

All Flesh is Grass

Una Hamilton Helle, Eltons Kūns, Uma Breakdown and Erik Martinson

exhibition, online reading group, online screening, and artist film program

Dates: June 4 – August 23, 2020

Venue: Kim? Contemporary Art Centre, Riga

In Clifford D. Simak's novel 'All Flesh is Grass' (1965) a small town becomes inexplicably isolated from the rest of the world by an invisible and impenetrable barrier. The central character Brad Carter, a near bankrupt business owner, becomes an interspecies conduit with the entities responsible for the shield encasing the town. The beings are extra-terrestrial in origin and take the form of purple flowers. Carter takes on a role of ambassador of sorts, in order to speak the flower patch's message of peaceful coexistence for all in the universe. The phrase 'All Flesh is (as) Grass' is also commonly used as an epitaph for many who have passed on and joined the soil, acknowledging life's cycle and interconnection.

The meeting place of interspecies communication and mortality is central to the 1978 film 'The Kirlian Witness' (aka 'The Plants are Watching') directed by Jonathan Sarno. Self described as 'the first botanical thriller' the film is a murder mystery where the key witness is a plant. The protagonist Rilla begins to unravel the circumstances of her sister Laurie's untimely death by delving into her sister's fondness and connection to plants. She locates a copy of the book 'The Secret Life of Plants' (1973) by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird to better understand her late sister's fascination. This leads Rilla to one plant in particular, a 'silent' witness that she begins to understand through experiments with Kirlian photography and other methods. Tension builds when two men in Rilla's life become the prime suspects. She must navigate their aggressive male chauvinism, and the resulting dangers. Retribution for Laurie is found in the end, thanks to Rilla's diligence and the help of the perceptive plant.

The exhibition 'All Flesh is Grass' at Kim? Contemporary Art Centre, Riga, will be structured around questions of plant consciousness/agency and interspecies communication/empathy. Engaging with these concepts as 'mysteries' the project will utilize play as a form of enquiry. 'The Kirlian Witness' and its context of 1970s (pseudo) science will be the departure point, paired with measured critique and expanded questioning. The method is a collaboratively developed immersive game that envisions the space at Kim? as a set, and a site for experimentation. Reference points include techniques/approaches from: LARP (Live Action Role Playing), LAOG (Live Action Online Games), TTRPG's (Table Top Role Playing Games), MMO's (Massively Multiplayer Online Games), and TV adventure games. The exhibition features: a public research lab with scrolls containing data pertinent to the development of the project; sound from a modular synthesizer; a self directed guided meditation; a soil tray; and a potted Ficus lyrata in front of a green screen. Additional 'prop' elements will enter the space over the course of the exhibition as the project and game design evolves. The resulting game(s) will consider both physical and online play scenarios, and will be publicly play tested by the conclusion of the exhibition. Perceived limitations of interspecies communication will be seen as grounds for speculative potential, and all engagement with living entities, fictional or otherwise, will be approached with respect.

'All Flesh is Grass' is a collaborative project by: Una Hamilton Helle, Eltons Kūns, Uma Breakdown, and curator Erik Martinson. During the exhibition Of Animacy Reading Group, convened by Nella Aarne, will host online sessions focused on pertinent texts to the project.

A pdf publication will be made at the end of the project to track collective research and present new writing.

Further public events include: an online screening of 'The Kirlian Witness' (aka 'The Plants are Watching'), with a video introduction by Kier-La Janisse, founder of Miskatonic Institute of Horror Studies; and a finissage screening featuring works by John Baldessari, Elise Florenty & Marcel Türkowsky, and Charlotte Pryce.

Una Hamilton Helle (NO/UK) is an artist and art worker with an interdisciplinary and research-led practice. Her long term project *Becoming the Forest* looks at questions around ecology, black metal, topography and plant sentience through exhibitions, events and a publication. She has also worked with gaming techniques, LARP and world building as ways to look at empathy, embodiment and collaboration with human and non human entities. Her most recent projects include creating a site-specific sound installation for Waltham Forest Borough of Culture (UK), a video essay for New Art Gallery Walsall (UK) and a text-based adventure game for Celsius Project Space (SWE), as well as events at London Short Film Festival, Kunstnernes Hus (Oslo), Het Bos (Antwerp) and [Space] (London).

Eltons Kūns (LV) has studied English and Literature at LCC International University and New Media Art at Liepāja University. Kūns' body of work focuses on the ambiguity of the real/virtual space via the medium of perceptually sculptural objects operating on the threshold of screen space perception. Kūns has participated in such group shows as *Well Now WTF?* (Silicon Valet, online, 2020), *SOOZ V1.9* (Sooz, online, 2015), *FR€€ THINGS* (STCFTHOTS, Leeds, England, 2015), *GIFbites* (Dar-ol-Hokoomeh, Shiraz, Iran, 2014).

Uma Breakdown (UK) is the name under which the Gateshead based artist and researcher Ralph Dorey writes on horror, art and play. Dorey received an MA from the Royal College of Art in 2008 and a PhD from Northumbria University, Newcastle in 2020. Their research is concerned with queer, ludic, feminist approaches to art via the tangential tactics of tabletop role playing games, horror cinema, and experimental literature, with an emphasis on 'Écriture féminine', the philosophy of Georges Bataille, and the writing techniques of Kathy Acker. As a practicing artist Uma Breakdown has recently presented material at SERF in Leeds, Res., South London Gallery, and Whitechapel Gallery, all in London. Recent publications include: 'PaperWork Issue 3: iilwimi lipsing' (2018) edited by Jessa Mockridge and Catherine Smiles, 'The Body That Remains' (2018) edited by Emmy Beber, 'Alembic' (2018) edited by Sarah Jury, Helen Kaplinsky and Lucy A. Sames, and 'Lossy Ecology' (2017) edited by Louisa Martin.

Erik Martinson (CA/LV) is a curator and writer living in the UK. His research stems from speculative beginnings, drawing from the fictional and esoteric as fertile ground for intersections with contemporary artists' practices. His projects often operate on a sliding scale between the metaphoric and the literal. Investment is made in the actuality of speculative scenarios, the possibility of impossible things or knowledge, as much as how these concepts might apply and draw connections to lived experience and social/political realities. Selected projects have been hosted at: The Images Festival, Toronto (2012); A Space Gallery, Toronto (2012); Pleasure Dome, Toronto (2012); Art Gallery of Mississauga (2013); Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (2015); Chalton Gallery, London (2016); LUX, London (2016, 2017); Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius (2016); The Ryder, London (2017); Toronto International Film Festival's Wavelengths Series (2017); Close-Up Film Centre, London (2018); Whitechapel Gallery, London (2018); Process Experimental Film Festival, Riga (2018); Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia, Tallinn (2018); North Norwegian Art

Centre, Svolvær (2019); Cubitt Gallery, London (2019); Lofoten International Art Festival, Svolvær (2019); Kunsternes Hus, Oslo (2019); Rupert, Vilnius (2019); and Baltic Analog Lab, Riga (2019).