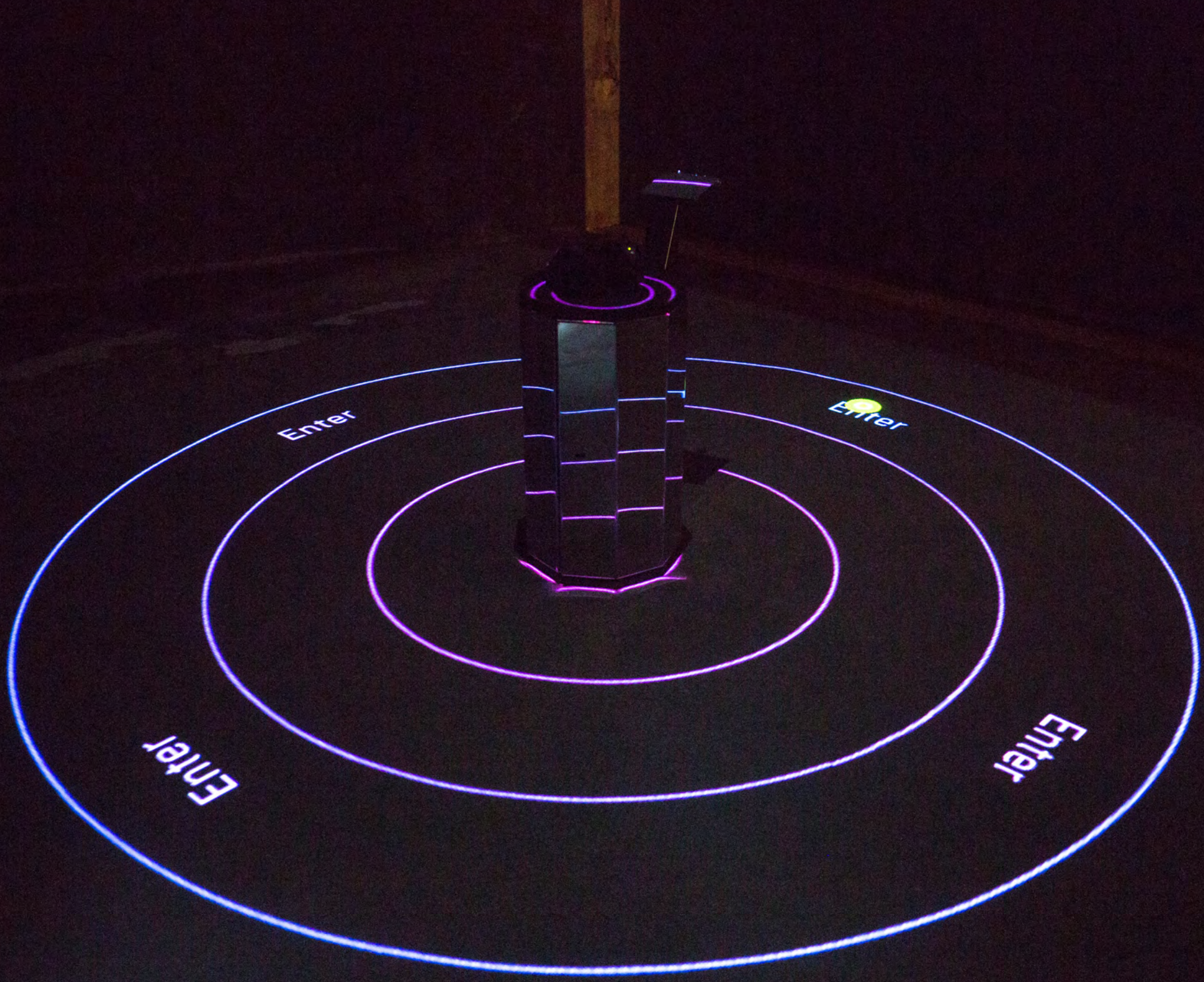UTS
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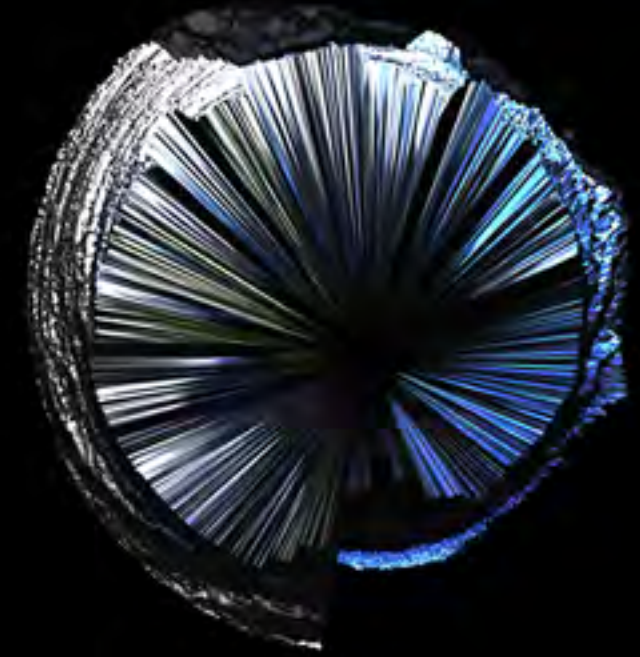
SOUNDING THE FUTURE - EXHIBITION

CURATOR'S NOTES

Sounding the Future is an exhibition that offers speculations about what art in the future will sound like. The exhibition presents sonic "possibles and potentials" ranging from almost-here Transhuman mediations to far-future post-Anthropocene aftermaths with some apocalyptic contingencies in between.

We always speak of 'visions of the future,' but what if we were to let the auditory realm lead our imaginings? Does the dialogue about futurity take on new dimensions when considered through a different sense ratio? [1] Speculations about the future are inevitably informed by the present day, so these dreams of future sounds also offer reflections on how we listen now.

However the exhibition is not simply focused on "what the future sounds like," rather "what art in the future sounds like." Art offers a concentrated and critical perspective on the state of a society. These speculative sound works allow for both the projection of a future world and a framing and analysis that can reveal things about our present relationship to sound. The conceit of a future artwork also offers the artists freedom to dream beyond what is possible now.

My own installation, also titled Sounding the Future, offers the foundation for the exhibition, presenting a survey map of the territory. Consisting of over 50 fragments of speculative fiction and fact, the interactive audiovisual piece is an immersive hypertext suggesting a web of possible sonic near futures. As part of this I conducted a number of interviews with leading Australian artists about their relationship with futurity and from these discussions I selected the artists to engage further with the project and develop concepts for this group exhibition.

Given the plethora of dystopic future scenarios that are almost too easy to imagine today, the artworks in Sounding the Future are on the whole curiously hopeful. While the many negative impacts of our current approach to living are shockingly present, the artists approach these possible futures with a sense of playful ingenuity and constructiveness.

For example in his work, Shelter Fallout/Spark Harvest, Peter Blamey explores a world of energy scarcity. However he combats this with a proposition for energy harvesting, finding new ways to garner precious resources from the very disastrous circumstances that are rendering drastic change. George Khut's Mettāmatics 1 & 2 proposes a way in which we will experience music remixed via our biological processes, however this interaction requires the pursuit of a state of mindfulness focused on compassion.

In the scenarios put forward in my work, there are definitely negative issues — overcrowding, energy crises, economic disparity, capitalist overdrive — but the imagined artworks show ways to negotiate these territories, often to transcend these conditions. Perhaps this is mere escapism but for me art reminds us of the spiritual values of humanity that are worth maintaining despite the circumstances.

In their collaborative audiovision, Pia van Gelder and Tom Smith speculate on a far future where the stars have transformed to iron and the human race, as we know it, is long extinct. Along the way they consider what they call "a proliferating array of objects, derivatives and metaphors." While it might seem catastrophic to imagine a world without us, it is perhaps a provocation to imagine beyond the Anthropocene, and contemplate our place within evolution on an awe-inspiring scale.

When researching this project I came across Neal Stephenson's Project Hieroglyph. Concerned that a large amount of science fiction was negative he suggested that in order to "get the big stuff done," writers, artists, scientists and technologists needed to start to work together to envision more positive futures. While I didn't set an agenda that the artworks in Sounding the Future should be utopian, this sense of proaction flavoured the thinking. If the future is what we are making now, we need to think critically and constructively about it. We need to seek it out, rather than letting it find us.

Gail Priest, July 2017

1 Media theorist Marshall McLuhan's term for the dominance of one sense over other another, specifically sight over sound. McLuhan, M. 1967 (2011 e-book), The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Canada.

A TREE FALLS: LIZZIE MULLER

One of the most well-known thought experiments has sound at its centre: If a tree falls in a forest and there is no one to hear it, does it make a sound?

This riddle is a mechanism for stimulating speculation, with a number of intricate moving parts. There is a tree — a living thing, with a life cycle, a metabolism, possibly with some form of sentience. The tree falls in a forest — a community of living things with networks of influence and communication.

The tree falls. The question could just as easily be asked with no fall (for trees make sound constantly), but this event is dramatic. The tree falls.

The sound of this event would be loud — it begins with an ominous wrenching creak, and ends in a thunderous crash. This makes the effort to imagine its silence equally dramatic, affecting, poetic.

The fall brings time into play — the event has a beginning, middle and end — a story arc. The falling is a kind of performance; the tree is raising its voice. It pays a high price for this dramatic act – falling, for a tree, is dying. The tree dies in the forest. It may take a few of its fellow trees with it, or perhaps it crashes through them, knocking off branches and finally coming to rest, on the damp, leaf-littered forest floor.

This carefully wrought conundrum creates a vivid (if unlikely) mental image. The tree in my mind is tall and narrow — perhaps an aspen. It falls beautifully, dead straight, through a crowd of almost identical trees. Brilliant sunshine makes the leaves a luminous green.

But the question is not how it looks. The question is: If there is no one to hear it, does it make a sound? I play the mental movie of the falling aspen in my head. First with sound, then rewind (the tree raises itself improbably back to its full height), and again silently.

Like the intricate set-up of its micro-scenario, the riddle has a number of nested riddles within it. Your answers to these riddles will reveal your own philosophical commitments.

First there is the question of the nature of sound. Sound waves travel through the air, reach the ear and cause vibrations. The brain translates this stimulus into a phenomenon that can be experienced. The sound of the tree (falling or otherwise) is a <u>shared</u> property — it is achieved through collaboration between the tree, the air, the ear, the brain and all of the past experiences that allow the embodied brain to recognise that noise.

The tree falling in the forest helps us to think through the physics, biology and subjectivity of sound, but nested within it are further philosophical questions. Does a thing exist at all if it is not perceived? Is an unobserved (or unperceived) phenomenon the same as a perceived one?

It is curious that all of these philosophical questions rely on the <u>sound</u> of the falling tree as their provocation. Not the question of whether it was <u>seen</u>. There is something about the sound-made-by-the-thing that is — experientially, rhetorically — independent of the thing itself. The visual-perception-of-the-thing is bound up so tightly with the thing, that there is little room for philosophical manoeuvre. It is hard to get a wedge of doubt or possibility between the thing and the visual-perception-of-the-thing. Between the thing and the sound-made-by-the-thing, however, there is space to imagine. This slight de-coupling gives us the wriggle room we require for speculation.

That is why imagining sound is so useful for speculative thought, and why the central question of Sounding the Future — what does the art of the future sound like? — is so powerful and provocative.

The micro-scenario of the tree in the forest, the drama of its fall, helps us imagine both sound and its absence. But more provocatively, it helps us to imagine a world without us.

This is perhaps the most testing future scenario that it is possible for the human mind to imagine: the world without humans. But that is the future we need to imagine if we take seriously the implications of our current trajectory. We do not need to imagine the end of the world – we need to imagine the world going on, without us.

Suddenly, the agency of the tree in this thought experiment becomes critical. The independence of things from human agency and perception takes on a more urgent aspect. It is not the existence of the things around us that is called into question, but the likelihood of our own existence in a future that we have made inhospitable (even un-inhabitable) for ourselves.

The future is created in the now. Like energy building up — stored as potential before it becomes kinetic. Like the slow growing of the tree over years, until its great height holds within it the power to enact a tremendous, cataclysmic fall. We are making the future every moment. Let's stop for a moment and listen to it...

GAIL PRIEST
SOUNDING THE FUTURE

Dimensions: 4m x 4m
Materials: video, stainless steel swivel stool,
wireless headphones, computer, trackpad,
webcam and light

An immersive audio-driven hypertext, Sounding the Future uses speculative narratives to consider what the future might sound like and how this may manifest as art. By imagining how we will listen in the future can our understanding of the aural realm be enhanced and deepened in the present? This speculation touches on multiple issues including technological determinism; transhumanism and transcendence; individuation versus collectivity; capital-driven environmental destruction; and powers of noise and silencing.

The installation is for single viewer/listener. Seated in the centre of a down-projection and supplied with wireless headphones, the listener is fully immersed in this ficto-critical world. They can navigate between over 50 audiovisual pieces that fall into three streams: Future human — the integration of technology and biology

resulting in trans- and post-human conditions; Future city — the exploitation of the sonic potentials of the new cities we imagine; and Future citing — non-fiction and documentary material that weaves present practice into future thinking.

The overarching interrogation is shaped/framed by an historical interest in media art theory of the 1990s and early 2000s in which the present and the future collided through the science fictionality of "new" media art. Forming part of this was the hope for "hypertext" to become the literature of the future. As both homage and cross-artform experiment, Sounding the Future seeks narrative and structural strategies across sound, text and vision, to create a truly immersive textual experience that works with and around 21st century attention deficiencies and multi-media dependencies.

Concept, text, sound, video: Gail Priest
Interactive programming: Julien Pauthier [FR]
Additional programming (2017): Max Breedon
Furniture design/fabrication: Thomas Burless/tomikeh

Includes feature interviews with:
Robin Fox (AU), Michaela Davies (AU), Guy Ben-Ary (AU), Cat Hope (AU), George Poonkhin Khut (AU), Pia van Gelder (AU), Peter Blamey (AU), Jasmine Guffond (AU/DE)

Extra commentary from: Peter Hollo (AU), Matt Cornell (AU,) Hamish Innes-Brown (AU), Mamoru (JP), Jin Sangtae (SK)

Previous Presentations: .move ON, Werkleitz Festival Halle Germany, 9-25 October 2015

ISEA2016, Run Run Shaw Creative Media Centre, Hong Kong, 18-23 May 2016

www.soundingthefuture.com

GAIL PRIEST is a Katoomba-based artist with a multi-faceted practice in which sound is the key material of communication and investigation. Originally trained in theatre she has worked as a sound designer/composer for performance and dance with works touring nationally and internationally. She has exhibited her own sound-based installation work in ISEA2016 Hong Kong and Werkleitz Festival, Germany and at Kapelica Gallery, Slovenia, Tokyo Wonder Site, Japan, Artspace and SNO Contemporary Art Projects, Sydney.

She has released several albums and EPs of exploratory music through her own label Metal Bitch as well as Flaming Pines and Endgame records. As a curator she has developed exhibitions and concerts for Performance Space, Artspace, the MCA's ArtBar, dLux media arts and Electrofringe. She also writes extensively about sound and media arts, in particular for RealTime magazine, as well as being the editor of Experimental Music: audio explorations in Australia through UNSW Press (2009). For 2015/2016 she was the Australia Council Emerging and Experimental Arts Fellow.

www.gailpriest.net

Images: Gail Priest, Sounding the Future installation, UTS Gallery 2017, photos David Lawrey
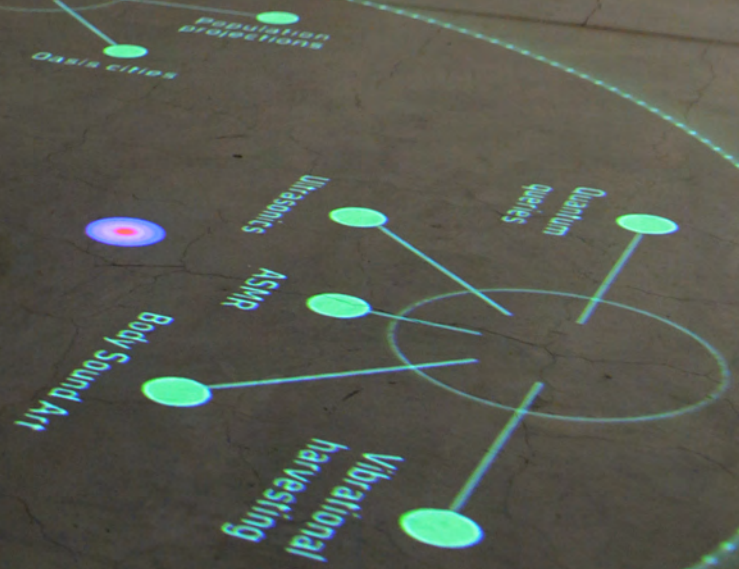
GEORGE POONKHIN KHUT
METTĀMATICS 1 & 2

Dimensions: variable
Materials: two tables with custom-made wireless electrocardiograph, computer, heart rate controlled interactive sound, texts, and headphones

Sound Design and Compositions: James P. Brown and Gail Priest
Electrocardiograph hardware and software developed: Dr Angelo Fraietta
Fabrication and framing: Acme Framing

George Khut continues his long-running exploration into creative applications for biofeedback and contemplative interactions, with two interactive sound designs made in collaboration with Gail Priest and James Brown, that invite us to imagine new contexts and applications for electronic music and sound design.

Mettāmatics features two sound designs that are mixed and modulated by changes in heart rate variability that can be elicited through gentle breathing combined with intentionally elicited feelings of benevolence, compassion and/or equanimity. The sounds are controlled by very gradual transformations in heart rate patterning that unfold over a 5-10 minute timeframe. The work explores the idea of slow and relatively elusive interactions, that require a sustained engagement and a softened quality of attention and intention.

Heart rate data collected by a custom made electrocardiograph — are analysed in real-time, using frequency-domain methods to measure very low-frequency oscillations (often referred to as 'resonance' or 'coherence') in the pattern of heart rate variations, that can increase during certain forms of slow relaxed breathing and heart-focused meditation. The resulting changes in heart rate patterning are used to mix and modulate layers of sound that provide feedback to participants on connections between their breathing and mental-emotional orientation.

* Mettā is a Pali word meaning benevolence and goodwill. The cultivation of benevolence (mettā bhāvanā) is a popular form of meditation in Buddhism.

Images: George Khut, Mettāmatics 1 &2, UTS Gallery 2017, photos David Lawrey

GEORGE POONKHIN KHUT is an Australian artist, academic and interaction-designer working across the fields of electronic art, design and health, at UNSW Australia, Art & Design. For the past 12 years he has been working with biofeedback technologies, creating intimate, body-focused interactive artwork experiences that re-frame our experiences of embodiment and presence. In addition to presenting his work in galleries and museums, he has been developing new audiences for interactive and participatory art with exhibitions and research projects in hospitals, starting with The Heart Library Project at St. Vincent's Public Hospital in 2009, and more recently with his collaboration with Dr Angie Morrow, Staff Specialist in Brain Injury at The Children's Hospital at Westmead, Kids Rehab.

George has exhibited his work across Australia, the UK and Asia. Recent exhibitions include Distillery: Waveforming at the Queensland Art Gallery, Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) for which he was awarded the National New Media Art Award (2012), The Heart Library Project (recently exhibited at Museum of Contemporary Art Taipei, and previously at St. Vincent's Public Hospital, Sydney, 2009), Cardiomorphologies (Biennale of Electronic Arts Perth, 2007, and Arnolfini, UK, 2006), and Thinking Through The Body, an interdisciplinary research group exploring the use of somatic bodywork methodologies and human-centred design as frameworks for body-focused interactive art.
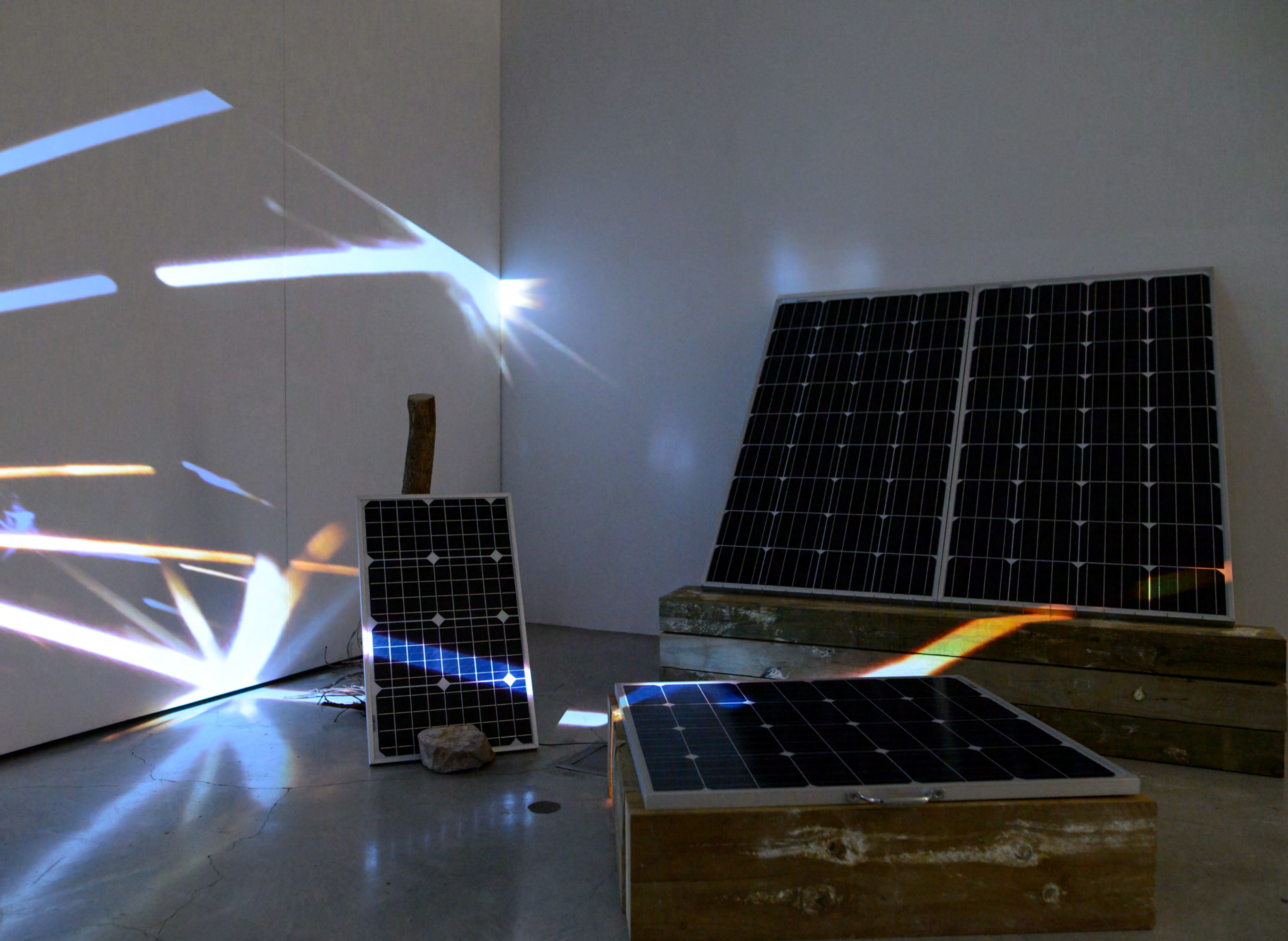
http://georgekhut.com

George Poonkhin Khut
Mettāmatics 1 & 2

Sound Design and compositions: James P. Brown and Gail Priest
Electrocardiograph hardware and software development: Dr Angelo Fraietta

PETER BLAMEY
Shelter Fallout/Spark Harvest

Dimensions: 3 structures, dimensions variable
Materials: photovoltaic (solar) panels, wood, video, electronics

Be prepared, but how prepared?

Does catastrophe spell the end of responsible energy, or only indicate that we will need to be even more diligent in a post-apocalypse future? Can the fallout from nuclear disaster (be that induced or accidental) actually be utilised to help us survive the resulting nuclear winter? Could lava spewing from an erupting volcano provide us with power while we wait for the situation to stabilise? With global warming increasing the frequency of thunderstorms and bushfires, can harvesting energy from lightning strikes and flying cinders help us cope with the problems at hand? Is the pursuit of resourcefulness in the face of environmental catastrophe a matter of necessity or simply gallows humour? Maybe it signals the ultimate move towards a renewable energy future. In the event that we find ourselves huddled in shelters, facing any number of protracted scenarios, we'll need to grab energy when and however we can. This work explores the sound of that process.

A blackly humorous and somewhat unlikely combination of environmentalism and post-nuclear apocalypse, Shelter Fallout/Spark Harvest considers the possibilities for energy harvesting in the face of catastrophic events, exploring hope, fatalism and futility in equal parts.

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PETER BLAMEY is a Sydney-based artist. His work explores themes of sound and energy, and the reimagining of technology through questioning accepted notions of connectivity, variability and use. His practice is typically grass roots, establishing interactions between disparate everyday technologies in order to produce performances, artworks and installations that investigate the relationships between people, technologies and their environments.

Peter has performed at experimental music and arts festivals such as What is Music?, Liquid Architecture, Electrofringe and the NOW now. His work has been exhibited at Artspace, SNO Contemporary Art Projects, Serial Space, ICAN and Hardware galleries, West Space and was part of the Instrument Builders Project at iCAN, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Sound works have been included in survey exhibitions such as Variable Resistance: ten hours of sound from Australia (SFMOMA, 2002), D>Art.05 Sound (2005) and Music and Technology Month, Issue Project Room, NY (2010). Peter was previously a director of Pelt gallery in Sydney, and currently plays drums in Your Intestines.
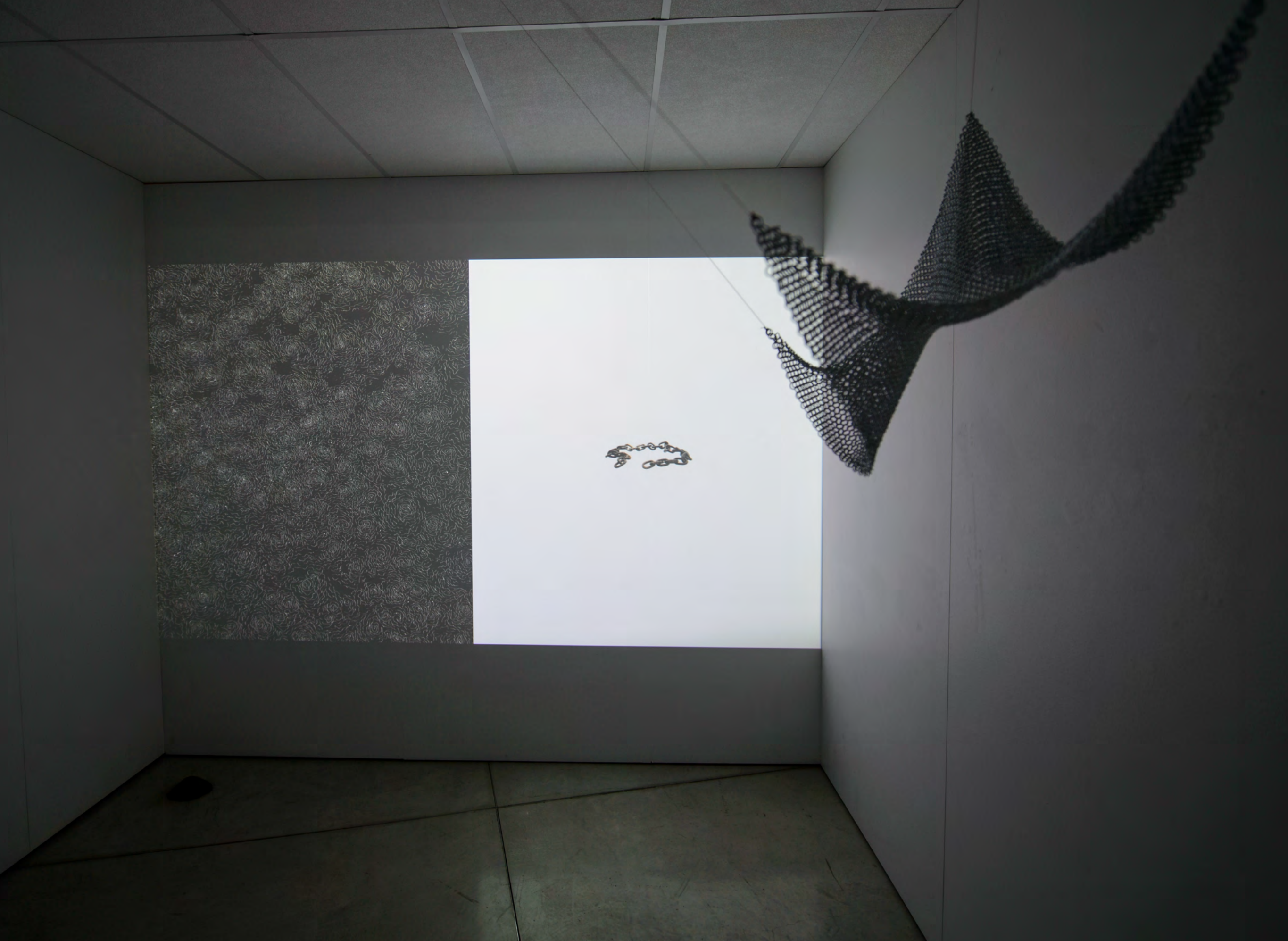https://peterblamey.net

Images: Peter Blamey, Shelter Fallout/Spark Harvest, UTS Gallery 2017, photos David Lawrey
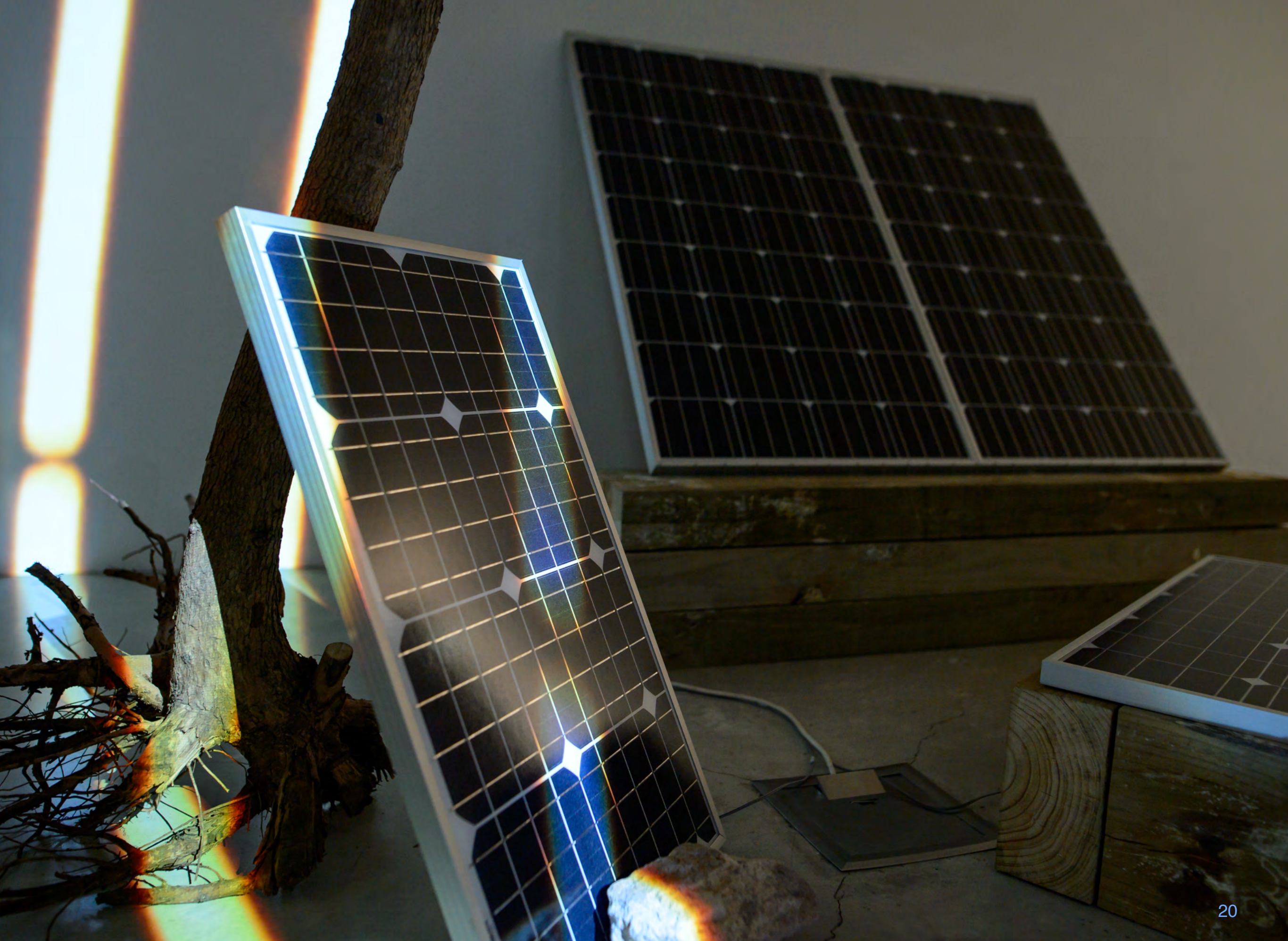
PIA VAN GELDER & TOM SMITH
IRON STAR

Dimensions: variable
Materials: iron, video, 2 channel sound

Pythagoreans proposed that the movement of the orbiting sun, moon and planets around the earth produced sound. This 'music of the spheres' prefigured ongoing discourse around sound and space. Some Pythagoreans reasoned that this celestial chord wasn't heard playing in the background because we had learnt to filter it out. Whereas Aristotle was confident that if the planets did hum, our world would shatter due to the immense scale of their corresponding vibrations. Aristotle's hypothetical is an early iteration of circular debates around the (im)possibility of non-anthropocentric perception — debates that continue to take up space in contemporary philosophy.

Iron Star reframes these questions by thinking through the possibility of an iron future. In the distant future, approximately 10 to the power of 1500 years from now, it is theorised that all stars will transform into their most stable nuclear form, iron — the last element a star produces before it goes supernova. In this future, when earth is no longer, the galaxy will be filled with giant stars of iron, transformed

through a process of cold fusion. The temperature will be unfathomably cold. Lingering stellar energy, leftover heat from the stars' earlier plasma form, will result in enormous fluctuating electromagnetic fields. No human can accurately conceive of this iron universe. By this time our bodies will have long since disappeared. There will be no sound. There will be no light.

Iron Star projects into the furthest possible reaches of the future, and upon failing to imagine it, returns to the symbolic universe in which iron is but one of countless signifiers. Iron Star depicts the final state of the universe as a set of processes that will end humanity — while concurrently, iron's use value and symbolic efficacy is shown proliferating into an array of human centric objects, derivatives and metaphors. Within Iron Star, as in the universe more generally, iron exists ambivalently as language, material, object, symbol, and future — but also as the immanent cancellation of all these strata of reality.

PIA VAN GELDER is an artist, researcher and teacher in Sydney, Australia. Her practice often takes shape as interactive and participatory installations and performance that explore contemporary and historical understandings of technology, energy and the body. Van Gelder has exhibited and performed extensively in Australia and internationally. Recent major projects include Recumbent Circuit, Primavera Exhibition MCA (2016), Relaxation Circuit, Underbelly Festival and Westspace, Melbourne (2015) and Psychic Synth, an immersive poly-sensory interactive installation commissioned and presented by Performance Space and Carriageworks (2014).

http://piavangelder.com

TOM SMITH is a Sydney-based artist, curator and musician. His current interests include the tyranny and poetics of the generic, aesthetic standardisation in music production, and the emancipatory potential of default media platforms. His work includes curatorial projects, experimental performance works, and electronic music. Tom has presented nationally and internationally at the National Gallery of Victoria, the Now now Festival, Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney, Liquid Architecture, 55 Sydenham Rd, Firstdraft, Alaska Projects, Blindside, Goldsmith College London, Cashmere Radio Berlin and Floating Projects Hong Kong.

http://thomaswilliamsmith.com

Images: Pia van Gelder and Tom Smith, Iron Star installation views, UTS Gallery 2017, photos David Lawrey

EXHIBITION ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sounding the Future
UTS Gallery
August 1 - September 22, 2017

UTS ART
Curator and Manager: Tania Creighton
Assistant Curator (Exhibitions): Eleanor Zeichner
Assistant Curator (Collection): Janet Ollevou
Education and Outreach Coordinator: Alice McAuliffe
Curatorial & Collection Assistant: Felicity Sheehan

Public programs
Artist talks & publication launch: Wednesday August 9, 6 - 7pm
Audio-described tour & discussion: Tuesday August 15, 1:30 - 2:30pm

http://art.uts.edu.au