

OUT OF THIS WORLD

**Writing on the 2022 Alberta
Media Art Conference**

by Kerry Maguire



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Contents

The Map	2
The Arrival	7
Dirt and Worms	10
In This World: AMAAS at St. Paul	16
Leaving Earth	22
Out of this World	25
Works Cited	36

Kerry Maguire is a writer, multidisciplinary artist and electronic musician from Moh'kins'tsis. In her practice, she collaborates with images of landscape, and with steel, water, and clay to posit precarious, nascent archives of place. Using techniques of imprint, transfer and decay, she explores writing, experimental printmaking and digitization as a way to create an unstable index of reality.

Kerry has exhibited her installation work, prints, sculpture and sound work in Austin, TX; Brooklyn, NY; Ireland; Latvia; Estonia; and across Canada. She has received travel grants to conduct sonic research in Ireland and material exploration on Toronto Island. Maguire has participated in artist residencies at Artscape (Toronto), The National Music Centre (Calgary, Canada), the New York Studio Residency Program (Brooklyn), and The Burren College of Art (Ireland).

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The Alberta Media Arts Alliance Society engages in promotion, education and advocacy on behalf of Alberta's media artists.

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Emily Promise Allison is a Canadian conceptual artist who uses photography and performance to create images that embrace surreal, metaphysical, and dreamlike qualities. The purpose of her work is to activate curiosity, stimulate a sense of wonder, and enable a collapse of status and expectation concerning theoretical knowledge versus lived experience. Emily regards the imagination as a fundamental sense that allows us to find or create magic within systems regulated by logic; celebrating the strange nature of existence and the absurdity of life.

There is a series of still life images that you will find in this publication. Each sculptural arrangement captured by Emily Promise Allison is based on the 2022 Out of This World conference as articulated in the text that fills these pages, written by Kerry Maguire. The photographs accompany Kerry's script in a way that encourages the reader to consider parallels between the composition of image and text. Together they illustrate a human collaboration of perceptions that play with the possibilities of correspondence rendered visually and verbally.

The Map

I travelled to the 2022 Alberta Media Arts Alliance (AMAAS) conference on a chartered bus. The theme was *Out of this World*, with a specific focus on virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), which are both covered under the umbrella term extended reality (XR). I found a map of Alberta tucked in my bag from a trip several weeks before. Following our passage on this map, I marveled at how, after a five hour's drive northeast to St. Paul from Calgary, we did not even cross half the length of Alberta. This province is enormous, and St. Paul is the furthest north I have ever been in so-called Canada. I only know the country's north as an imaginary place, an area of increasingly sparse dots and lines on my map.

Traveling with other conference participants felt significant for several reasons. We are two and a half years into the COVID-19 pandemic, which means that being in the close quarters of the bus was both anxiety inducing and thrilling. I caught lines of conversation between some long-time AMAAS members who hadn't seen each other since the 2019 *On Sound* conference, each talking about how their lives had invariably been buffeted by COVID-19 through isolation, lack of opportunities, or illness. I also heard conversations imbued with excitement for our ways of life to go back to being physically and spatially interconnected. The summer of 2022 is shaping up to be, wisely or not, full of weddings, conferences, and other kinds of gatherings that were impossible during the first years of the pandemic.

Our bus passed oil refineries (Edmonton), the largest sculpture of a sausage in the world (Mundare), the largest sculpture of a Ukrainian easter egg (Vegreville) and sloughs, cows,

horses, canola fields, and windswept barns. The refineries and the landscape are unfathomably and endlessly large and in comparison, Alberta's collection of biggest-in-the-world monuments are always somehow disappointingly small. However, I admire that, for example, the Mundare sausage is simply called "The world's largest sausage." It is not ever referred to as a statue of a sausage; it is a sausage. Giddiness flowed through the bus when we passed this absurd monument. If there was any remaining shyness or uncertainty between us bus riders, the Mundare sausage helped to dissolve it completely.

For better or for worse, I like to know where exactly I am, even when I am only a passenger. Needing a map usually means one is in an unfamiliar place or trying to get to a familiar place in an unfamiliar way. In navigating with a virtual GPS system, each of us is always at the centre of the universe. We simply input our destination, and on our screens the world unfolds around us. The GPS viewport shows the user at the centre of a foreshortened world: streets, avenues, roads, and highways radiate outward from the user's body. Each restaurant suggestion or traffic update is tailored perfectly to each navigator. Whenever I use GPS, it feels less like I am navigating an intricate, semi-static designed system of purposeful avenues and overpasses, and more as if I am embarking on an exclusive journey through alive, mutable, snaking roads that could only be made for *me*.

With a paper map, you must instead locate yourself in the world. The resolution of most paper maps is such that a single human or house wouldn't register. You take cues from what you see around you—town names, the curvature of the road, landscape features, road signs—and triangulate your position. If you are still unsure, you can look at the sun, find the Rocky Mountains on the Western horizon, employ a compass, or ask someone which way is North. Using this system, the world is anchored

outside your body. For example, to make sure you are indeed in St. Paul, position yourself between several enormous entities: prairies to the north, east and west; Upper Thérien Lake to the south.

I cherish my maps as wayfinding devices, but I attempt a healthy disrespect for their declarations. Western maps, and the paper on which they are printed, have been some of the most forceful tools of power, oppression, and colonization. Maps oppress and colonize even in the present tense: the current war between Russia and Ukraine is testament to that. When I am at my least attentive, I get caught up in the details of *where* I am: latitude, longitude, distances to nearest towns, population sizes.

Looking at my map, I began the weekend thinking about being *in/of this world*. Despite the far-reaching, world-changing implications of immersive XR technologies, they are still very much grounded on planet Earth: the server farms that process AI data; the deadly cobalt and lithium mines that furnish raw material for our computers; the programmers in front of these computers scattered across the globe; and the Earth-bound end users of each technology. I think about how using XR technologies is like navigating a route using GPS: when you put on VR goggles or use AR through your phone, the world unfolds around you. You are the anchor, the centre of that world (a few days later, this thought is no longer a metaphor when I learn that Google Maps now *is* an AR experience, if you wish it to be). For now, XR worlds need you, the user, to actualize them.

On the other hand, this conference took place in the world of St. Paul, Alberta. This is a physical, built place, made of material and histories and flora and humans. It is accessed by a bus ride through other places. Simply traveling to and arriving at a new



Semi-static Purposefully. Emily Promise Allison. 2022.

place changes and expands your world. There is only so much a map, a photo, or a VR replica can tell you. Thinking about place in this way—as something to locate yourself within, rather than something that expands around you—is to think of oneself in relation to the landscapes, plants, animals, structures, and people that are simply existing there as well. They will hopefully continue to exist whether you are present or not.

Over the course of the conference, we were prompted to think hard about a future where VR will be indistinguishable from our Earthly world. Maybe my words about the tangibility and humility of travel and place will seem quaint a few years from now, when one can visit not only Earth but other universes and imagined places in a wholly unreal reality. Digital artist and educator Matthew Waddell, who ran several conference workshops over the weekend, posited that soon to our human senses, VR will be indistinguishable from Earth-reality. But for now, at least, it holds true that the best way for a human to know a place is to physically be there.

So here we are in a town called St. Paul. Now is a good a time as any to shed one's colonial placemaking bias by relying on settler names, borders, and gridded roads. We can instead learn that it smells like rain and grass and something distantly acid, perhaps a by-product of agriculture or industry. There aren't any people on the streets to behold on a Thursday afternoon, and the buildings crouch low to the ground. The vast prairie plays a trick with my depth perception. I can at once see forever to a prairie horizon, but it is somehow difficult to visually discern what is happening on the next block. I prepare to undertake the slow work of knowing a new place by experience.

The Arrival

Entering St. Paul, there are trappings common to many small Albertan towns: billboards advertising heavy equipment, a small, bald cemetery, a farming credit union, motels, and a church. But the drive into this small town offers a singular sight: the world's first UFO Landing Pad.

The UFO Landing Pad—named, according to the brass dedication plaque, *Stargate Alpha*— is an enormous circular platform. A Métis flag, the flag of each province and territory, and a relief map of Canada adorn the raised circular structure. Built in 1967, it is a docking station on which alien visitors, upon first contact, are welcome to land their spacecraft. Situated at the town's western edge, it welcomed our busload of media artists into St. Paul.

The Landing Pad somehow looks out of time. Filmmaker Michelle Wong, one of the conference's keynote speakers, was raised in this town. She had recently unearthed a box of vintage postcards with a photograph of the Landing Pad on the front, and she gave one to each attendee as a takeaway. Wong's best guess is that the postcards were printed in 1970s. When I was finally within the physical presence of the Landing Pad, the present-day structure seemed to retain the quality of the postcard's aged film photograph.

According to the *Stargate Alpha* plaque, St. Paul is a place where "all visitors from earth or otherwise are welcome." The town's website says that visiting the Landing Pad centre is an "opportunity to view actual photographs of UFOs, crop circles, and cattle mutilations."¹ The esoterica of ufology is expansive,

¹"The Landing Pad," Town of St. Paul, accessed July 14, 2022, <https://www.stpaul.ca/visitors/ufo-landing-pad>.

and, at best, incidental to how I think about the Landing Pad. I am more concerned with the history and lived, earthly experiences of those in St. Paul, rather than a past of contested UFO sightings and a future of peaceful interstellar space travel. In 2022, space travel is singly reserved for only the richest white men on earth: Elon Musk, Richard Branson, and Jeff Bezos. It is easy, and probably true, to think of these men as some of the most harmful people alive, figureheads of racial capitalism, clickbait news, environmental distress, and unimproved labour conditions for low-income wage workers.

But, somewhat confoundingly, the Landing Pad's bronze dedication claims that it is to be a sign of "faith that mankind will maintain the outer universe free from national wars and strife." I don't presume to extend this faith to anyone beyond the creators of the monument. As I write in July 2022, Ukraine and Russia are several months into a horrific war; outside impacts on low-income people and people of color from the COVID-19 pandemic continue to play out all over the world; global disaster capitalism causes climate change to spin out of control with increasing momentum; and tech oligarchs continue to unabashedly consolidate their money and power. I don't list these large, heavy, and omnipresent calamities glibly. I do so to illustrate how the Landing Pad plaque glazes over our earthly obligations. Rather than wishing for peace on earth, the plaque's authors seem to only have dreams of peace in space. Maybe this is because "peace on earth" seems a more bold, difficult and tangled claim than "peace in the as-yet-uninhabited vacuum of space beyond earth."

I did not at first see a second, less prominent plaque, which I discovered later in online photographs from tourists.



Stargate Alpha. Emily Promise Allison. 2022.

The second plaque reads:

As mankind stands on the threshold of inter galactic travel, let us not forget our failures on Earth.

If we are to become voyageurs of space, we must learn the true meaning of tolerance to others that are different from us.

We must remember that no matter how large the universe, the smallest creature has its place in the order of life.

If we fail to conquer disease and pestilence on Earth, but instead transmit them to other planets, we shall never be welcome.

If we fail to travel Earth without destroying the environment, how shall we ever travel the universe safely.

If we cannot develop international goodwill among all men, how shall we ever develop intergalactic goodwill among all beings.

Lastly, if mankind travels this earth or universe armed with kindness, tolerance, hope and good spirits, he will always be welcomed.

- Anon

Dirt and Worms

I have been thinking a lot about what makes something otherworldly; or, as the 2022 AMAAS conference theme declares, *out of this world*. This has led me to make a basic distinction: there is that which is worldly, and that which is earthly.

What do I mean by this? The earth is singular. The earth occurs once, as becomes painfully obvious when we consider climate change and its attendant harms. The earth is our dirt-and-

wormy satellite that carries us through outer space. Perhaps, as suggested by Adrian Stimson in his Friday evening artist talk, the earth is hurtling through the universe, chased by a trail of satellites, suns, and stars. The earth provides for us, holding our food sources, glaciers, friends, and the infrastructure that transmits digital data.

In any case, the earth's properties are bound to the physical. The earth excels at holding a multitude of beings; everything from the plants and mycelia present in Kelly Andres' hydroponic installation *Intraterrestrial Botanist* (2022) to the frigid interiors of a decommissioned high-north weather station photographed by aAron Munson in *Isachsen, Nunavut* (2017). Andres presented *Intraterrestrial Botanist* in her workshop *Digital Ecologies 101*. This installation proposes an ecosystem between sound and plant life: engraved images of rhizomes and brain coral seem to present a score one could follow using the microphone, sound generator, and plants suspended in water. The title's use of "intra" (within) implies a re-configuring of existing earthly ecosystems such as sound ecology, botany, and chemistry.

Munson's *Isachsen, Nunavut* documents the artist's attempt to follow his father's footsteps to the Isachsen weather station, where Munson's father was employed as the sole station operator in 1974. Isachsen closed in 1978 and has been mostly abandoned since. Munson's photographs reveal the station's devastated, frozen interiors. In some, a haunting figure in a parka occupies the desolate rooms. These photographs, which Munson made despite a great deal of technical difficulties related to the frigid temperatures, showcase one of the most extreme ecologies on earth, and implied in the photographs are a human's ability, or inability, to survive in such a place. In his talk, Munson suggested that he would have been unable to

complete this project without his guide, who had cultivated a toolkit of traditional arctic knowledge and gear that helped them withstand the weather. Ultimately, being earth-bound means that we are inextricably linked to overlapping planetary ecologies, which hold us, nourish us, challenge us, and encourage us to thrive.

Being earth-bound does not entail having only material concerns. Spiritual reckoning, emotional states, and conceptual thought all manifest in the works of Andres and Munson. These two artists create meditative spaces in a decidedly earthly fashion, referencing ice, snow, sound, plants, mycelia, and water. Together, we watch Munson's video *Bipolar* (2021) in the auditorium of Portage College. The video boasts a quiet, unraveling soundtrack from Canadian ambient producer Loscil. The footage is at first unintelligible: it could either be depicting a macrocosm—a universe birthing a star—or something infinitesimally small, a microcosmic microbe multiplying. It eventually becomes apparent that we are watching liquid physics. Water ions attract and repel the molecules of another darker and more mysterious substance. Crystals form. Entropy prevails. In watching the uninterrupted magic of liquid physics in *Bipolar*, we can map something approximating the awe of outer space on to, what I learn later, is a square inch of ink and water.

In the installation *10,000 Plus*, Adrian Stimson guides himself and the audience through the pains of war using a traditional, plant-based toolkit of sage, tobacco, sweetgrass, and cedar. *10,000 Plus* is a body of work he created in response to visiting a Canadian military base in Afghanistan as part of an artist residency with the Canadian Forces. The work's title refers to the number of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people who have served in the Canadian military. Stimson said that he



Let Us Not Forget Our Failures On Earth. Emily Promise Allison. 2022.

added “plus” to the title because historically many Indigenous people did not declare their heritage when enlisting. The work features four monochromatic panels—red, yellow, black and white—representing the four cardinal directions. Each panel is garnished with one of the traditional medicines: sage, tobacco, sweetgrass, and cedar.²

Stimson’s use of Blackfoot sacred medicines in this work approaches indigeneity’s contemporary relationship to militarism with nuance. In his artist talk, he explained to us how he and his recent ancestors have served in the Canadian military, and how he sees this, in part, as a story that continues from the warrior practices of his Blackfoot ancestors. *10,000 Plus* addresses both what is more obvious—that Canadian First Nations people have a traumatic relationship to organized, colonial bodies of warfare—and what is harder to pinpoint: how Indigenous people are integral to present-day military forces; how the military can be a site of identity-making for these people; the complexities of patriotism; and how this is all as difficult to parse as war itself. These knotted concerns are obvious even in our surroundings: this presentation, like all of AMAAS’ evening activities, takes place at the St. Paul #100 Canadian Legion. Stimson presented this body of work following a delicious steak dinner prepared and served by gracious Legion volunteers, many who are war veterans. We ate surrounded by documents of war, including military maps, photographs, medals, and clothing. High on the wall, I see a small, framed poster printed in 2012 that says, “Commemorating Canada’s Aboriginal Veterans.” It is the only item I see that specifically addresses Indigenous veterans. If any of the other names and faces enshrined on the walls are those of Indigenous people, it is not made explicit.

² Elizabeth Matheson, “Holding Our Breath: The Work of Adrian Stimson,” Grunt Gallery, January 2019, accessed July 10, 2022, https://grunt.ca/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Adrian-Stimson_Holding-Our-Breath-essay_web-version.pdf.

Answering a question from the audience along the lines of “how do you reconcile engaging with something as violent, colonial and complicated as war?” Stimson implies that he uses sage, tobacco, and sweetgrass to honor those who have served, and his ancestors and their traditions, but also to imply that it (war) is a fraught subject, and he wishes to engage with what is really, devastatingly of this world (also war), all while knowing that he does not have all the answers.

So, then, what is a world? I can share a crude definition: a world is a unique set of circumstances. These circumstances can be as simple as the interaction between a sphere and a cloth square, shown to us by Waddell in a 3D modeling/animation demonstration. Through the viewport of his 3D software, we saw a sphere and a square collide in an abrupt thud. Waddell then ascribed “cloth-ness” to the square. In this new world, upon collision, the square gently envelops the sphere.

But worlds don’t need to have physical prerequisites, such as cloth-ness, soil, air, and chlorophyll. Worlds can be created, imagined, made of thought. They can be secret or shared. They can wholly overlap with the daily existence of millions, or in the inner life of one individual. An untold number of worlds have come into being at the behest of the earth’s people. Worlds can be found in ideas, in protest, in speeches, in myth, in virtual spaces, in stories, and in music. Whole worlds exist on microscope slides, in a poem, and in latent imaginations.

In This World: AMAAS at St Paul

St. Paul's motto is that it is a "people kind of place." This slogan rings clear and true. It is a people kind of place in that it is welcoming, but also it is a place defined by and experienced through its people.

In my experience, AMAAS is also a people kind of place. AMAAS does not have unchanging map coordinates like St. Paul does, but it has a set of underlying principles that allows it to set up camp in a different location and still feel like AMAAS. This year was my second conference, and many things carried over from the first conference I attended in 2019: Sharon Stevens, the director, expertly, compassionately, and with an immense reserve of humor acting as our guide; a mad scramble to gather for a group photograph by long-time member Noel Bégin; and the singular chance to have drawn-out conversations spanning days with other media artists and thinkers.

Each iteration of the conference is structured such that the physical location becomes as important to the experience as AMAAS' organizing principles. Stevens had, before our arrival, knitted us a network of friends to soften our landing: our kind and unflappable bus driver Barry, the Portage College security guard and local expert Doug, to Connie at the Legion, who populated our snack table with homemade Nanaimo bars because the store-bought ones "are just terrible" (I ate 6). As we roamed between our three venues in the rain, local folks waved from their porches and car windows.

Each of us lives in a multitude of overlapping worlds. For example, over the course of the conference, I came to know St. Paul as a world comprised of many smaller, architectural worlds. Where currently stand the spaces I am now intimately



Resolution of Several Enormous Entities. Emily Promise Allison. 2022.

familiar with—Portage College, The #100 Canadian Legion, The St. Paul Motel—is one world witnessed, remembered and embodied by Métis elder Linda Boudreau-Semaganis. It is also the site of the divergent yet overlapping world of filmmaker Michelle Wong. If we divorced these two stories from their geographical context, they might seem a world apart. But, as I have learned, they are not.

Boudreau-Semaganis spoke of St. Paul as a place where Métis people, displaced from the Red River settlements, came to establish a sanctuary. For those folks, Saint Paul de Métis is now home. Like any home, it's a place host to the gamut of human experience such as the heartbreak of residential school systems and government neglect. Perhaps more importantly, St. Paul is a place where the Métis people have been able to thrive, create, and celebrate.

Boudreau-Semaganis' oral storytelling—a candid mix of humour, directness, and warmth—offered an unparalleled welcome to St. Paul. She told us about young Indigenous men who retaliated against the abuses of their local residential school and burned it down, thus putting the education of the local Métis children into the hands of their families. It seems that because of this act, the Métis people of St. Paul were allowed an amount of freedom in passing on traditions that were destroyed by residential school systems elsewhere.

On the very same soil, Wong's family built a life in Saint Paul around their Chinese restaurant business. We saw parts of Wong's childhood reflected in her short film *Do Wok a Do* (2000). The protagonist, a teenager named Joanne, is, despite her best efforts, firmly tied to St. Paul's geography. In an act of reaching beyond the confines of the town, Joanne sets about attempting to listen to alien communications. She secretly

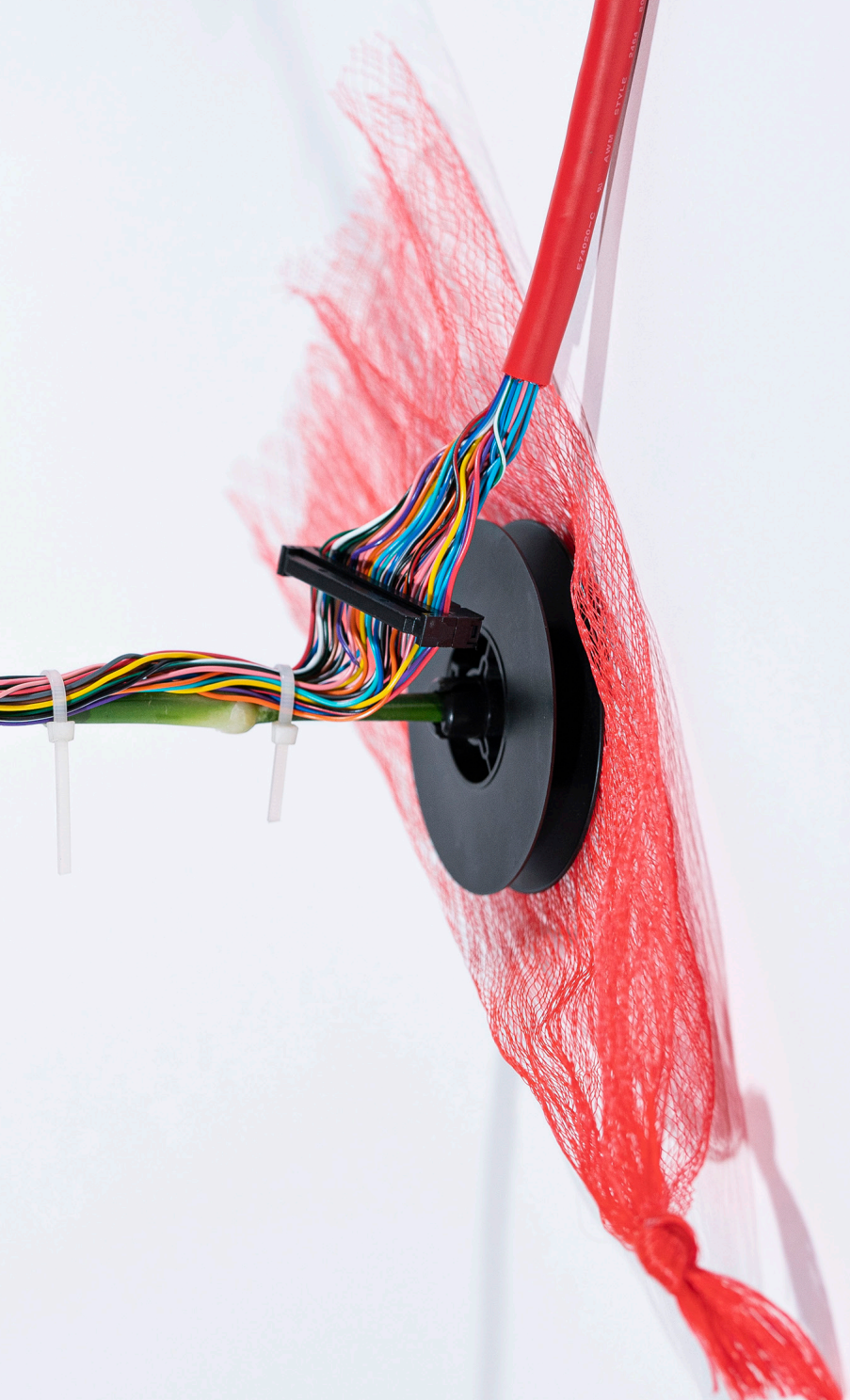
constructs her own listening devices and, like Jodie Foster's character Dr. Arroway in the film *Contact* (1997), goes to great lengths to diligently sift through the noises of the night sky in search of an alien message.

As the dynamics of her family fray around her—her grandfather dies, and her mother leaves her father for another man—Joanne sets up her listening equipment on the St. Paul UFO Landing Pad. Although we never know if Joanne succeeds in hearing alien transmissions, she does communicate with her grandfather in a dream while wearing her listening device. Ultimately, facilitated by her homemade device, Joanne experiences her own victories and heartbreak in the world of her family, entwined into the architecture of St. Paul.

During the conference, I walk by the lot on St. Paul's main street where Wong's family restaurant once stood. It is now just an empty square of grass. Like the residential school long ago, the building was consumed by fire. The rumor is that, after Wong's family sold the business, the second owner allegedly committed arson for insurance reasons. Entropy has claimed all physical traces of the building, except for a low wall. Wong's film preserves some of the small moments that could have been part of her life—a life where her family's restaurant was a second home—such as folding wontons with her mother or arguing with her brother at the front counter.

Boudreau-Semaganis' and Wong's stories have helped me shape an idea of what St. Paul has meant for generations of their families and communities. Their ancestors were displaced and found a new home in this small Alberta town. I like to think that, through storytelling, each listener's consciousness can now share some of the processing power needed to keep these worlds alive, crisp, long-lasting, and vibrant.





She Secretly Constructs Her Own Listening Devices. Emily Promise Allison. 2022.

Clea Karst, one of the conference's VR artists-in-residence, borrowed from St. Paul's overlapping histories to create *The Beauty Salon* (2022). She invited us to a VR world rooted in anecdotes and myths unearthed from Saint Paul's newspaper archives. She chose stories tied to the UFO Landing Pad which, since its construction in 1967, has become an integral part of the town's cultural identity.

The Beauty Salon is a VR world where historical events from the earthly St. Paul inform an alien social space. Karst found mention in the St. Paul archives of a local Martian hair-do competition, which inspired the beauty salon milieu on what she calls "planet St. Paul." Using the VR 3D drawing software Quill, Karst created a navigable painting that weaves the facts and folklore of St. Paul into an otherworldly construction. As aliens go about their everyday lives, we can closely examine their fashion choices and hairstyles: elements of their culture. Inspired by the odder side of what is real, *The Beauty Salon* (2022) extrapolates UFO-inspired oddities of St. Paul into an imagined world.

Leaving Earth

Extended reality tools are incredibly well suited to world-making. Technology that we are more familiar with, such as film and the internet, do this, too.

Artist Laura Anzola's VR experience *Welcome* (2022) teleports us to a theoretical playing field that contains a portal between our recognizable world and outer space. Upon donning an Oculus VR headset, I am deposited in the middle of a huge



Do This, Too. Emily Promise Allison. 2022.

field at the base of *Stargate Alpha*. A UFO sits on the platform, and another has just taken off. The world in the headset appears three-dimensional but also reminiscent of a scene in an action film, the moment when a bomb explodes. Everything is suspended mid-movement, and deathly quiet.

Radiating out from around *Stargate Alpha* are lines of people: hundreds of emigrants waiting to board the UFO. In front of each group is a number between one and 100: these numbers indicate each demographic's desirability as immigrants into Canada. This numbering system was introduced in Canada's 1967 Immigration Act and is used to this day. In her artist talk, Anzola told us how the 1967 Act was passed to replace the blatantly biased, white supremacist system that existed previously. She placed pages from the Immigration Act on the wall for us to read while waiting to experience her VR world. The biases in the numbering system are immediately obvious: "for every year that the immigrant is over 35, deduct one point." Or, "for every year the immigrant has attended post-secondary school, add one point." The biases—in this case, ageism and classism—are clear.

As I slowly navigate Anzola's intricately detailed scene, I pay close attention to each group of immigrants. Young white doctors all stand single file, scoring in the high 90s. Dark-skinned people in singed, tattered clothes don't manage to score above 20. Others dance, and their performances seem to be a bid for their worthiness. Seeing this entire system in place, I am moved by the brutality of the purported scarcity around immigration: making a case for oneself, trying to describe to an immigration functionary exactly what it's like to see your home wiped from the face of the earth, and to measure both your trauma and your promise to that of others. I look up at the two UFOs; I don't think that everyone in line will fit.

Exploring Anzola's world, I begin to understand why these people want to leave the grassy field of what I assume is Planet Earth. At the further horizon, I see that these people flee floods, bombings, fire, war, and climate change. I find someone who is dead, crushed by a bombed-out building. I find other people drowning in a flood, attempting to cling to passing rafts, escaping what I gather is a climate disaster. I don't know if they have more information than I do about the alien race who has landed, but it seems like they are trying to leave because they have lost everything.

Prompted by Anzola, who has experienced first-hand the bureaucracy of the Canadian immigration system, I couldn't help thinking about the word "alien" as used by governments to designate an individual living in their country who is not a naturalized citizen. As someone who has also undergone several visa application processes, I have had the disorienting experience of being referred to, bluntly, as both "madam" and an "alien" in official government correspondence. Even so, I am deeply privileged: I am white, formally educated, and come from a prosperous country. I have had a relatively easy experience navigating immigration bureaucracy. But, taken out of context, it would be difficult for me to ascribe anything else as a definition for "alien" except for: "a being who is not of this world." It robs one of any feeling of belonging.

Out of This World

And then there is physical space that is no longer earthly: the vacuum beyond the atmosphere of Planet Earth. This is where we become lost in space, enter other dimensions, or meet unknown creatures. XR Artist Evan Pearce's *Three Visits*:

A Study on the (XR)traterrestrial (2022) is a VR work inspired by the Falcon Lake incident, a documented alien sighting in Manitoba in 1967, the same year that the St. Paul UFO landing pad was built.

I was one of the last people to experience this work, which gave me the pleasure of watching the reaction of others while not knowing what exactly they were seeing. If you have never been in the same room as someone experiencing a world on an Oculus VR system, it is odd and charming. The viewer dons the large white headset, which protrudes over their eyes in a way that makes them look like an insect or a Storm Trooper. A truly immersive VR work will cause a viewer to lose all self-consciousness about their real-world appearance almost immediately, which was true about *Three Visits*. Pearce patiently and meticulously fitted each viewer's headset and oriented them in his virtual world. Many viewers' initial reaction, including both mine and Sandra Vida's, (a fellow artist who experienced this work right before I did) was, "Oh, wow!" as our hands delicately prodded the air in front of us.

Allow me to explain: once the world initializes around you, you land in a realistically rendered hilly, rocky, scrub brush landscape. There is a UFO that looms and pulses in the distance, seeming to be hundreds of feet tall. It becomes apparent that the UFO is the only site to explore in the VR world, so I eventually enter the UFO after seeing how far the landscape will render in any direction.

Pearce told me that the aliens that steward this UFO were inspired by earthy mycelia. I thought immediately of the mycelium colonies in Kelly Andres' *Intraterrestrial Botanist*, but in Pearce's work, the mycelium are otherworldly rather than earthy. The UFO has three rooms, and they are strange and



Global Positioning System. Emily Promise Allison. 2022.

ominous. Empty chambers and unsettling low, blue lighting cause me to move very slowly. In the last chamber, there is a pulsing brown and blue structure organically strung over the entirety of the large room, and it glows from the inside. I am not sure if this structure is part of the ship, or if it's an alien, or if there is even a distinction between ship and alien being. I feel as if something is behind me the whole time I am on the UFO and because it's VR, I can look over my shoulder to check.

Pearce's work takes a first step into imagining what is out of this world. Taking cues from beings familiar to earthlings, like mycelia, Pearce has generated an intricate, cathedral-like UFO that is haunting in its silence. Although I do not necessarily feel negative intentions from the aliens, the odd equipment and unsettling illumination of the UFO's interior make me curious, yet weary. It prompts me to not simply wonder, but to experience how it would feel to encounter a completely alien life form. As with Anzola's work, I am fascinated with how encompassing a VR construction can be. It seems to have to do with the contrast between the large scale of each world with the smallest, most intricately rendered detail, like Anzola's attention to each emigrant's facial expression, or Pearce's rendering of a scratched metalloid panel on the inside of the UFO.

"Out of this world" can imply something beyond the pale, something beyond our intellectual grasp, or something physically beyond our universe. Recent images from the James Webb space telescope, for example, make me feel all three of these things, and awe to boot. The telescope's images depict celestial bodies deep in the universe at a crisp resolution far superior to anything previously possible. In the words of NASA, they are "the deepest and sharpest infrared image[s] of the

distant universe to date.”³ The James Webb telescope has imaged pinpricks that we are told are universes never before glimpsed by human eyes. Other photographs show the death of a star in dramatic clarity.

What telescopes and VR have in common is that they can both image outer space and the otherworldly. Telescopes enhance what is already there, or to be more precise, what was there. The light of stars must travel many light years to reach earth. By the time a star’s light reaches our retinas, it could be dozens or billions of years old. When we see a star—with unaided eyes, or with the most powerful telescope invented by humankind—we are looking at the star as it appeared in the past. VR has the potential for all of this and more, but through simulation rather than enhancement. A VR program could show us many different forms of outer space: space in the future, space in the past, or space in a different part of the universe because in VR, we can travel through both time and space. Thinking back over the conference, I realized that none of the presenting artists at AMAAS showed us *space*, but they gave us the tools to go there: mycelia-constructed UFOs, outer-terrestrial immigration systems, deep-space listening devices, and the potential to build other forms of interconnectedness between earth and the greater universe.

I was thinking about telescopes as I watched *Do Wok a Do*. I wondered what it meant that Joanne chose to listen to space, rather than to see it. Listening implies two-way communication, as the listener has ideally grabbed on to a signal that another consciousness has broadcasted with the intent of being heard. In listening, there is the possibility of communion between humans and alien others. On the other hand, telescope images

3 Strickland, Ashley. “Webb telescope’s first photos reveal unseen aspects of the universe,” CNN News, published by MSN News, July 16, 2022, accessed July 17, 2022, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/technology/webb-telescopes-first-photos-reveal-unseen-aspects-of-the-universe/ar-AAZEj26>.

are simply looking. Karst, Anzola, and Pearce's VR projects were a more involved kind of looking but looking all the same: in navigating each world, I felt as if I were floating within a 3D photograph. It was peaceful and because time was suspended, I felt that I could take my time in each work as nothing changed or slipped away. I sought detail in a way that I feel the real world, in its entropic chaos, does not always allow me to do. Bestowing users with the ability to interact with and affect a VR world will become increasingly simple for creators. I enjoyed the slowness of these works, and I can imagine that interaction will accelerate the act of looking in VR, and will come with its own set of anxieties, wonders, and ethics.

Something that has recently made me weary of research-scale telescopes is their earthly footprint. Although the James Webb telescope is installed in space, it is made of alloys and computers and batteries and solar panels, all made exclusively on earth. Thirteen telescopes are concentrated on Mauna Kea, a traditional sacred site for Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawai'ian) people. The construction, use, and continued development of these telescopes harms the land and Kanaka traditions.⁴

I bring in telescopes to say that analog and digital tools we use to see, project, and imagine are not inert. They live, breathe, consume, pollute, trespass, and are subject to entropy, just like all earthly beings. A recent MIT study outlines the environmental impact of internet use and asks us to consider the carbon needed to power information transfers, the water needed to cool data systems, and the physical land needed to house the infrastructure of the internet.⁵ The study calls on us to think

4 Adrienne Keene and Matika Wilbur, "For the Love of the Mauna Pt. 1," All My Relations, December 9, 2020, accessed July 9, 2022, <https://www.allmyrelationspodcast.com/podcast/episode/4bab2c15/for-the-love-of-the-mauna-part-1>.

5 Kelley Travers, "How to reduce the environmental impact of your next virtual meeting," MIT Energy Initiative, MIT News, March 4, 2021, accessed July 11, 2022, <https://news.mit.edu/2021/how-to-reduce-environmental-impact-next-virtual-meeting-0304>.



Entropy Prevails. Emily Promise Allison. 2022.

of the water, land, and carbon needed for a one hour Zoom call. Think of all the resources needed to stream a one-hour television show. Think of the water, land, and carbon needed to render the meticulous, life-like frames of your cloud-based first-person shooter game.

When we reach out of this world and into another, we are ready to see things as they might be, as they ought to be, as they were, or even as they already are, but in higher resolution. The assistance of technology—computers, VR goggles, telescopes, personal devices, film, recorded sound—help us build worlds and share them with others.

I continue to wonder what the users of these technologies in the future will find most important. Will it be preserving the way things were for when they inevitably change? Although perhaps not intentionally, Wong's *Do Wok a Do* preserved the architecture of a St. Paul from 22 years ago. Aron Munson's *Isachsen, Nunavut* photographs show us a high-arctic weather station that has been at once preserved and destroyed. Its bones are frozen, but the surfaces are windswept and exposed to the elements. I think of this act of cataloguing change when I navigate older captures on Google Street view and see houses on my street that have since been demolished. Will this type of looking apply to forests, coastlines, and ice sheets?

Will XR continue to be used to tell stories? Evan Pearce and Clea Karst use the St. Paul Landing Pad as a tangible anchor that creates a portal into a different world, where stories, customs, physics, and lifeforms are alien. We can physically insert ourselves into Karst's alien beauty salon, or Pearce's Falcon Lake UFO and feel, to some degree, what it would be like to share space with alien beings. This kind of empathy is

an essential beginning for expanded digital storytelling about other worlds.

Ultimately, I think of how Boudreau-Semaganis, whose knowledge is stored in her memory, her stories, and her community, and was shared in vivid detail using only her spoken words. Her stories were also out of this world: stories whose data are not anchored in anything physical. They describe a world that white supremacy and colonial efforts have long since tried to silence. And yet her world is triumphantly present. Rather than seeing her stories as a theoretical overlay to the St. Paul of 2022, I instead imagine that if we could x-ray the town, we would find the bones and life source to be the very same one built by the Métis.

Boudreau-Semaganis shared a Louis Riel quote that I cannot stop thinking about: “My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back.” I am reminded that as artists, we are in many ways the keepers of a thriving and multiplicitous culture, and purveyors of the necessary ingredients for rich introspection in both ourselves and others. To foster these experiences, we must never lose sight of our driving values.

Maybe “out of this world” means, simply, revealing layers of the world that we had never thought to look for. New skills that participants developed at the conference (VR, AR, and projection mapping) will allow us to make or unearth layers of the built environment and landscapes that constitute our material reality. At its best, extended reality is a tool to imagine otherwise, and to share the ineffable parts of our individual worlds with others. Using motion tracking, Tyler Klein-Longmire’s lighthearted *COVID-19 (2022)* mapped the

movements of up to 4 participants onto strange, endearing characters on a projector screen. This work was set up in the Legion for the entire weekend, and I could not tear myself from watching rotating groups of conference participants dancing with abandon, their movements reflected by the groovy alien or lackadaisical banana characters on the projection screen. I laughed until I was in tears. Whether this sort of light-hearted group activity, or something as critical as witnessing the flight of climate refugees in Anzola's *Welcome*, VR works best when it engages its creators and users in a worldly story.

Internet artist and theorist Olia Lialina notes that it is a technology's users that have historically generated the most inventive and avant-garde uses of technology. It is the users who are "constantly recreating, changing, and fleshing out the medium itself."⁶ She also implies that this power might be slipping away from us, and that it is time to assert our importance in shaping the digital histories of the computer and the internet.⁷ How can we be empowered users to create the kinds of digital cultures that we find most useful, moving, and propelling? Both Lialina's writing and Waddell's workshop have reminded us to keep this in the forefront as we use XR technologies. As digital citizens, we have learned repeatedly the painful lesson that the owners of digital technologies (social media platforms, drone technology, smartphone tracking, Amazon) will not stand up for the rights and freedoms of users.

Making and visiting other worlds does not give us license to forget about this one. Each of us exist at the intersection of many worlds, described by our past, our thoughts, our environment, our ambitions, and our experiences. Although

⁶ Olia Lialina and Dragan Espenschied, "Do you believe in users?" in *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Lauren Cornell, et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

we are welcome to shed worlds that no longer serve us, we cannot shed our entanglement with the earth and its beings. Wahtokohwin is the Cree word Boudreau-Semaganis used to describe the interconnectedness of our kinship communities: earthly tethers that we cannot sever, even if we wanted to. This concept is re-iterated on the St. Paul Landing Pad plaque: "We must remember that no matter how large the universe, the smallest creature has its place in the order of life."

The immigrants and refugees in Anzola's word are attempting to escape calamity, but, for better or for worse, we do not have that option. As artists and people living in some of the most fortunate, bountiful, beautiful, and prosperous parts of the world, we have the ability and even the duty to turn around and face, appreciate, love, and reckon with the Earth we have been gifted.

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On the Traditional Territory of the Nêhiyaw-Askiy (Plains Cree) and Michif Piyii (Métis) on Treaty 6 originally known as St-Paul-de-Métis, we gathered for our 17th Conference in our 32-year history.

St. Paul is also home to the world's only UFO Landing Pad built by the town and community in 1967. And as the Landing Pad plaque states "All visitors from Earth or otherwise are welcome to this territory and to the Town of St. Paul" and yes we felt so very welcomed.

AMAAS is a Provincial Arts Service Organization and as such hosts a conference every two years bringing together media artists and member organizations as a partial retreat, professional development and opportunity for learnings and renewing energies.

Due to COVID, we had not been together since 2019 - so finally - we went Out of this World and into another dimension of the Alberta's Media Art Conference 2022. I consider the conferences to be THE signature event of our programming and one of the most important activities AMAAS produces.

Producing this event involves a million moving pieces and I am grateful for the support, expertise and energy to put everything into motion. We appreciate our funders and thank our sponsors – the conference is kept accessible with their support.

This publication will bring you back, take you there, and with a nod to Rod Serling "to another dimension, a dimension not only of sight and sound, but of mind. A journey into a wondrous land whose boundaries are those of the imagination".

Enjoy.

Sharon Stevens
Executive Director, AMAAS



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