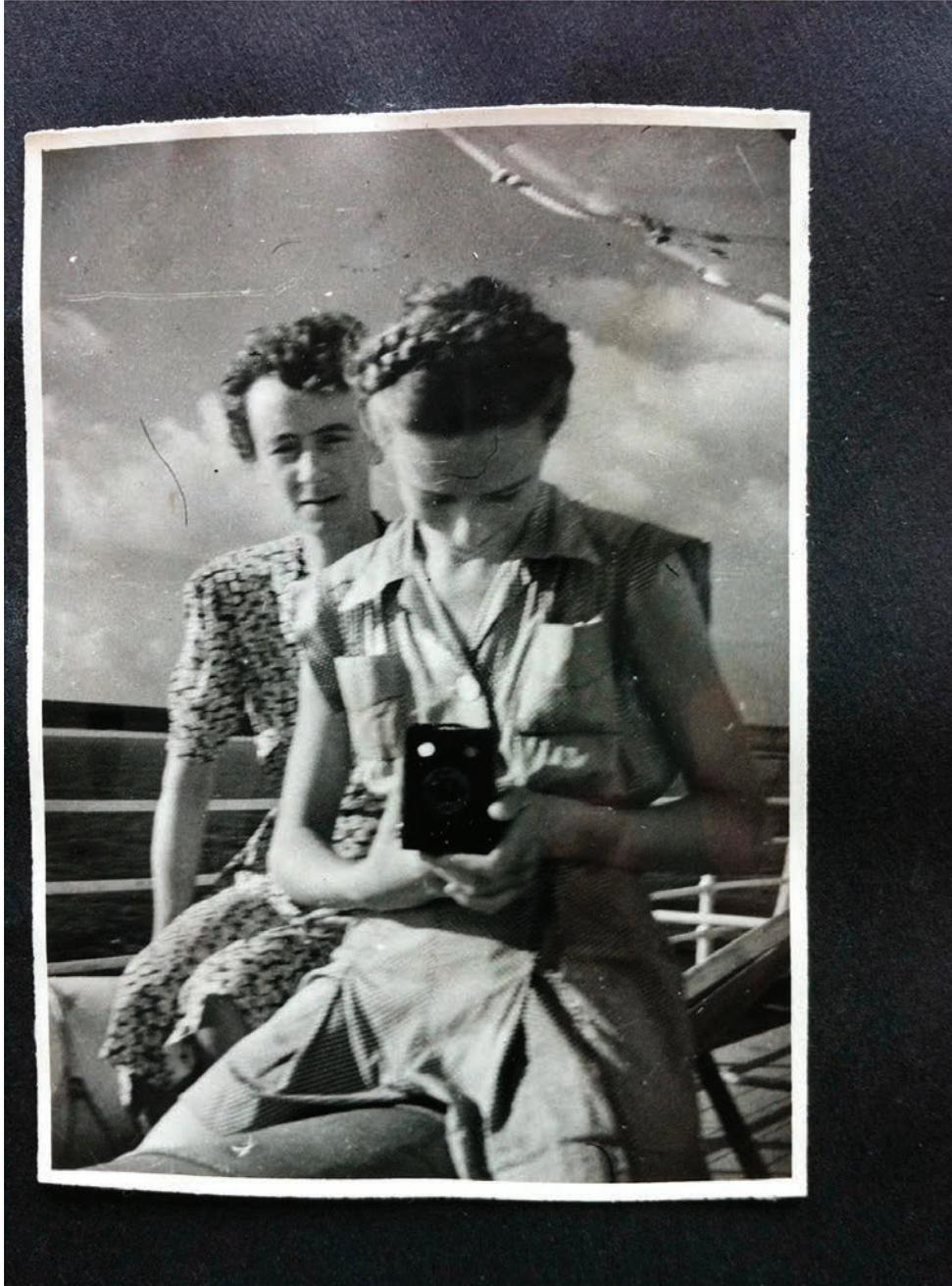


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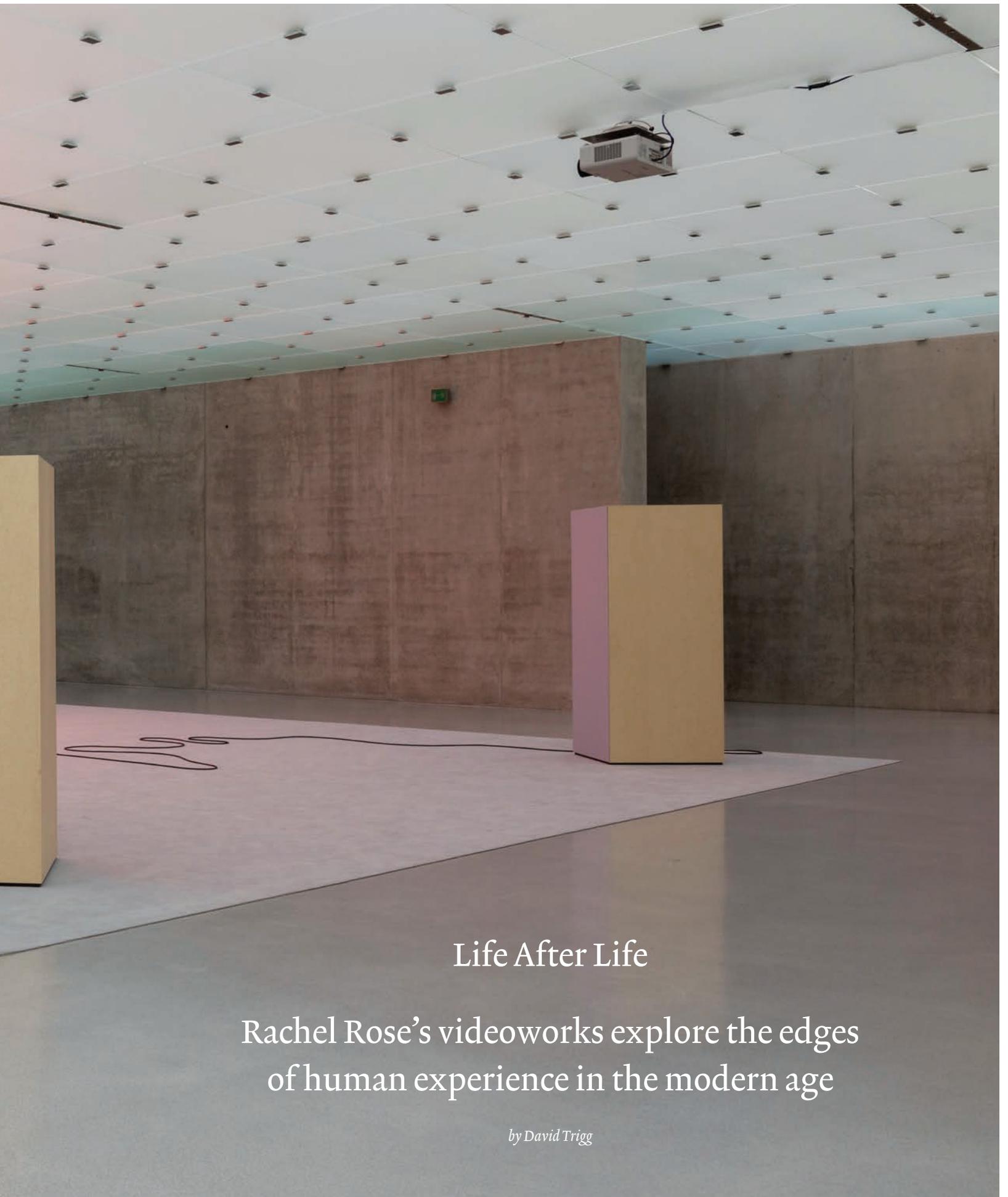
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Life After Life

Rachel Rose's videoworks explore the edges
of human experience in the modern age

by David Trigg



“Try to stop death.” This quixotic suggestion is uttered, stilted and autotuned, by Rachel Rose in her first videowork, *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* (2013), a dense, jump-cut collage of found and original material that muses on mortality, temporality, technology and evolution. Such weighty themes are a preoccupation of the young American artist, who despite having completed only six videoworks, has rapidly established herself as a prominent figure in contemporary moving image practice. Whether meditating on the roots of our culture’s current malaise, the threshold between life and death or her own experiences of disquiet, Rose’s short yet compelling videos attempt to give form to the manifold anxieties of modern life. With each of her projects employing differing production techniques, it is easy to overlook that which unites her stylistically disparate work – namely a concern with liminality and those hard-to-define interstitial situations and conditions that stem from the dislocation of established structures.

Rose came to video via painting, initially studying at Yale under the rigorous tutelage of Robert Reed. But finding pigment and canvas too restrictive, she almost gave up art altogether: ‘I didn’t understand how I could be an artist and also care deeply about the things around us that affect how we live and think,’ she told curator Aily Nash in an interview for *BOMB* in 2015. Seduced by the creative possibilities of digital video, Rose produced *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* as a means of exploring what she terms ‘deathfulness’, the numb, liminal state she experienced after abandoning painting. The unnerving sensation of being suspended somewhere between life and death became a springboard for the mesmerising audiovisual mashup, which connects the dots between cryogenics, artificial intelligence and zoological parks. In examining the nature of mortality in the twenty-first century, it inevitably also probes definitions of life. In a way, the video revitalised Rose’s ailing practice, and so death, it seems, was averted after all.

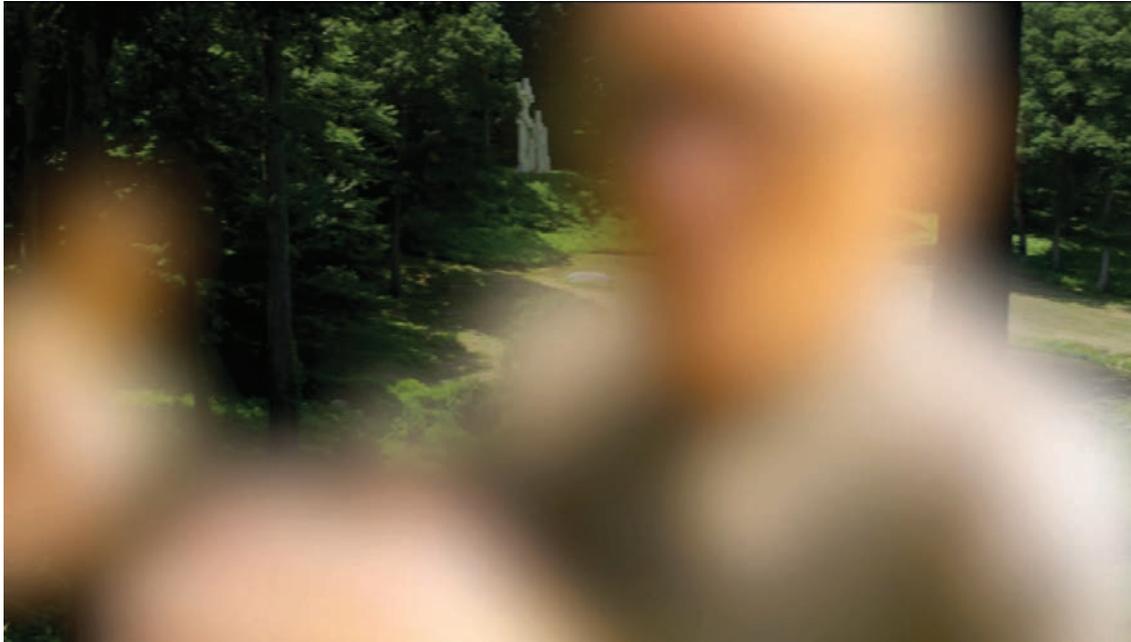
The nagging disquiet of *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* is similarly felt in *A Minute Ago* (2014), though here Rose dwells on modernity’s fading promises of unfettered progress and wellbeing with evocations of anthropogenic climate change and the jaded rhetoric of high Modernism. The video pivots on Philip Johnson’s famous Glass House, a building the American architect modelled after Mies van der Rohe’s

Farnsworth House. After opening with a YouTube clip of terrified Serbian beachgoers caught in a freak hailstorm, there follows a remarkable sequence in which an ageing VHS recording of Johnson touring his house is digitally fused with Rose’s own film of the sleek structure. As Johnson’s blurred and ghostly figure roams to and fro, the building appears to disintegrate in a hailstorm of pixels. The modernist dream of stability and balance literally shatters before our eyes.

For Rose, the Glass House presents as a mausoleum of a decaying ideology, a utopian vision that isn’t quite dead, but not exactly alive either. Existing in a state of constant repair, the vulnerable building and its contents are regularly attended to by conservators. These include Nicolas Poussin’s *The Funeral of Phocion* (c. 1648–49), which is installed in the house as part of its permanent collection and which appears in the latter half of *A Minute Ago*. The painting depicts the body of the Athenian statesman being carried to burial. Like Johnson’s foggy image, and indeed the Glass House itself, the corpse is betwixt and between, existing in a state of suspended animation, or as Rose suggested to critic Wendy Vogel, ‘infinitely paused’ like a freeze frame.

The formal construction of Rose’s first videos provoke comparisons with artists such as Elizabeth Price, Laure Prouvost and Ben Russell, not to mention the experimental works of Stan Brakhage, Leslie Thornton and Paul Sharits from the 1960s. But with each new work, her exploration into liminality becomes more deft and inventive, making her practice harder to pin down. A case in point is the oneiric video animation *Lake Valley* (2016), which grew from her enquiries into the fuzzy line dividing childhood from adulthood. The visually and sonically rich eight-minute video is painstakingly assembled from thousands of colourful images scanned from vintage children’s books; slipping between figuration and abstraction, the collaged fragments coalesce into hallucinatory landscapes, cityscapes and domestic scenes. The loose narrative follows a hybrid family pet – a mix between dog, fox and rabbit – yearning for attention. Hand-drawn using traditional cel animation, the black-and-white creature is met with indifference; forlorn and rejected, it ventures into hostile woodland, where it is further beset by alienation. Compounding the melancholy mood is the delicate soundtrack, which mixes ambient electronics with

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above
A Minute Ago (stills), 2014, HD video, 8 min 43 sec.
Courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias, London

facing page
Lake Valley (still), 2016, HD video, 8 min 25 sec.
Courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias, London

preceding pages *Everything and More*, 2015 (installation view, Kunsthau Bregenz, 2017). Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York & Rome



above and facing page *Wil-o-Wisp (Moiré Installation)*, 2018, HD video (colour, sound, 10 min),
double-lined mesh scrim, carpet, projection screen and semitransparent projection scrim. © the artist.
Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art and Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin



sampled snippets to form an atmosphere of swirling unease textured with ominous breathing sounds, distant whispers and animal calls. All in all it is a convincing metaphor for coming-of-age anxieties and a masterful example of the way Rose balances line, form and colour with her intricately crafted soundscapes.

Rose's formal concerns are not confined to the screen; she also carefully tailors her video installations to their physical surroundings. By incorporating plush carpets, conspicuous loudspeakers and subtle alterations to gallery architecture, she creates site-responsive situations in which viewing becomes an experience. Take *Everything and More* (2015), which meditates on isolation and alienation via the experiences of American astronaut David Wolf. His recollections of the disorienting effects of reencountering Earth's gravity are accompanied by shots of a NASA training facility and strange, swirling imagery evoking deep space. At the Whitney Museum of American Art, Rose projected the video onto semitransparent scrim adjacent to the gallery's floor-to-ceiling windows. Wolf's bewilderment was amplified as the distinctions between interior and exterior were blurred; viewers caught glimpses of the New York skyline amid what appeared to be swirling nebula and distant galaxies, but were in fact homebrew effects concocted in Rose's kitchen. However, the effect was less apparent in London, where the work was shown as part of the Hayward Gallery's 2016 pop-up exhibition *The Infinite Mix*. Such are the challenges of allowing works to exist in multiple permutations.

Exhibition design is also integral to *Wil-o-Wisp* (2018), co-commissioned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Turin's Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo. The ten-minute video installation is her most ambitious to date, employing for the first time narrative storytelling and a full cast and crew. Set in Somerset in 1570, it tells the story of a fictional peasant woman, Elspeth Blake, who vanishes from her village after her daughter accidentally burns down the family home. Reappearing 30 years later as a healer, she is soon prosecuted for witchcraft and apparently led away to her death. The mysterious tale, shot at a living history museum in Plymouth, Massachusetts, is relayed via a series of fleeting vignettes, female narration and even a

short ditty in iambic pentameter composed by poet Josh Stanley and musician Isaac Jones for the film.

As the exhibition publication reveals, *Wil-o-Wisp* grew from copious research, yet historical realism is evidently not intended. Playing like a curious docudrama-cum-period fantasy, the video exudes an aura of enchantment engendered by postproduction effects including unnatural colour saturation, the overlaying of abstract moiré patterns and other signs of digital manipulation. In Turin, *Wil-o-Wisp* is presented in a large, grey-carpeted room hung with layers of mesh scrim. The shimmering fabric-covered walls produce the same moiré pattern as in the video, troubling the line between the filmic and the real. Most incongruous is a large projection screen that occasionally appears in the video, mirroring the one in the gallery. By emphasising the constructed nature of her work, Rose calls for a metafictional awareness on the part of viewers. History is itself revealed as a liminal discipline, operating somewhere between objective facts and their mythic representation, between empiricism and imagination.

Significantly, *Wil-o-Wisp* is set against the backdrop of the English enclosure movement, a period when common land was privatised for the purposes of capital accumulation and which Karl Marx identified as integral to the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In the context of Rose's wider practice, a tacit parallel is drawn between that tumultuous era – marked by mass displacement of people, environmental destruction and the oppression of women and nonconformists – and our own precarious age. Notably, Elspeth doesn't actually die at the end of *Wil-o-Wisp*. Rather, her executioners dissolve into thin air before she, too, fades away. The final shot shows her family home, intact and unharmed. With death averted once more, Rose again suggests that the hope of an alternative future should never be forsaken. **ar**

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empiricism and imagination**

Rachel Rose: *Wil-o-Wisp* is at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin through 3 February

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