



THEMATIC ESSAYS

Bringing the Cosmos Down to Earth

Artists are increasingly looking to outer space to contemplate earthly questions – and what remains, sometimes painfully, close to home

BY CASSIE PACKARD | 26 AUG 26

FEATURED IN



ISSUE 261





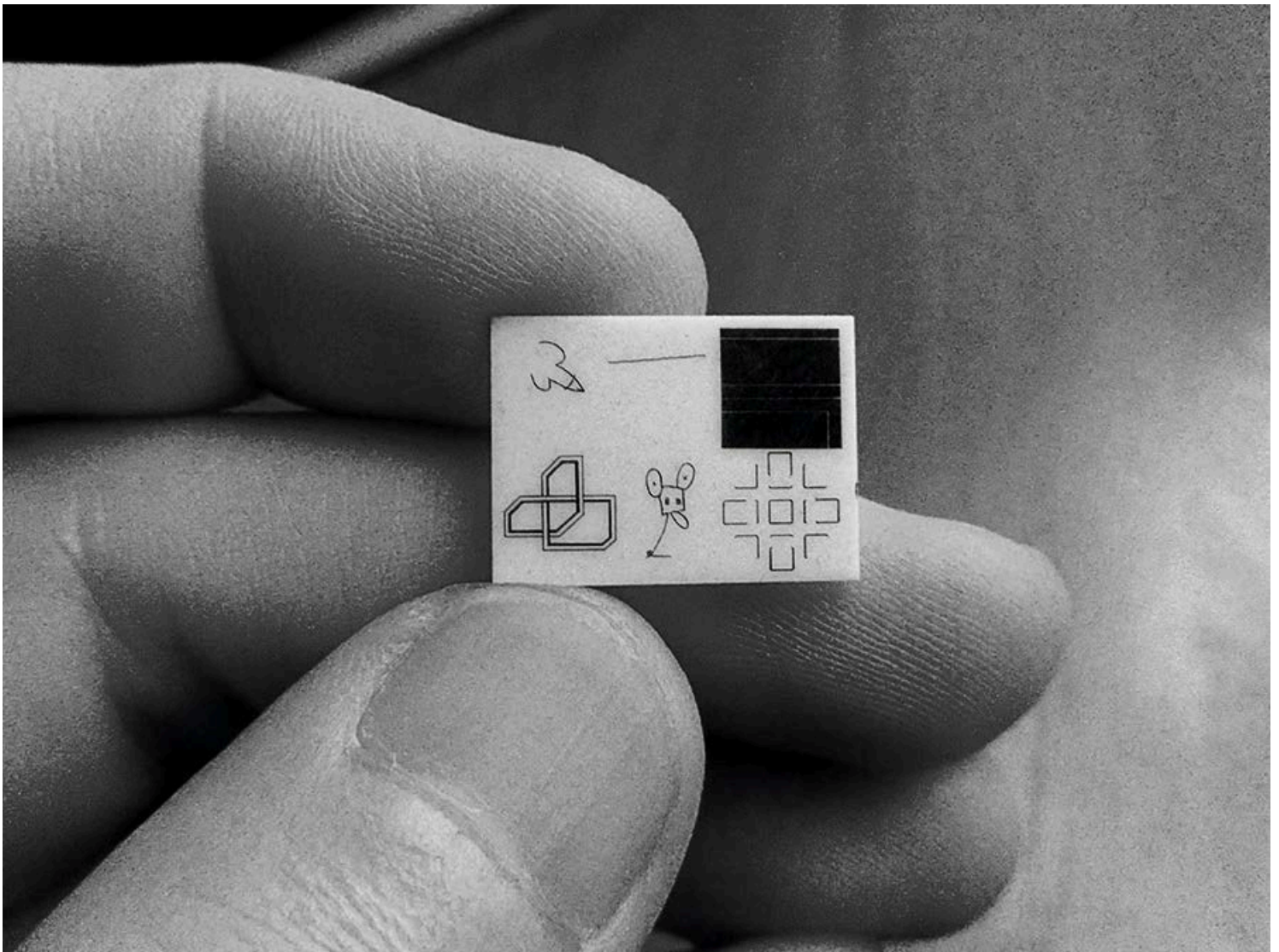
Stanisław Lem, author of the science fiction classic *Solaris* (1961), balked at Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 film adaptation after the two fell out over creative differences. Lem believed he had written a story about an alien intelligence: a sentient ocean on an exoplanet that confounds and exceeds human understanding. Zeroing in on another unfathomable experience – that of grief – Tarkovsky gave us one of cinema's great ghostly love stories, focusing on a space station psychologist haunted by a simulation of his late wife, at once familiar and unknowable. 'I only wanted to create a vision of a human encounter with something that [...] cannot be reduced to human concepts, ideas, or images,' Lem wrote in 2002, the year of Steven Soderbergh's remake. 'This is why the book was entitled *Solaris* and not *Love in Outer Space*.' Whether he was aware that 'Love in Outer Space' is the title of a 1965 song by the proto-Afrofuturist musician Sun Ra – who embraced cosmic consciousness to defy the failings of earthly society and place Blackness at the centre of the future, and whose influence on such visual artists as Lauren Halsey and Cauleen Smith is celebrated in the exhibition 'SPACE IS THE PLACE' (2026) at Los Angeles's Hammer Museum – is another matter.



Xin Liu, *Drift Upwards, Fall Downwards*, 2021, performance documentation, Aranya Art Center, Qinhuangdao. Courtesy: the artist

The term that unites all parties, of course, is human encounter. For artists, looking further afield to outer space and the philosophical questions raised by our engagement with it can offer a means of reckoning with what is – at times painfully – close to home: the dogged pursuit of connection with its pleasures, frictions and failures; the alienation of individuals and communities within systems seemingly dead-set on othering them; curiosity about intelligences unlike our own. And space structures more than our metaphors: life on earth was born of cosmic processes and remains affected by them in ways that range from readily assimilable – the sun powers agriculture – to relatively abstruse – the collision of black holes billions of years ago manifests on earth today as gravitational waves, whose impact on our bodies we might detect were we much finer instruments. Thinking about art's operations in this context, we might turn to a cognitive phenomenon known as 'the overview effect', wherein astronauts, viewing Earth from a distance, report experiencing a profound sense of interconnectedness. While this may sound like a neoliberal fantasy, particularly given the violent underpinnings of so much technoscience, it is worth noting that such scale shifts are also among art's most powerful tools: a way to see the familiar anew. Or, to see the familiar at all.

Solaris was published in the heart of the first space race, as astro-science became a geopolitical battlefield for asserting technological, military and ideological dominance. Devoting a gallery to *Solaris*'s ripple effects, the 14th Shanghai Biennale at Power Station of Art, 'Cosmos Cinema' (2023–24), was organized around nine themes, including interstellar travel and astrofuturism. The show was inspired by Russian cosmism, which yoked socialist and utopian impulses to cosmology and influenced such avant-garde art as Russian suprematism, yet also expressed an interest in interplanetary colonization and the pursuit of immortality – concerns that find uncomfortable echoes in present-day Silicon Valley transhumanism and space fetishism. 'Cosmos Cinema' numbers among a spate of recent exhibitions that consider our relationship with space, and in the process say quite a bit about our fears and longings on earth. In 2025–26 alone, group shows engaging with space's scientific, social and projective dimensions cropped up at museums in Beijing, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Chicago, Dunkirk, Hamburg, Irvine, London, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, New York and Turin, among others.



Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, David Novros, Forrest Myers, John Chamberlain and Robert Rauschenberg, *The Moon Museum*, 1969, lithograph of tantalum nitride film on ceramic wafer, 1.4 ×

This curatorial constellation – which, perhaps unsurprisingly, skews towards geographies heavily invested in space research (China, the EU and the US) – is notable for its density. While art has long looked to the cosmos, space science (an interdisciplinary field that extends to such earthbound endeavours as extremophile research, the study of organisms living in hostile environments) is front of mind amid the ‘second space race’, a period marked by increased dependence on satellites for telecommunications infrastructure, climate anxiety-riddled habitability research and a grim push towards off-world resource extraction, with an eye to metals used in electronics. The moment is shaped by not only competition between national superpowers, but also the expansion of the private sector into space through companies like Blue Origin and the newly public SpaceX, whose founders harbour fantasies of escaping a warming planet made increasingly inhospitable by their own data centres and supply chains.

“ Recent exhibitions have seen artists work in an intimate and even romantic register to bring outer space close. ”

Concurrently, conditions have emerged to nurture an efflorescence of artwork about space, as scientific organizations launch programmes in the spirit of initiatives like Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), founded by Bell Labs engineers and artists in 1966 to facilitate collaborations and relaunched as an artist residency in 2018. (The first artwork believed to reach the moon – Forrest Myers’s collaborative *Moon Museum* of 1969 – was made under the auspices of E.A.T.) The SETI Institute, which scans for alien technosignatures, debuted an artist residency in 2010 that was attended by the likes of Laurent Grasso. The European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), home to the world’s largest particle physics laboratory, followed in 2012 (notable attendees include Yunchul Kim). In 2016, the European Space Agency unveiled its own residency; recent collaborations with ESA include Steve McQueen’s *Atlas* (2026), an immersive installation using astronomical telemetry. NASA, which has had a modest arts commissioning programme since 1962, appointed its first and only artist-in-residence, Laurie Anderson, in 2002, culminating in her 2018 virtual reality piece *To The Moon*, developed with Hsin-Chien Huang; artists have since made work by embedding themselves in its press corps, as Heji Shin did in 2024 to photograph Florida rocket launches.





Heji Shin, *Vulcan 2*, 2024. Courtesy: the artist

These programmes theoretically help ground more speculative work on solid scientific foundations: an important consideration when making art that draws on science in an era of rampant misinformation and public mistrust of empirical evidence. Peter Galison, who directs Harvard University's Black Hole Initiative and with his team produced the first image of a black hole in 2019, has written of the complexities of picturing scientific phenomena – and people's 'horror at the personal, the subjective, the artistic, the interpretive' in this imagery, as he put it in 'The Objective Image' (2010). He explains that the 'mechanically objective' image, which can literally register as noise, is not necessarily the most accurate or useful one (consider, too, that scientific images regularly convey information beyond the visible spectrum), and different modes of visualizing scientific data allow for different types of knowledge production. Art can be one such mode. Gravitational-wave astrophysicist Maximiliano Isi, who advised on Peter Chu's *Dancing with Black Holes* (2026) – a choreography for people and tarpaulins that revolves around the event horizon, or the black-hole boundary from which nothing can return – told me that he was struck by the ease with which the dancers treated space and time as entangled, as in astrophysics. Here, theories that may seem counterintuitive become absorbable on a human scale, that of bodies moving through space-time. Such representations may, in turn, offer a means to metabolize our own experience, even at its most extreme thresholds: the event horizon, for example, of experiencing a loss or falling in love.

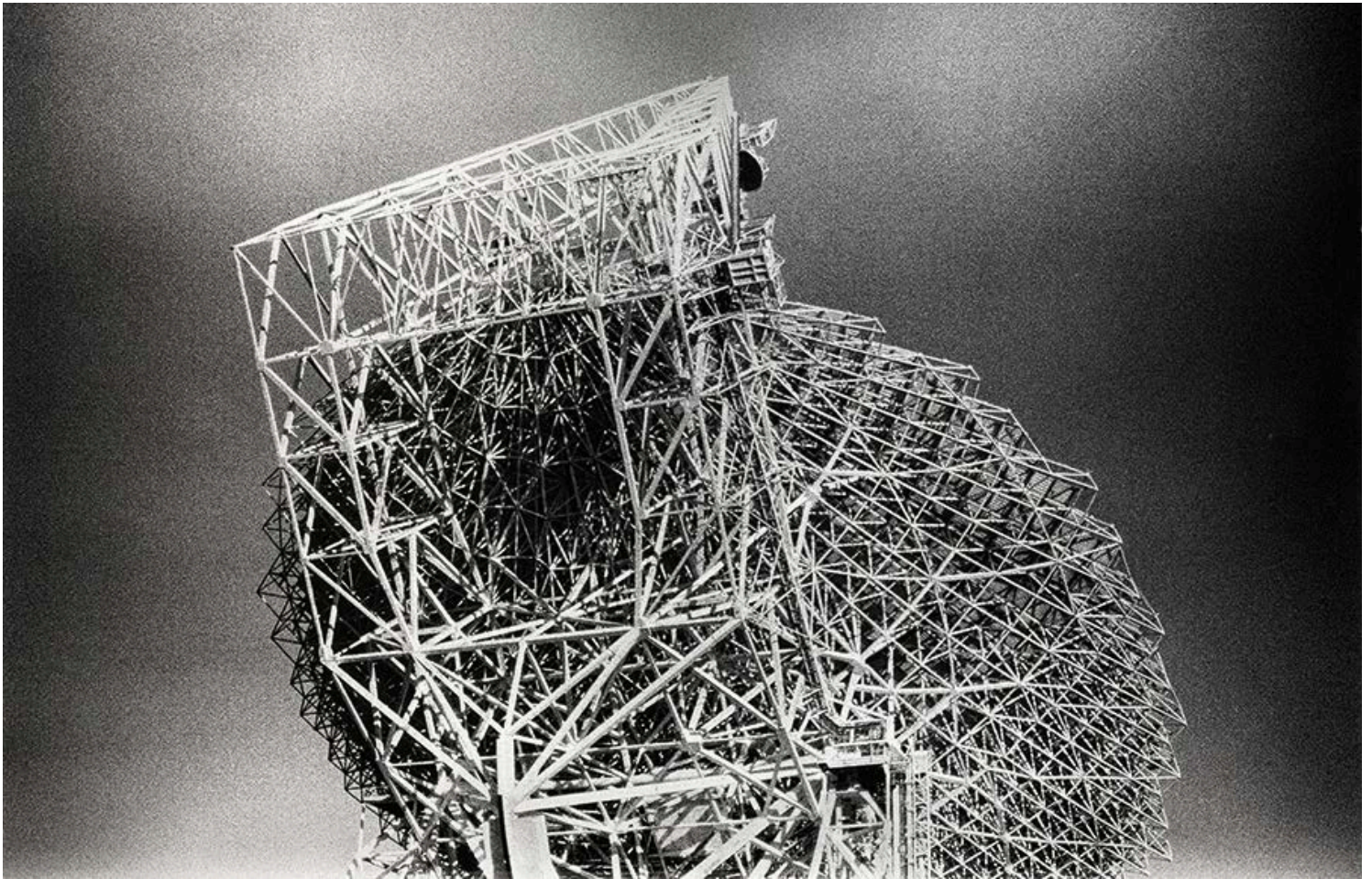
In this vein, recent exhibitions have seen artists who pass through hard science residencies work in an intimate, narrative and even romantic register to bring outer space close. Take Alice Bucknell's cooperative video game *SMALL VOID* (2025), first presented as a two-channel installation in 'Soft Robots' (2025–26) at Copenhagen Contemporary and most recently in 'QUANTUM' (2026) at Science Gallery Bengaluru. Bucknell developed the game over the course of a 2024 artist residency at CERN, during which they focused on quantum cosmology, black hole studies and the cross-scale parallels between black holes and lichen – which they described to me as 'aliens beneath our feet'. Inspired by an element of the so-called Hawking paradox, wherein a particle–antiparticle pair splits at the edge of a black hole, the game sees two players – one acting as matter, the other as antimatter – seek each other out in the hope of reconnecting and annihilating.



Alice Bucknell, *SMALL VOID*, 2025, gameplay still. Courtesy: the artist

As they journey to find one another, the two lovers traverse strange, shifting landscapes: a dusty expanse peppered with broken radio telescopes, lichen-flecked boulders trodden upon by spectral giants. In its narrative premise as well as its multiplayer structure, *SMALL VOID* proposes a world that is not acted upon by a single agential protagonist, but rather perpetually comes into being through relationships. Such a framework chimes with feminist physicist Karen Barad's writings on 'intra-actions': the conviction – derived, in Barad's case, from quantum physics – that we do not precede our entanglements with other entities, which might provide the basis for an ethical obligation to each other. Ethical obligation being a form of love.

'Desire', we might note, derives from the Latin *desidero*: the sense that one is 'away from the stars'. The human desires that drive space science – specifically, the search for contact with extraterrestrial life – underpin recent work by 2021–22 SETI artist-in-residence Brittany Nelson. Filmed at the Green Bank Observatory in West Virginia, where in 1961 Frank Drake formulated his equation for estimating the number of intelligent civilizations in the Milky Way, Nelson's *Rebecca* (2026) personifies the world's largest steerable radio telescope, used to passively listen for extraterrestrial communications. Photographs and video sequences, intercut, luxuriate in the telescope's forms and textures – hoping for coded confirmation, as with a queer gaze – before the film breaks down, adopting the perspective of a camera being hurled exasperatedly into the surrounding grass.



Brittany Nelson, *Greenbank Telescope*, 2026, gelatin silver print, 1.1 × 1.6 m. Courtesy: the artist and PATRON, Chicago

Debuted in January in 'List Projects 34: Brittany Nelson' (2026) at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, the video treats the possibility of contact that the telescope synecdochically teases as an object of obsession; running along the bottom of the screen, lines from Daphne du Maurier's Gothic novel *Rebecca* (1938) conjure the weather of the narrator's queer-coded fascination with her husband's late wife, whose absence drives the plot. Radio telescopes become inadvertent monuments to fruitless attempts at connection. (This topic is also taken up by Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's *The Great Silence*, 2014, made with science fiction writer Ted Chiang and featured this summer in the two-part show 'Palomar' at the Renaissance Society, Chicago; the video juxtaposes the pored-over quiet of extraterrestrial life with the overlooked 'alien' intelligence of vocalizing parrots, who here symbolically 'use' the Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico to relay their message.) Stymied by the Fermi Paradox – the high likelihood of alien civilizations existing and the dearth of evidence for as much – as they compulsively scan 'waterhole' frequencies in search of extraterrestrial intelligence, humans start to sound a lot like Roland Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse* (1977): 'The lover's fatal identity is precisely this: I am the one who waits.'

“ These artists’ tableaux probe how human relationships inform and map onto our connection to the cosmos. ”

Seeking, waiting, falling apart: running counter to the slick aesthetics of techno-solutionism, these poetic approaches to space science – which treat its technologies and theories as personae or foils – are often interested in the failure endemic to the endeavour, a subject explored in ‘Cosmos Falling’ (2026) at Harvard’s Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. Included in that show was *The White Stone* (2021), a speculative video about rocket parts that crash back to earth in southwestern China, by Xin Liu: a 2021–22 SETI artist-in-residence, arts curator of MIT’s Space Exploration Initiative and adviser to LACMA’s Art + Technology Lab. Her media-spanning ‘NOAA’ series (2020–ongoing) engages with the more protracted liminality of decommissioned climate monitoring satellites, which can continue to orbit for years after being declared obsolescent.



Xin Liu, *The White Stone*, 2021, film still. Courtesy: the artist

In 2020, Liu crafted antennae from broomsticks and copper wires; using these cyberpunk apparatuses, she accessed, decrypted and made art with old weather satellites’ unused transmissions. She began to think of the satellites as diasporic characters with rich inner lives: a framing that feels like reclamation in light of the vocal xenophobia of some invested in interplanetary colonization. Her interactive web-based work *NOAA: A Fall Towards Home* (2025) narrates three US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration satellites’ real experiences from their speculative points of view –

NOAA-19 frames pre-launch damage as childhood trauma – as they reflect on home, borders and family. ‘NOAA clicked around migration because of this idea of departure – not about advancement or improvement but about leaving home,’ Liu told me. At The High Line in New York in 2026, she premiered a live performance version set against an LED screen. ‘Distance can be a kind of love,’ NOAA-15 remarks, in voice-over, of its vigil. There’s a melancholic flavour to Liu’s project: sadness over the devices that dutifully watched over us and then were brusquely disavowed; worries about the afterlives of the technologies that we beget, of little apparent concern to the accelerationists ushering them in; and questions about what developing forms of accountability to these technologies – here, slowing down enough to understand and even mourn them – might look like. In 2025, amid federal cuts to environmental monitoring budgets, NOAA ended the delivery of data from the three satellites; in a sense, Liu’s performance is a funeral rite.



Allora & Calzadilla, *The Great Silence*, 2014, film still. Courtesy: © Allora & Calzadilla and Lisson Gallery

In *Picturing the Cosmos* (2012), scholar Elizabeth Kessler argues that Hubble telescope imagery bears aesthetic resonances with 19th-century paintings and photographs of the American West, which were used to reinforce and justify the violent imperatives of manifest destiny, the notion that US territorial expansion was preordained. Such sublime aesthetics are easily put in service of the technocapitalist framing of outer space as a frontier: a resource from which to extract minerals, a void in which to build data centres. Part of a cohort that approaches space’s romanticization from a starkly different angle, these contemporary artists cast the theories and technologies that mediate our engagement

with outer space as actors in theatres of intimate experience: an imperfect mode, but one that accommodates the productive mess and complex reckoning that intimacy implies and demands. Working towards a new poetics of space science, their tableaux – of love, desire, loss, kinship, obligation – probe how human relationships inform and map onto our relationship with the cosmos; toggling between scales, their metaphors invite us to conceive of the universe as an ecosystem of which we are already part. Which is to say: looking upward also means looking inward, and around. In Lem's *Solaris*, the cyberneticist Snaut declares: 'We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors.' To which I might add the line attributed to poet Paul Éluard: 'There is another world, but it is in this one'.

This article first appeared in frieze issue 261 with the headline 'Worlds Away'

Main image: Xin Liu, The White Stone, 2021, film still. Courtesy: the artist



Cassie Packard

Cassie Packard is a New York-based writer and assistant editor of *frieze*. She is a recipient of the 2024 Rabkin Prize for art writing and the author of *Art Rules* (2023).

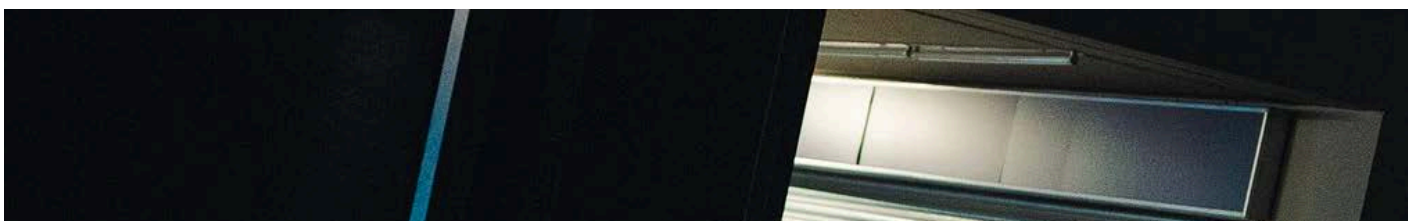
TAGS

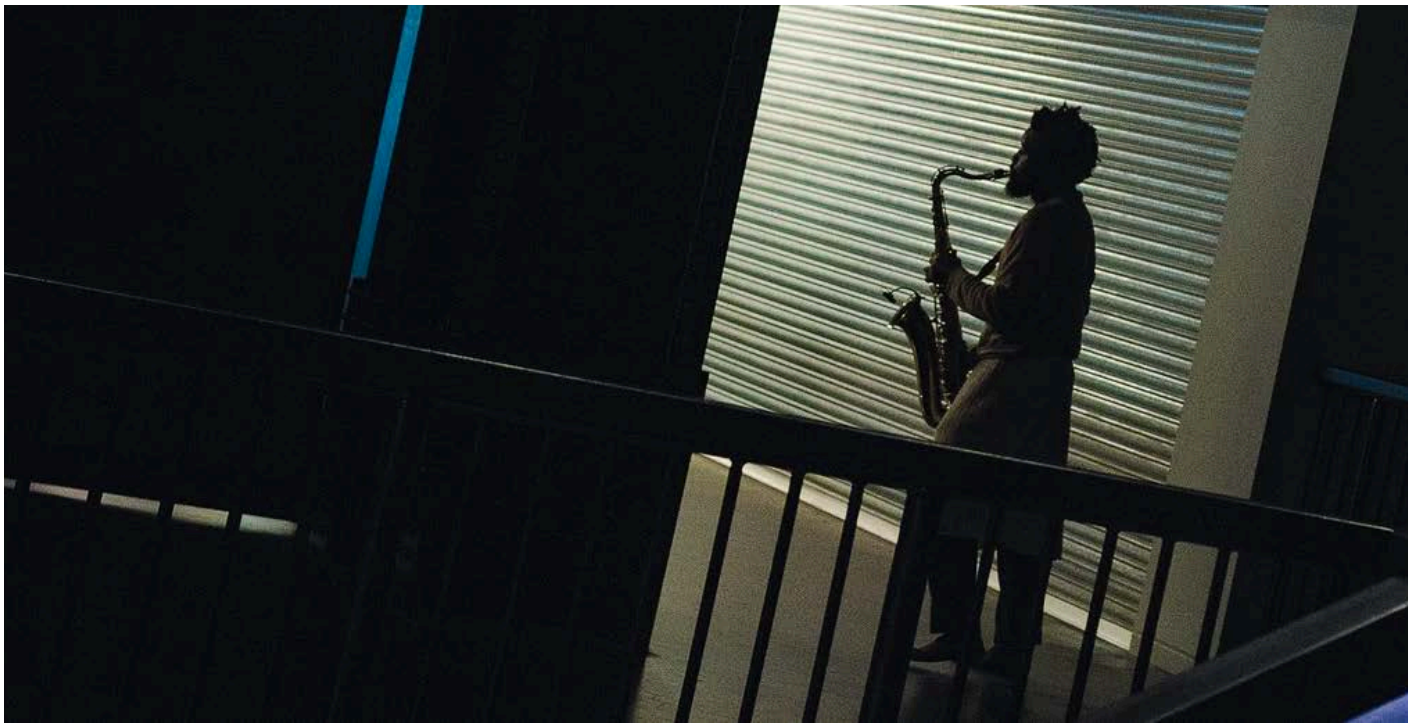
[Issue 261](#) [Thematic Essays](#) [Cassie Packard](#) [Power Station of Art](#) [Shanghai Biennale](#)
[Forrest Myers](#) [Steve McQueen](#) [Laurie Anderson](#) [Heji Shin](#) [Peter Chu](#) [Alice Bucknell](#)
[Copenhagen Contemporary](#) [Science Gallery Bengaluru](#) [Brittany Nelson](#) [MIT List Visual Arts Center](#)
[Allora & Calzadilla](#) [The Renaissance Society](#) [Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts](#) [Xin Liu](#)

SHARE



MORE LIKE THIS





JJJJJerome Ellis's Music for Opening Time



Must-See: Asad Raza Builds Monuments for Rats





Wakaliga Uganda Rewrites the Plot



The Theatrical Turn in Contemporary Art

FRIEZE



Sign up for email updates on the latest frieze talks, fairs and events.

Subscribe

By signing up, I accept the Frieze Terms of Use.

회사

도움말

소셜미디어

회사 소개

멤버십 FAQ

페이스북

VIP 팀

개인정보처리방침

링크드인

FRIEZE STUDIOS

이용약관

인스타그램

파트너

쿠키정책

프레스

지속가능성 안내

채용 공고

광고 안내

문의



© FRIEZE 2026 | [Cookies Settings](#) | [Do not sell my personal information](#)