Notes on taking off at the end of the world.

'Maybe we've been too silly to deserve a world like this'

- Dwight Towers in Neville Schutte's On The Beach.

'I was reading the opening chapter of What We Talk About When We Talk About Photoreconnaissance: The Legal And Performance History Of Aerial Espionage, taking notes for an upcoming lecture series, and my phone was on silent. A glass of orange juice to my left and a black coffee. I'd spilled a little on the table cloth in my eagerness to drink it and get a refill. I was waiting on eggs Benedict. Its the banality that pains me.'

- The moment before the World ends in The Last by Hanna Jameson.

' No more internet, no more social media, no more scrolling through litanies of dreams and nervous hopes and photographs of lunches, cries for help and expressions of contentment and relationship status updates with heart icons whole or broken, plans to meet up later, pleas, complaints, desires, pictures of babies dressed as bears or peppers for Halloween. No more reading and commenting on the lives of others, and in doing so feeling slightly less alone in the room. No more avatars.'

- Station Eleven – Emily St John Mandel.

Until recently I hadn't left my country of residence (the UK) for eight years, in fact due to the restrictions placed on me by rearing three young children and as someone who chooses not to drive I had rarely even left my village apart from occasional meetings or teaching requirements. This restricted existence has fuelled my research into the problematics of artists' travel and residency practices, catalysed a series of projects around virtual journeying and led me to develop the Arts Territory Exchange, a large-scale global project which connects artists and writers in remote locations in creative digital and postal correspondences[1]

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[1] aTE seeks to critique the idea (as ingrained in many artist residency models) that physically inserting yourself into a space is the only valid way to experience it. The aTE enables engagement with far away places through mediated experience and postal and virtual relationships with a correspondence partner. My own aTE partnership with the artist Carly Butler in Canada has been a life-line for me and has enabled me to travel virtually to the area in which she lives (she lives in Ucluelet BC, near to Tofino where the resident population is under 2,000, but can swell to 22,000 during peak tourist season causing concerns for the natural ecologies of the area) without visiting in person.

I spend quite a lot of time thinking about the problematics of travel and tourist cultures – the environmental as well as the ethical implications of travel in a post colonial context – the desire to observe and document places/people and landscapes fuelled by the artist residency 'business' and its funding frameworks (which encourage a structure of ; observation, interpretation and the re-delivery of information to a 'home audience'). This structure speaks of ethnographic and 'field work' practices which come straight from an era of Colonial exploration (and were also overarchingly male).

Being in an airport after so long - setting out on a family holiday - was a strange experience – guilt at flying at all setting off a casquede of neurosis; confusion at the amount of trees we would have to plant to offset the carbon for our family of five (online estimates ranged from 11 to 250) and annoyance that the train had been less affordable than flying (Gatwick to Bordeaux) while at the same time observing the excitement in my children who have never left the soil of their country before.

I expected to feel, as I had in the past that airports were non-relational places (a la Marc Auge) but instead felt the opposite, that Gatwick was somehow the pinnacle of relationality – that humanity, in it's tilt towards environmental catastrophe, now in its last glory days of global travel was somehow immersed in those slow burn moments in a disaster movie, the moment before everything changes, the quotidian made exotic by its curtailment. How odd that people fly around the world on these metal machines – how glorious that they can visit loved ones, escape from things they hate and how sad, how *insane* that it comes at such a high ecological cost.

Whilst on the plane my attention was pulled in two directions; between my children and the pop fiction Sci-fi Novel I had just bought. The idea of my thus far terrestrially grounded children having their little bodies elevated to 34 thousand ft was vertiginous enough in itself (I am a nervous flyer). They reacted pragmatically to the experience with matter-of-fact comments like *'we are taking off'* , *'We are above the clouds'* – they showed no sense of fear. With every flight I have taken in the past I have convinced myself of some disaster scenario and am not convinced in Aerodynamics as a sound principle. My fear may be due to the fact I didn't fly as a child and infrequently since. For my children (one, three and seven) it was perhaps like any other form of travel.

The book I was reading was set in the mountains of Switzerland – a hotel which has ostensibly survived when the rest of the world has been obliterated in a nuclear war. It is a

very post-Trump novel with American protagonists divided over those who voted for *'Him'* and those who didn't. The end of the world narrative seemed inline with my thoughts at the airport – that the era of global air travel, and the way we live in general was coming to an end. I mused at the fact that Sci-fi - or more specifically post apocalyptic sci-fi – my own personal favourite sub genre, has had such a resurgence in popularity in recent years, especially amongst those interested in arts and ecology. Not even during the Cold War in the 1980's were science fiction books about the apocalypse and imagined life afterward so popular. This genre acts as warning and a way of imagining multiple possible futures.

My generation (elder millennial) is one which knows the status quo we currently enjoy in the west is one which will not last much longer, as kids brought up on *'Protect and Survive'* public information campaigns and *Terminator* films – we have been waiting. In fact most of my friends and contemporaries seem to have some version of their own apocalypse contingency plans; conversations which may begin about the need to stock up on food in light of a possible no-deal brexit easily turn to how you may protect your family against a number of threats in a disaster situation - how to avoid looters, ferrels, how to protect your home, swapped knowledge over how to purify contaminated drinking water…whether you would be safer on the road or staying put, etc. At our disposal we have a vast repertoire of apocalyptic narratives to use as manuals or handbooks to tailor to any particular scenario that may arise…*The Road, Earth Abides, Canticle for Leibowitz, Station Eleven, The Drowned World, World War Z, Riddley Walker, The Postman, Children of Men, Roadside Picnic, On The Beach, Wool, The Dog Stars, The Crysalids, One Second After, Alas Babylon, The Stand* and many others including *The Last* (the book I was reading on the plane).

At a time of ecological catastrophe (the climate change 'tipping point' has been passed and we face Ecological emergency that could signal the extinction of the human race if we don't act fast) it does not seem as irrational as it once may have been to obsess over and study the narratives of post apocalyptic novels. Many books in the genre use the motifs of aeroplanes, and flight, the airport the perfect setting for panic and disaster to unfold. In *Station Eleven* a plane lands and is quarantined, every passenger sealed inside and left to die, the plane grounded on the concourse where it remains forever.

Despite the damaging effects of air travel - global and long hall travel is still an inherent part of the art-world, when talking to people recently about my interests in non-travel and its ethical position, especially in regard to the potential of virtual residencies and virtual conference attendance, I have been met a number of times with responses such as *' but being there in person is so good for networking!' 'But its so important to meet people face to face'* and in regard to climate change *'Artists need to travel so they can relay information to*

the public'. Travel as a marker of success and as a necessity for research purposes is still very much culturally ingrained, the narrative still holds that a 'virtual residency' or an exploration of a locality from a distance is an impoverished and lesser experience – one which must be augmented with 'real' experiences in order to be valid. Artists are desperate to physically insert themselves into spaces subject to rapid climate change 'parachuting in'[2] to provide testament or make images which could have been provided by local populations on the ground or facilitated by mediators.[3]

The idea is still upheld that travel is synonymous with, not only intellectual credibility but with career success: At a conference recently on art and rurality in central London I was shocked to hear a speaker making comment on the difficulties in reaching 'rural audiences' suggesting that the gulf would be very hard to breach between the entrenched locals and 'us' internationally travelled conference attendees and panel members. The implication being two-fold, that intelligent and engaged artists must surely be well travelled and those who live rurally do not travel. As an artist/academic who lives rurally and does not often travel, I didn't recognise this and it embedded for me the disappointment that artists don't address the privilege inherent in their travel practices (particularly the irony in being paid to fly across the world by a gallery to talk at a conference about remoteness and ecology...).

On a dying planet these narratives become all the more pressing - one day perhaps artists and intellectuals won't long hall travel – staying at home will be the credible and erudite option. Long distance air travel will be reserved for the most vulgar and disengaged humans who will one day make their final expeditions to Mars to start space colonies, leaving the rest of us on a dying planet.[4]

In the meantime, sadly flights are still very cheap in comparison with other ways to travel long distances and for this reason they can be hard to resist for those with limited budgets. Our decision to fly may have been ideal but was a way for myself and my family to escape the stress and chaos that is the UK's current climate and the shit-storm that is brexit as well as the stresses and strains of daily life and work. We will not be doing it often though and endeavour to stay home, read more sci-fi and make plans for the apocalypse.

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2 *"For years we've been warning against artists 'parachuting' into unfamiliar territory."* Lucy Lippard - Queens Museum / 12th May 2018 / New York / Open Engagement Conference 2018 as documented by Robyn Woolston for the a_n blog https://www.a-n.co.uk/blogs/s-u-s-t-a-i-n-a-b-i-l-i-t-y-artist-bursary-2018/

3 Of course long hall travel may be necessary occasionally, research trips to the Arctic for example can be well planned and ethically conducted by selective Artist Residencies such as the Arctic Circle residency.

4 But wouldn't we *rather* take our chances on earth than shuttle off to space and become extra-terrestrial with the likes of Donald Trump and Elon Musk?