the novel as a title in some essay or research database and that peaked my curiosity, since I had just made a purple cloud on the Arctic Ocean a few months earlier. The discovery was important because it allowed me to anchor the project to a story, whereas up until that point, it had grown out of research into military outposts and history of the area. Visually, it was also inspired by the 1968 colorfield painting by Jules Olitski, *Instant Loveland*. My performance of creating a purple cloud as a smoke screen in front of an active military radar outpost left me with the challenge of how to stitch together what might first look like a formalist and beautiful gesture, with the intended political ramifications. There was an inherent contradiction in trying*

to show something that was invisible (military radar and power) and furthermore hidden by a cloud (the smoke grenades). The novel provided a story for the project that linked a historical piece of fiction, through a contemporary art gesture, into a future politics. Storytelling has the power to create such a complex arc—and making it accessible for people to join for the ride.



Title: Charles Stankieveh, *LOVELAND* (2011),
video installation still, courtesy of the artist.

DH: ...This was an extraordinary moment of serendipity between us as well, as I was working on Frankenstein and its conception during a moment of global climate crisis that would become known as a year without a summer—a cooling effected by the eruption of Mt. Tambora, a volcano in Indonesia, in the year 1815. The rest is history...

CS: Yes! I didn't realize until our last conversation when you told me that the Mt. Tambora eruption wasn't actually the eruption fictionally and hyperbolically accounted in *The Purple Cloud*—because nobody knew in 1901 that Tambora was the cause of the cooling episode of 1815-1818. I've always loved the apocrypha of Mary Shelley writing a seminal piece of science fiction while sheltered away from the world and the great outdoors one summer. That history is now echoed by the pandemic and our quarantining together this summer. I'm curious what will manifest, and excited by our other *quattro* collaboration with Ala Roushan and Nadim Samman for *Afterall Journal*. It seems appropriate, given our

shared interest in science fiction, that we're collecting a menagerie of philosophical monsters. You commissioned several short science fiction stories for your volume *A Year Without Winter*. What was your reason for inclusion of fiction in an academic publication?

DH: The science fiction stories were actually the original core of the book—which grew into an academic and art book over time, like an alligator in the bathtub, a metaphor that New Yorkers use for a pet that outgrows its tank and takes over your small apartment. A Year Without Winter was originally conceived as a—climatically inverted—historical re-enactment of “the dare” to write a horror story—the game Shelley played with her lover Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and his doctor, John Pollidori, while they were trapped indoors by inclement weather during the summer of 1816. Frankenstein, published in 1818, is considered the first sci-fi novel—the first representative of a new genre. To commemorate its bicentennial, I invited four sci-fi authors (Nnedi Okorafor, Vandana Singh, Tobias Buckell and Nancy Kress) out into the desert, to the utopian experimental town of Arcosanti, in Arizona—the opposite of Geneva’s climate—to meditate on our emerging climate crisis. But I also wondered if a new artistic or literary genre might emerge from our contemporary confrontation and immersion within a changing atmosphere. Even though we know what is happening, from all the data, models, simulations, grasping it aesthetically and imaginatively remains a struggle. So the rest of the book follows up different threads, showing how fiction and reality are interwoven, and contextualizing the collection of sci-fi short stories historically, philosophically, scientifically, and visually.

Conceptual Sci-fi

DH: How does a contemporary, conceptual artistic practice relate to science fiction? What are the overlaps, and is there any substantive difference, as far as you are concerned?

*CS: I wouldn't make a distinction. Good science fiction at its core is always conceptual, and some of the earliest pieces were more impressive as conceptual ponderings than written craft. For example, my project *Monument as Ruin* (2015) revolves around the apocrypha of the novella “Black Destroyer” (1939) by the Canadian writer A.E. van Vogt—which is not the most textured read—but returns as the core story in the *Alien* film franchise (1979-). One could argue it wasn't*

until Ballard's generation that the writing became more literary (Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* of course being an outlier composed under special circumstances you've already laid out). (Being Canadian myself and interested in how the sublime landscape of Canada and its role as a colonial outpost has left a marked impression on the genre, I think it's worth pointing out a certain skeleton of the canon: van Vogt's story "Black Destroyer" kicked off the 'Golden Age of Science Fiction,' Ballard discovered science fiction as a genre while stationed with Royal Air Force in central Canada, and Canadian James Cameron wrote and directed the most celebrated installment of the series with *Aliens*—even *Frankenstein* ends with the monster disappearing into the darkness of Canada's Arctic.) The most recent development to your question lies, however, in the broad phenomenon of contemporary artists appropriating science fiction as means of expression. For myself, I came about it quite naturally. I started by studying physics in university, and before becoming an artist, I worked in the camera union on science fiction movies and TV (on shows like the long-standing series *Outer Limits*, *Stargate*, etc.). Transitioning from such a pop industry, it stuck with me how powerful the genre could be for communicating and connecting with an audience. Science fiction also folded well with my long-term interests as a researcher in the history of technology, military logistics, and colonialism. My first artwork, *Requiem* back in 2002, was a *mise-en-scène* setup as a mobile genetic laboratory / alien testing site, where, for three hours, I was submerged in a gigantic custom-made test tube dosed on empathogens breathing underwater via a respirator. We know artists like Dan Graham were big science fiction fans (Mark von Schlegell, whom I commissioned to write a sci-fi short story for my *LOVELAND* catalogue, also wrote a great essay on the relationship between Dan and 20th century science fiction for his retrospective catalogue), but now it feels everywhere I turn, artists are not only influenced by, but using the genre. And rightfully so, with the constant acceleration of technology at the rate of Moore's Law, we are experiencing radical shifts in our society and our environment as whiplash. The future was yesterday. A network effect in a globalized world makes the pandemic, the internet, or climate change, radically re-orientate our world. The genre of science fiction is collapsing into our generation's realism, to avoid becoming historical at the moment of its public release.

The Soniferous Æther

DH: In your work The Soniferous Æther (2013), to take one example, you represent actual historical military outposts and other such technological

infrastructures in a way that alienates, almost as if they were part of a sci-fi film. Does sci-fi help you grapple with histories that are stranger than fiction?



Title: Charles Stankieveh, *The Soniferous Æther of The Land Beyond The Land Beyond*, (2013), 35mm Film Installation with Dolby Sound; Film Still, courtesy of the artist.

CS: Actually, all of my video work is documentary, in that it documents real sites and actual performances—though they are sometimes edited and framed as science fiction for strategic reasons. I think the impression you are sensing is the brute reality of their extremely remote locations: *Aether* for example, was shot at the northernmost settlement in the world, the signals intelligence station CFS ALERT, when I was embedded with the Defence Department. I don't alienate the viewer from the sites; they are already "alien". (Your original word choice, alienate, I think takes on a double meaning which I'll get to in a moment.) I think the general viewer doesn't realise how much of science fiction comes from actual military and industrial design. Instead of alienating the view, my films (whether its *Æther*, *The Second Coming*, or *Transmission*) take sites beyond the viewer's access and familiarizes them with the language of science fiction. There's a strange dialectic that occurs. On the one hand, science fiction allows us to look at our own reality through a new lens, due to a suspension of belief that in turn allows us to rethink, by short-circuiting our prejudices. We can rethink our systemic issues and cultural biases by mapping them onto a different world or species. I was

once asked by the Otolith Group at the symposium *Rare Earth* why I use the strategy of sci-fi, assuming it was an escapist, design aesthetic. But the project in question, *Anabarium* (2015), was an attempt to reorient the dialectics of colonial discourse by avoiding a simple inversion. The position of power in the Master-Slave dialectic cannot imagine the position of the other because of the facticity of history. Such an empathic understanding is better imagined by going meta and introducing a new master into the dialectic, without a subaltern history. Science fiction is perhaps the easiest and most subtle way to go about this strategy, which can occur in such classic earth invasion narratives, where an alien race takes over the domestic power. On the other hand, because as an artist I'm no longer working on studio stages or with CGI, the documentary images in my work reveal to us *how strange our real world already is*. Ultimately, my hope is that my work oscillates between these two forces: making our world strange and making the strange part of our world.

Dehlia Hannah is a curator and philosopher based in Copenhagen and Berlin. In 2013 she received her Ph.D. in Philosophy from Columbia University, with specializations in philosophy of science, aesthetics, and philosophy of nature. She is presently Mads Øvlisen Postdoctoral Fellow in Art and Natural Sciences at the Department of Chemistry and Biosciences at Aalborg University-Copenhagen and affiliated researcher at the School of Earth and Space Exploration at Arizona State University. Her most recent project, *A Year Without a Winter* (Columbia University Press, 2018), reframes contemporary imaginaries of climate crisis by revisiting the literary and environmental aftermaths of the 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora. Her writing, teaching, and curatorial practice broadly explores contemporary art's role in shaping emerging environmental imaginaries and philosophies of nature. Past exhibitions include *Placing the Golden Spike: Landscapes of the Anthropocene* (Milwaukee, 2015), *Control: Experiment* (Stockholm, 2016) and *Pareidolia* (Copenhagen, 2017).

Her forthcoming monograph *Performative Experiments* examines the philosophical implications of contemporary artworks that take the form of scientific experiments. Her current research project *An Imaginary Museum of Philosophical Monsters* examines the role of imaginary places, creatures, and technologies in the history of philosophy.