

Douglas Rushkoff, July 2023

I am the jellyfish; I am not the jellyfish

By calling this collection of exhibitions “Future Nostalgia”, Charlotte Haywood and her collaborators playfully yet soulfully suggest that we might not realize what we’ve got til it’s gone.

In some cases, a natural, paradisaic subject or landscape finds itself intruded with the sounds of civilization, as if in the anticipation of its own demise. In others, the human contribution is no less a part of the landscape as the rest of nature: an equal celebrant and plaintiff at the passage of time and inevitable loss. But these are just the obvious narratives, imposed by an observer’s brain desperate to interpret these emergent phenomena through the lens of a traditional story.

On a deeper level, however—on a more daring, dangerous, yet delightful level—Future Nostalgia forces us to transcend the paralyzing dialectic of climate change and the potential horrors of human impact on nature. Instead, we are reminded of the immensity of geologic time, the inevitable cycles of life, and the sweet, silly punctuation that human experience and intentionality interject into the greater swirl of nature.

These works invite us to consider our place among the leaves, shells, jellyfish, plants and seeds. Are we just part of the dance of matter and life, complexity and decay, entanglement and release? Must we accept our essential meaninglessness to achieve a rapprochement with the rest of life? Or do we bring purpose and forethought, design and desire into the mix? What makes wood into “chair,” and who besides a potential human sitter knows this has even happened?

Does our ability to observe and reflect upon the swirl guarantee us unique privilege among the many forms? In spite of our innumerable crimes against nature and pretty much every other living - or formerly living - species, don’t we hold a special place as thinking, observing, singing, and dancing human beings?

Does our need to confess and mourn absolve us of even some portion of our guilt? Or what about simple humor? Doesn’t our ability to identify and laugh, to be silly and clever, to recognize a bunny in woven straw or to re-invent the orchid as mycelia merit some recognition of specialness and selfhood?

How will we be remembered, and how will we remember ourselves? Will we be nostalgic for that moment in evolutionary history when we thought ourselves to be unique among earthlings? Or will we simply be nostalgic for our long lost ability to recognize ourselves in the patterns of nature? Will we remember what it was like to experience ourselves in solidarity with all living things? Or will we be obsessed with our former ability to imagine and believe in our own separateness?

Or given our current trajectory, must we do all that remembering and reminiscing right now, both pre-mourning and pre-celebrating a past we will not live long enough to look back on? Perhaps. But I prefer to take a different message from Future Nostalgia: While times are hard and our separation from the cycles of nature may appear to be irrevocable, we will one day retrieve the social, cultural, and spiritual mechanisms of our indigenous ancestors—finally reconciling our place within nature with our inherent alienation as self-aware beings.

Positive futurism, then, is a practice of looking ahead while also bringing forward the past into that imaginary. And while that would likely induce a sense of vertigo in the time traveller, the grounded human artist experiences it instead as more of an emotional mobius strip: a nostalgia for what has yet to be.

**Douglas Rushkoff** is an American [media theorist](#), writer, columnist, lecturer, graphic novelist, and documentarian. He is best known for his association with the early [cyberpunk](#) culture and his advocacy of [open-source](#) solutions to social problems.

Rushkoff is most frequently regarded as a [media theorist](#) and is known for coining terms and concepts including [viral media](#) (or media virus), [digital native](#), and [social currency](#).

Rushkoff is currently Professor of Media Theory and Digital Economics at the [City University of New York, Queens College](#). He has previously lectured at [The New School University](#) in Manhattan<sup>[5]</sup> and the Interactive Telecommunications Program at [New York University's Tisch School of the Arts](#), where he created the Narrative Lab.<sup>[6]</sup> In 2012, Rushkoff was declared the sixth most influential thinker in the world by *MIT Technology Review*

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