

Random International and Wayne McGregor's '+/- Human' Is an Unsettling Installation Featuring Drones

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The seven helium-filled white globes that hover, swarm, and form kaleidoscopic patterns above visitors to London's Roundhouse are neither friend nor foe—they're inanimate drones programmed by an algorithm to move, and to respond in turn to the various movements of people below them. And yet their behavior is familiarly, unsettlingly alive. They seem curious at some points, breaking away from their pack to investigate individuals on the ground. They're menacing at others, gliding gracefully into imposing structures overhead. They're sometimes clumsy, colliding with each other and veering awkwardly upward. And they're mesmerizing, evoking entities as disparate as birds and bacteria in the ways they gently dance and dip under the Roundhouse's domed ceiling.

The balloon-drones are *Zoological*, a flock of "autonomous, flying spheres" created for the installation *+/- Human* by the studio Random International, the artists best known for *Rain Room*. That work, which debuted at London's Barbican in 2012, helped usher in a new age of Instagram-friendly immersive artworks, attracting day-long lines when it moved to New York's Museum of Modern Art prior to a 15-month stint at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. But where *Rain Room* allowed visitors to feel omnipotent, walking freely through a room of falling water without getting wet, *Zoological* encourages a sense of vulnerability. The ever-shifting constellations overhead are beautiful and unsettling: They catalog and respond to human behavior. This is an artwork that you observe while aware that it's observing you right back.

+/- Human includes dance performances choreographed by Wayne McGregor, devised to provoke and create new patterns of movement as the dancers and the spheres interact. During the day, visitors can simply enter the Roundhouse's space and move around underneath *Zoological*, which is accompanied by original music composed by Warp Records's Mark Pritchard. The score is pivotal, offering ethereal layers of electronic harmonies, and then jarring, discordant sounds of exaggerated humming or screeching. At times the room feels like a scene from Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*; at others like a particularly traumatic episode of *Black Mirror*. The drones are benign, staying out of arm's reach, but their behavior—both pre-programmed and responsive—is impossible to predict.

Zoological, as a work, seems intended to play on subconscious anxieties about everything from driverless cars to alien invasions to mutating pathogens. The ways in which the spheres rise and fall around each other mimic the ways birds fly, and bugs swarm, and computers generate graphics that move to music. It's eerily familiar, but inhuman. Random International [describes](#) the work as "an amplified and physical manifestation of our lived experience in a world increasingly run by algorithms," and its rendering of our uncertain, symbiotic, increasingly dependent relationship with machines and code captures the flux of an era in which technology is evolving faster than our ability to devise ethical frameworks for it. The spheres in *Zoological* are harmless, but for how long?

It's perhaps less instantly gratifying and joyful than *Rain Room*, but much more thought-provoking. It's also of a piece with other recent works of art and entertainment that try to wrestle with how drones are [changing the nature of warfare](#) or how [technology will ruin humanity](#) if we're not perpetually vigilant. It's a theme Random International has considered over and over, in a series of "Swarm Studies" that examine and mimic [collective behavior](#), and in works that [reflect the human form in motion](#) as pinpricks of light. *Zoological*, fascinating and occasionally alarming, encourages engagement, but the underlying note is one of caution.