

Possibilities, risks and openings for immersive,
speculative, public futures-making.

Immersive
**WHEN I'M
OUTSIDE.**

Dare to dream

DIFFERENT

**Tomorrow
is within us.**

“Life is not beginning, middle and end – it is beginning, middle and beginning.” Fabio Scarano

We dedicate this publication to Alistair Gentry (1973–2026)

I AM THE FUTURE

I AM THE FUTURE HOLDER
A MOTHER
A CARER
A NOURISHING BODY
I THINK AND I ACT
I DON'T ONLY ENTICE
I HAVE HOPE
I HAVE A VOICE
AND HOLD POWER
TO TRANSFORM

Tomorrow is within us: possibilities, risks and openings for immersive, speculative, public futures-making.

I AM CONNECTION

I AM A RIVER
I AM HOLDING HANDS
I AM BREATHING TOGETHER
I AM PAYING RESPECT TO THE ELDERS
I AM GIVING HOPE TO NEW
GENERATIONS
I AM MINDFUL OF MY FEARS
I AM MINDFUL OF OTHERS' FEARS
I AM EMBRACING TRUST
I AM BUILDING NEW WORLDS
I AM HUMBLE

WELCOME

This publication is a public record and resource for the imagination arising from a symposium hosted by the **ESRC Centre for Sociodigital Futures** in February 2026.

Over the last three years the Learning team in the Centre has been exploring what is and what may be happening at the intersection of three emerging trends:

- the development of immersive digital technologies;
- the transition of cultural institutions such as museums and galleries from archival to futures-oriented goals; and
- growing authoritarian tendencies to police and preclude public futures-making work in countries around the world.



Keri Facer
Professor of Educational and Social Futures,
University of Bristol

Creating immersive public futures-making in changing times

Our work as a centre is committed not just to documenting what is happening, but to actively seeking to intervene in the futures that are being made as social and digital aspects of our lives converge. To that end, we decided it was time to bring together some of the creative, ethical and courageous people working in new forms of public futures-making and in public and creative uses of immersive technologies, to consider its role under conditions of authoritarian populism.

Our aim was primarily to strengthen the relations between these individuals and collectives, to play our own role as a public research institution in constituting a public space for dialogue – which we understood as a conversation without bounds, without deadlines, and without predetermined goals. We hoped that participants would fall a little in love with each other, and we trusted – recognising that futures-making in times of complexity is as reliant on emergence and accident, personal connection and relationship as it is on plans – that from these relationships new possibilities would and will arise.

This document is a record of the conversations that arose over the three days we were together. It cannot tell the full story of a rich human experience, but we hope it captures enough of its essence to give other readers some further prompts for thought, some resources for hope, and some useful insights into what is happening in this rapidly changing field.

We invite you to immerse yourselves in this document, let it sit with you a while. We look forward to hearing of more experiments, alliances, invitations and collaborations that we should surely already be aware of, or which are just coming into being.

Keri Facer
Jessica Pykett
Carolina Valledares Celis
Arathi Sriprakash
Ben Williamson



From left to right:

Keri Facer
 Professor of Educational and Social Futures,
 University of Bristol

Jessica Pykett
 Professor of Social and Political Geography

Carolina Valledares Celis
 Senior Research Associate, University of
 Bristol
 and **baby Nicté**

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ABOUT THE SYMPOSIUM

On a crisp February morning in Bristol, UK, an invited group of museum directors and curators, computer scientists, creative digital artists, researchers and cultural activists gathers to confront changing conditions for public futures-making and to discover together the ethical and practical commitments necessary to keep futures open in the face of emerging techno- and political-authoritarianisms.



I AM AGENCY

I AM INSIDE AND OUTSIDE
I AM IN TIME
I AM IN RELATION WITH THE AIR, SKY
AND SEA
I AM HEART
I SMILE AND SCREAM
I FEED ACTION
I AM POWER AND POWERLESS





I AM CONNECTIONS

I AM FELT AND I FEEL
I AM SELF LOVE AND ANCIENT LOVE
I AM A WHISPER AND A SHOUT
I AM PRESENT
I AM FREE
I AM ALIVE

“How do we build the ability to deal with complex futures, to imagine possibilities and to make good choices?” *Lisa Bailey*



I AM IMMERSION

I AM FLUID
I AM FLOW
I AM DIGITAL AND REAL
I AM MAKING TANGIBLE AND YET
I AM IMMATERIAL
I AM TAKING SHAPE AND
I AM RESHAPING
I AM MAKING SPACE
I AM MAKING SPACE FOR VISIONS,
FABULATIONS AND THE
PREPOSTEROUS
I AM COMING TOGETHER
TO COLLABORATE
I AM HOLDING TENSIONS,
ENTERTAINING, CONSENSUS
AND DISSENSUS
I AM THE NOT YET
I AM THE AS IF



I AM DEMOCRACY

I AM PRECIOUS
I AM SEEDS EVERYWHERE
I AM NOWHERE GROWN
I AM FICTION
I AM CAPTURED
I AM NEGLECTED
I AM FREEDOM

Activists, educators, museum curators and creative digital artists around the world are also exploring how to curate new spaces for public futures-making.

At the time of the workshop, Donald Trump is ripping up the conventions of international co-operation, populist political parties are gaining ground from Brazil to Germany, museums and cultural institutions are under increasing economic and political pressure. Governments worldwide are dealing with the fallout from digital harms and big tech companies are falling out with the US Department of War. A new kind of world is forming.

Despite or perhaps because of this, activists, educators, museum curators and creative digital artists around the world are also exploring how to curate new spaces for public futures-making. They are asking how we might bring together fractious communities to interrogate the conditions of their existence, to find new points of connection, to sit with discord and tension, and to imagine otherwise.

At this gathering, leading figures in these highly diverse fields have come together to explore three key questions:

- 1. How can the core democratic** capacity to gather and imagine, challenge and invent futures be defended from political, economic and technological authoritarianisms?
- 2. How can the emerging landscape of** immersive tools, which offer powerfully compelling embodied experiences, serve rather than hinder democratic futures-making capacities?
- 3. How can new alliances be forged** between globally dispersed, locally embedded cultural and arts organisations to create situated and networked responses to these challenges?

“We need to move from fragmentation to coherence, from transactional relationships to trust, from optimisation to resilience.” *Lisa Bailey*

The symposium runs over three days with a combination of expert talks and collective sense-making.

On Day 1

We focus on ‘exploring the possible’, feeding the imagination with the rich range of expertise and practice in the participant community.

On Day 2

We open space for radical critique and for dreaming, challenging ourselves to move beyond the present to identify the longings and desires for other practices.

On Day 3

We get concrete. We identify shared commitments through a manifesto. We clarify core values and concepts using poetry. And we identify shared actions and alliances to take forward.

These pages are a record of the flavour of this gathering, of its insights into dialogue across difference, its exploration of the paradoxes of control and agency, and the possibilities it identified for nurturing collective imagination through immersive speculative experiences, times and spaces.

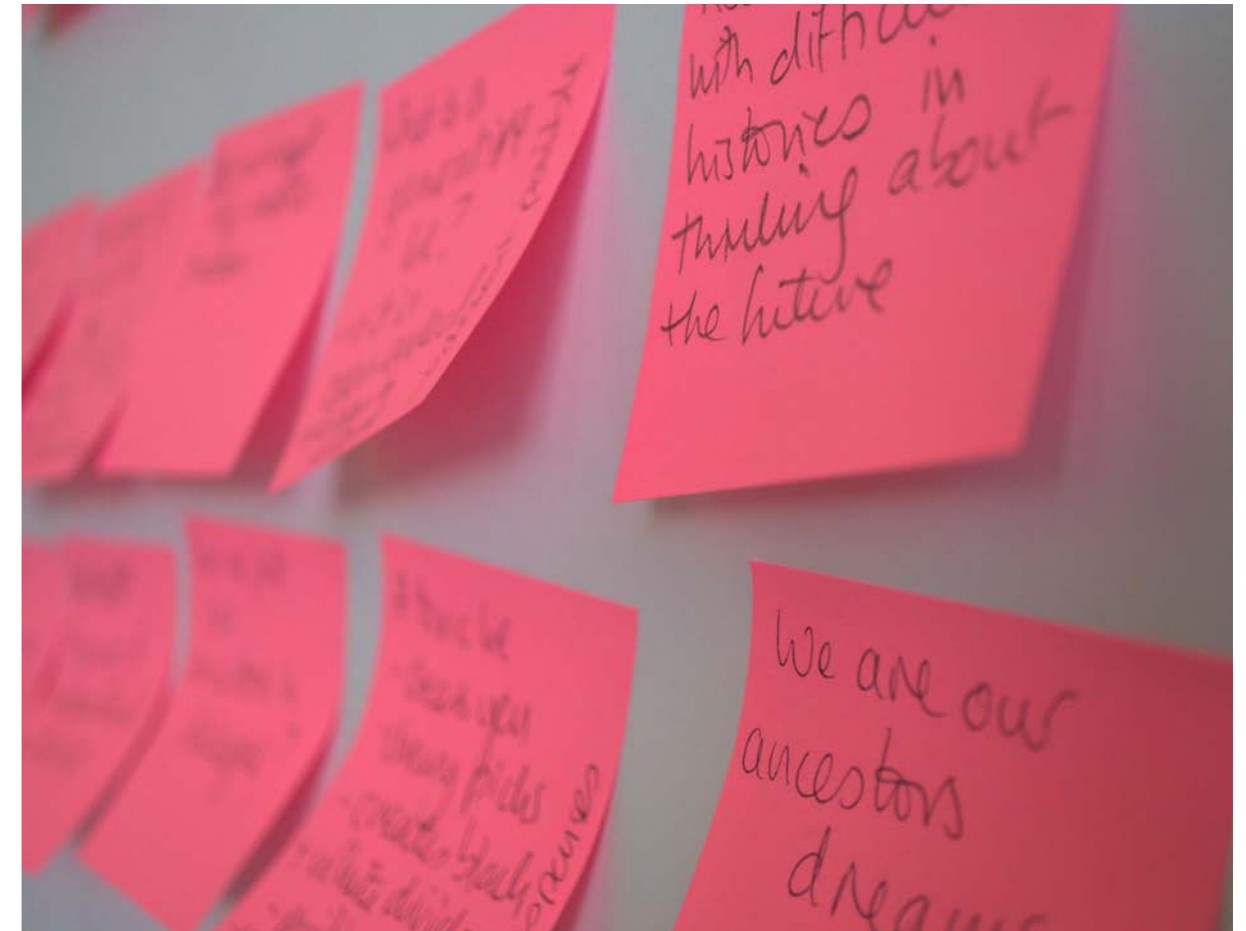


WHAT IS ALREADY IN MOTION?

To open our time together we invite participants to reflect, silently, on their previous experiences of immersion, and its relationship with imagination. We begin with a prompt: 'Think of a moment when you felt fully and completely immersed in the world, what did that feel like'.

We share these stories, then invite everyone to step back, and, using collage techniques, to create postcards that reflect the questions that they are working on and bringing to the symposium. This foregrounds diverse lines of inquiry including:

- Human-dominant forms of imagination and multi-species ecological realities
- Collective imagination for hope, restoration and connection
- Using affective worldmaking and design methods to create iterative futures
- The superpowers of immersive technologies
- Unlocking civic imagination and counter futures
- Growing and caring with communities who are harmed by slow violence
- Sensory, emotional and biometric futures of embodied identity and conviviality
- Data, institutions, communities and trust
- Utopias, rituals, drama, fabulation and liminal spaces in futures-making

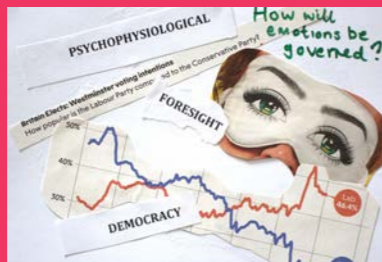
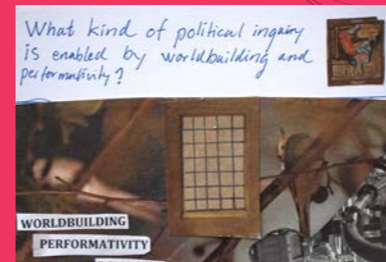
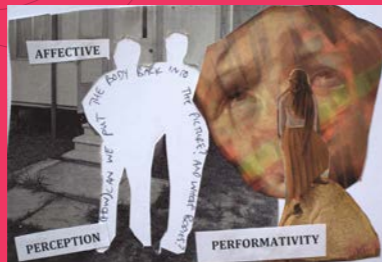
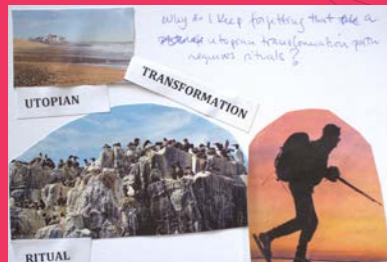
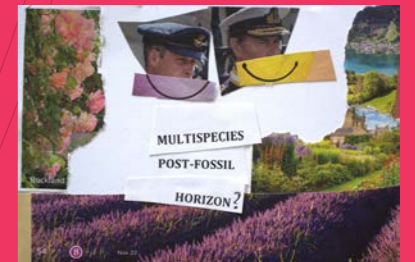
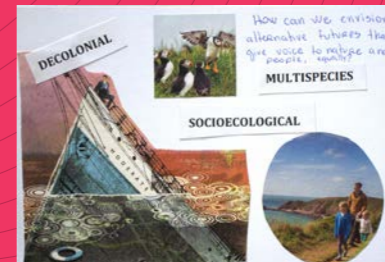


I AM AGENCY

I AM HARD TO TIE DOWN
I AM IMPOSSIBLE TO DIRECT
I AM NECESSARY
I AM WHAT EVERYONE WANTS
I AM WHAT SO FEW HAVE
I AM ENTANGLED
I AM IMPOSSIBLE
I AM PERMISSIVE
I AM A KEY
I AM A DOOR
I AM A SLEDGEHAMMER AND A STICK
OF DYNAMITE
I AM A CHILD
I AM ALL OF US TOGETHER
I AM IN YOU AND WAITING TO IGNITE

AGENCY-BASED
PROTOTYPING
INTERVENTION
PRACTICE
ADAPTATION
RESILIENCE
INNOVATION
IDENTITY
MEANING-MAKING
REPRESENTATION
TRANSLATION
COMMUNICATION
EVALUATION
FACILITATION

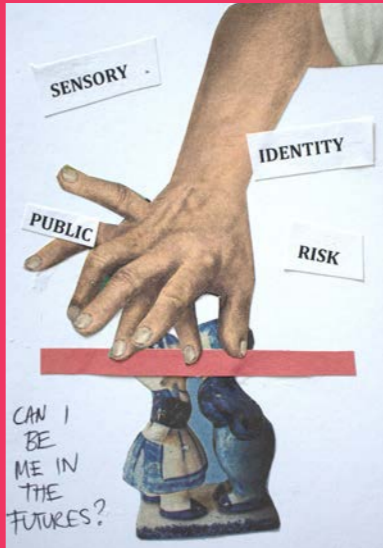
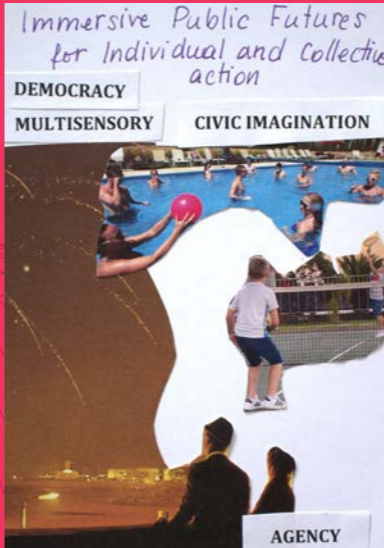
“Can we play with and use the glitches, find gaps and seams in our perception?” Steve Benford



“We are already living in immersive systems that work because they don’t interrupt our attention, they absorb it.” Andrea Bandelli



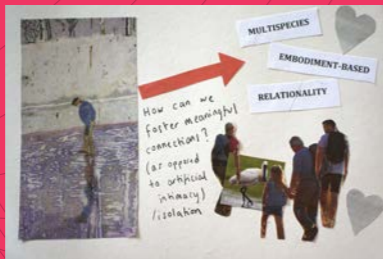
How do we bridge the vast ^{BRIDGE} gap between the imagination that has been nurtured in cultures of human supremacy and the unfolding collapses and possibilities of ecological reality? AND Is it really the case that we must bracket out the 'negativity' of collapsing life-worlds in order to imagine and project abundant and regenerative lifeways?

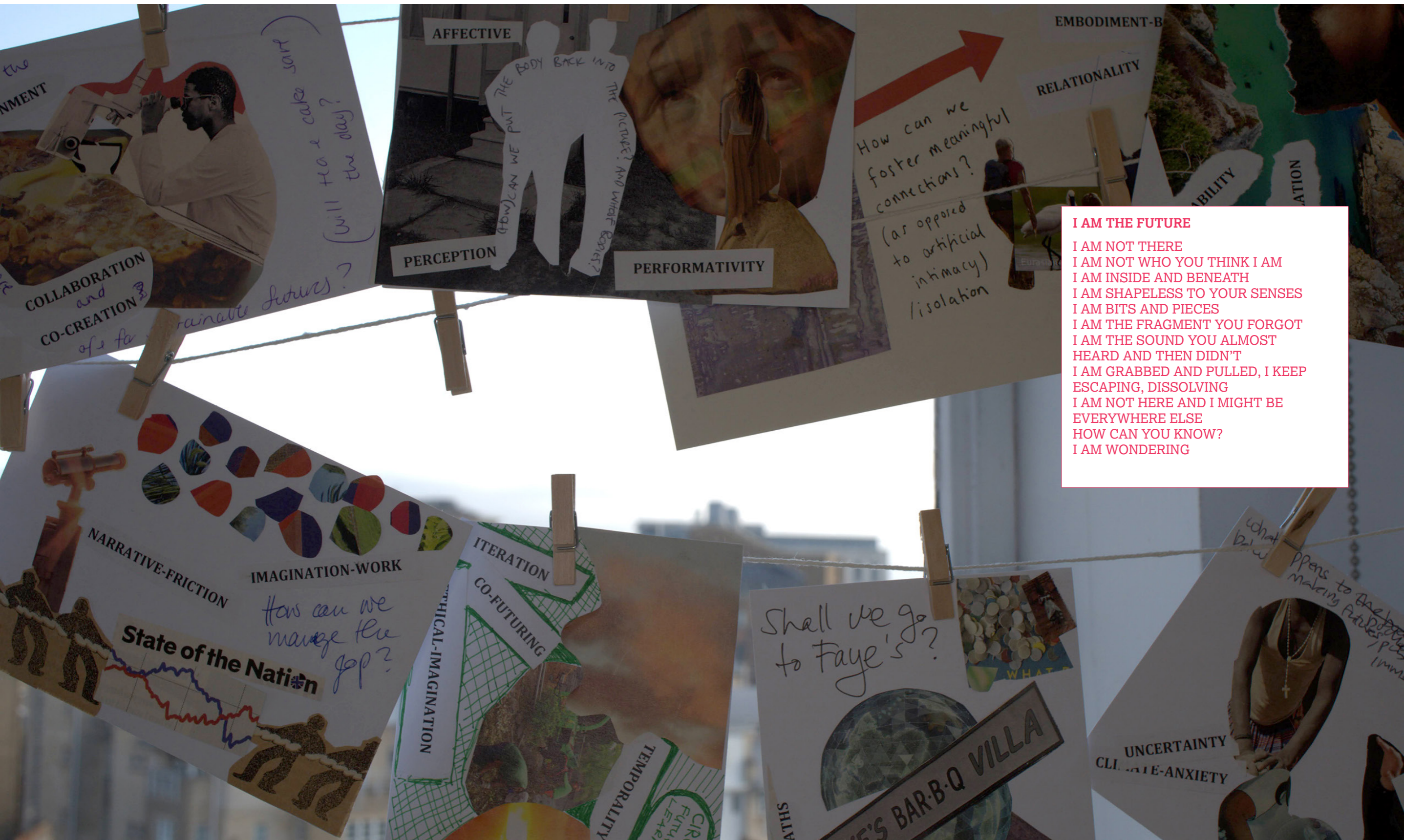


How can ~~social~~ dreaming/collective imagination inspire hope + restore connection? How does the liminal space support us to access utopian imaginaries?



What are the superpowers of immersive technologies to reveal the unseen; enhance engagement with the non-human world; to shift perspectives and facilitate behaviour change?





COLLABORATION
and
CO-CREATION
of sustainable futures?

(Will the day?)
How can we manage the gap?

AFFECTIVE

PERCEPTION
PERFORMATIVITY
BODY BACK INTO THE PICTURE? AND WHAT BODY?
(HOW) CAN WE PUT THE BODY BACK INTO THE PICTURE? AND WHAT BODY?

EMBODIMENT-B

RELATIONALITY

How can we foster meaningful connections?
(as opposed to artificial intimacy) / isolation

I AM THE FUTURE

I AM NOT THERE
I AM NOT WHO YOU THINK I AM
I AM INSIDE AND BENEATH
I AM SHAPELESS TO YOUR SENSES
I AM BITS AND PIECES
I AM THE FRAGMENT YOU FORGOT
I AM THE SOUND YOU ALMOST HEARD AND THEN DIDN'T
I AM GRABBED AND PULLED, I KEEP ESCAPING, DISSOLVING
I AM NOT HERE AND I MIGHT BE EVERYWHERE ELSE
HOW CAN YOU KNOW?
I AM WONDERING

NARRATIVE-FRICTION

IMAGINATION-WORK

How can we manage the gap?

State of the Nation

ITERATION

CO-FUTURING

TEMPORALITY

SHALL WE GO TO FAYE'S?

BAR-B-Q VILLA

UNCERTAINTY
CLIMATE-ANXIETY

FEEDING THE IMAGINATION

Four keynote speakers share their assessment of the state of the field, their own practice, and the risks and possibilities of immersive public futures-making.

Lisa Bailey

Director of the Museum of Discovery (MOD), Adelaide



“The more you test and practice your futures-thinking skills, the better you get.”

Lisa talks about the global transformations which necessitate thinking about the future. She highlights the need to weave futures by building reciprocal relationships over time.

MOD is informed by the idea of developing futures literacies and by two-way minded approach of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Rather than ‘providing content’, the museum encourages questions, critical conversations and dialogue.

But they aim to leave people hopeful, able to envision multiple pathways and an enhanced sense of agency. They co-design exhibits through youth forums and open space methods. They explore subjects ranging from the experience of eternal life, job interviews by AI metahumans, and ‘time commissioners’ of AI futures and bring diverse voices and ethical concerns to futures-oriented public debates.

Fabio Scarano

Curator of the Museum of Tomorrow, Rio de Janeiro



“We have all three times inside us – memory, attention and anticipation.”

Fabio shares experiences from this flagship museum which opened in 2015, attracting over 8 million visitors, many of whom have never or rarely visited a museum before. He described its cosmological approach and the museum’s underlying philosophies of sustainability, conviviality, planetary wellbeing, knowledge pluralism and an ethics of care. He explains how this has shaped architectural, design decisions and daily rhythms of the building in its area over this time. He contextualises the museum’s location in Rio bay, where for local indigenous communities, the world began and yet is also a place with a painful colonial history and ongoing struggles and inequities.

And he encourages us to adopt more intertemporal thinking, inspired by plants, which simultaneously practise memory, pay attention and actively anticipate. He shows us many inspiring exhibits which combined organic and technological elements, and visitors’ interactions with the ‘heart beat’ at the end of the museum – a pool which when touched creates ripples and connections of light, sound and pulsation between people. The museum shapes immersive experiences in order to cultivate transcendence and is shaped by twin principles: love and democracy.

Steve Benford

Dunford Professor of Computer Science at the University of Nottingham



“What do I consciously control and what is beyond my control?”

Steve discusses his work at the Mixed Reality Lab and as a UKRI Turing AI Fellow. Demonstrating innovations and experimental arts collaborations with VR, AI and robotics, he focuses on the unusual things that happen in tech, working with ‘thrill engineers’ and ‘messing with people’s senses’. Exploring sensory misalignment, he expands on the role of immersive tech in shaping perception and interoception, and the implications these have on awareness, control and embodied agency.

He counterposes the promises of seamless technology and seamless bodies, with the idea of ‘glitching the soma’, describing work with dancers interacting with robots and raising ethical and safety concerns relating to regular dance practices. He shows how working with these tools invites reflection on what it means to be human, what it means to be in control of our bodies and how we anticipate others’ behaviours and bodies acting in the world.

Andrea Bandelli

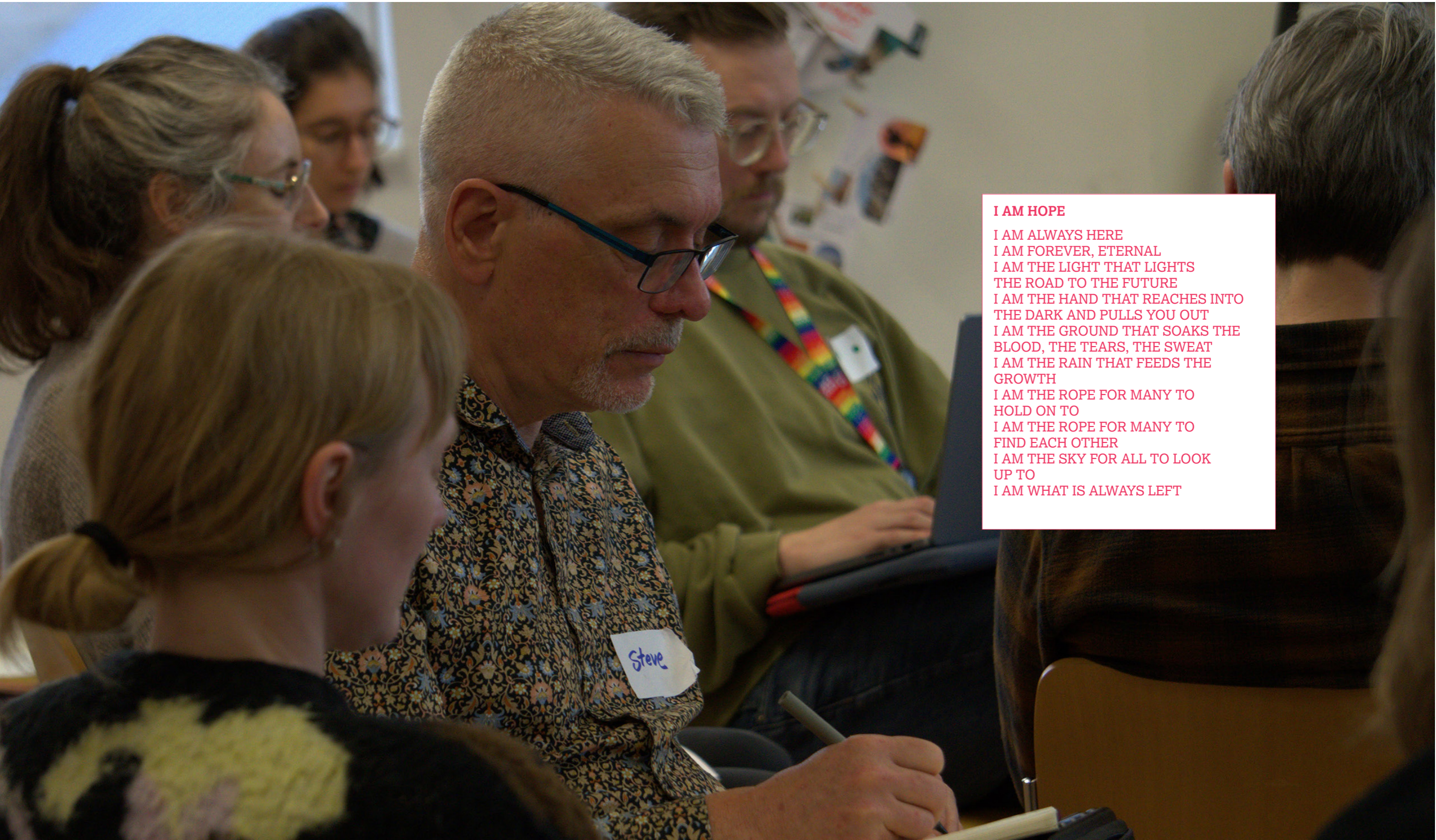
Cultural Strategist at Woven Foundation



“Narratives are the architecture of immersive worlds.”

Andrea speaks about his work with science communicators, museums and galleries across Europe and in civic activism. Andrea defines immersion not as a medium for experience, but as a condition of existence. He shows extraordinary examples of aesthetic experiments, satirical art works, thought-provoking and sci-art collaborations. These include an artist who collected cigarette butts and hair from the streets to collect DNA samples, drawing attention to urban surveillance practices.

Another example is a chicken wearing a mock-up VR headset. In both cases, the absurdity and conceit of the artists is all too rapidly manifest in real-world examples of striking similarity – identifying and shaping litter pickers in Hong Kong, and experiments with milking cattle wearing VR headsets. The role of civic artistic activism of this nature is to engender a radical imagination to support capacities of interpretation, dealing with complexity and motivation for intervention.



I AM HOPE
I AM ALWAYS HERE
I AM FOREVER, ETERNAL
I AM THE LIGHT THAT LIGHTS
THE ROAD TO THE FUTURE
I AM THE HAND THAT REACHES INTO
THE DARK AND PULLS YOU OUT
I AM THE GROUND THAT SOAKS THE
BLOOD, THE TEARS, THE SWEAT
I AM THE RAIN THAT FEEDS THE
GROWTH
I AM THE ROPE FOR MANY TO
HOLD ON TO
I AM THE ROPE FOR MANY TO
FIND EACH OTHER
I AM THE SKY FOR ALL TO LOOK
UP TO
I AM WHAT IS ALWAYS LEFT

TELLING TALES OF IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES

LOST FUTURES EXIST IN THE WORLD WE ARE IN

Five leading researchers and practitioners share their stories of powerful immersive experiences.



Gabrielle Zipf from **Berlin's National Futurium Museum** discussed Filipino Artist Leeroy New's Ocean Futures exhibit, a large-scale immersive environment of fantastical mangroves and islands, and the powerful affective impact of this world on those who encountered it.



Johannes Stripple from **Lund University** invited us into the 'beaver office' in Berlin, where humans and beavers work together to address the consequences of a world where nature works alongside people to create city infrastructures.



Mandy Rose from **University of the West of England**, described the experience of stepping into a massive living tree, and the awe and wonder of seeing it grow.



Justin McGuirk Director of the **Design Museum Future Observatory** introduced the Stone House Demonstrator, a massive house skeleton built from highly ecological materials in London, as a living material argument for low-carbon construction.



Dan Lockton **Norwich University of the Arts** told us stories of lost futures, introduced us to a collective participatory artwork of sunsets and sunrises, and then recounted a participatory practice to acknowledge futures we must say goodbye to so that others can emerge.

THE ARTIST CRIED THINKING OF HIS FAMILY

IS A BEAVER DAM CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE?

I FOUND MYSELF WITH THE TREE SEEING NUTRIENTS POURING DOWN AND WATER POURING UP

MOVING BEYOND CO-OPERATION TO ZOOOPERATION, CREATING SPACE FOR NON-HUMAN LIFE

WE SPEND TOO MUCH TIME IN THE IMAGINATION OF OTHERS

USE ART TO PUNCTUATE PUBLIC SPACE WITH IDEAS

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM IS THE BUILDING THAT IS NOT THERE

THE REAL AUDIENCE IS INSURERS, DEVELOPERS, PLANNERS



- I AM IMMERSION**
- I AM UTOPIA
 - I AM IDEOLOGY
 - I AM THE IMAGINARY
 - I AM IMAGINATION
 - I AM SECURITY
 - I AM FREEDOM
 - I AM FEAR
 - I AM LOVE
 - I AM THE APOCALYPSE
 - I AM ETERNITY
 - I AM THE BEGINNING
 - I AM THE MIDDLE
 - I AM THE BEGINNING
 - I AM COINCIDENTIA OPPOSITORUM

The World Council of Boundless Imagination

The lights dim, the mood shifts and music plays. We answer the call to a world of 'Abundant Shorelines' and form a congregation to hone our collective imagination, rediscover agency and dream up new worlds.

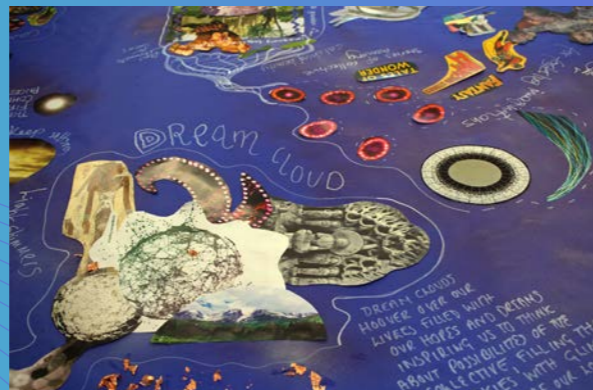
Gone are the staid and disembodied conventions of an academic conference or a higher education institution. On our wrists are silver wristbands, binding us together as a new community. We are invited by New York-based artists and creative leaders in liberatory Black visioning, Aisha Shillingford and Terry Marshall (Intelligent Mischief), to a newly formed World Council of Boundless Imagination. Together, this council will be responsible for crafting a future where space, time, infrastructure and resources are available for preserving and amplifying democratic forms of imagining and futuring.

Guided by Aisha's voice in the dark light of the room, we travel together to a habitable planet where the imagination was unbounded and all that we wished for had been achieved, an Alternate Earth. Here we are invited to imagine who we would meet, what dwellings, materials, spaces, technologies and institutions we would encounter, how we would communicate and what we might build.

From these possible futures we return to Earth, to report back on what we had learned, to consider how we would correct the anomaly that has caused imagination to be enclosed by a narrow, increasingly anti-social group of people. Our council formulate our message back to the world through a collective collage, showing what the Alternative Earth is like, communicating public hope.



Aisha Shillingford and Terry Marshall
Intelligent Mischief

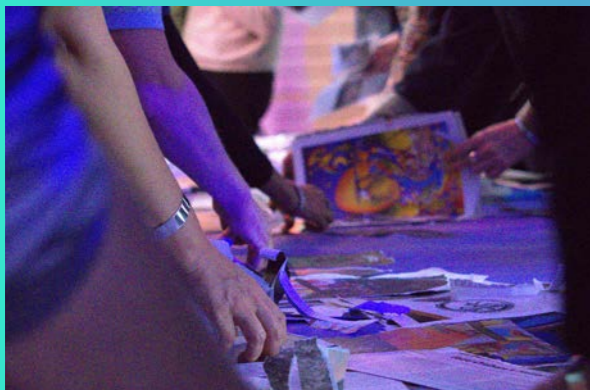


“Imagination is crucial to social movement.”
Terry Marshall



I AM DEMOCRACY

- I AM PRECIOUS
- I AM SEEDS EVERYWHERE
- I AM NOWHERE GROWN
- I AM FICTION
- I AM CAPTURED
- I AM NEGLECTED
- I AM FREEDOM



I AM CONNECTION
 I AM CRACKLING
 I AM SHIMMERING
 I AM METAL ON THE WRIST
 I AM ALL UPHILL
 I AM A CUP OF MINT TEA, NOT FULLY DRUNK
 I AM A RABBIT STAMPING ITS FOOT
 I AM SIMPLE... AND OURS

“We need a revolution in how we think about time.”

The symposium was designed for dialogue and relationship building. From these came abundant avenues for discussion and calls for action. We talked of how immersive spaces are deeply rooted in places, and how co-design methods and processes can be made more democratic. We asked how can we support non-anxious futures-thinking, by tending to speed and pace of engagement? We thought about how best to acknowledge different experiences of ‘when’ a crisis or apocalypse will arrive, is under way or has already happened.

Some key principles emerge, such as not confusing evolution with progress, adopting holistic narratives of time and timelessness, and raising awareness of socioecological, sociotechnical and sociodigital systems rather than individual technologies and tools. Alarms are raised to avoid building public futures on deeply flawed technological systems. Options of technological refusal, resistance, independence, escapism and transformation are elaborated. Learning to let go and to celebrate endings can be part of this orientation.

I AM PUBLIC

I AM SINGULAR
I AM MULTIPLE
I AM MEDIATED
I AM UNSTABLE
I AM THRIVING IN OPEN SPACES
I AM OUTRAGED
I AM A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION
I AM THE OUTCOME OF DEEPLY ENGRAINED HABITS
I AM USED BY OTHERS AND SPOKEN FOR
I AM A SERVICE AND A VALUE THAT IS FOR THE WHOLE

I AM DEMOCRACY

I AM FAILING IN-BETWEEN
I AM BOUNCED BACK AND FORTH
I AM NEGOTIATING THE MIDDLE
I AM IN NEED OF LAW
I AM IN NEED OF ETHICS
I AM UNDERWRITTEN BY MERCY
I AM MISTAKEN FOR TAWDRY FORMS OF FAIRNESS WITHOUT IT
I AM THE MEETING, THE NEGOTIATION OF POWER AND VULNERABILITY
OR I AM TRYING TO BE

I AM AGENCY

I AM BREATHING
I AM AIR
I AM POROUS
I AM FLUID
I AM GROUND
I AM ALCHEMIC
I AM SHAPE-SHIFTING
I AM TOUCHING
I AM RESPONSE-ABLE
I AM SPACE-TIME

I AM FUTURE

I AM HERE AND NOW
I AM THERE AND THEN
I AM WHERE AND WHEN
I AM SKIMMING ON THE SEA, FLOATING ON THE BREEZE
I AM DEEP IN THE EARTH, ENTANGLED IN THE ROOTS
I AM WHAT COULD BE AND WHAT COULD NEVER BE
I AM FAR AWAY
I AM CLOSE AT HAND
WE HAVE TIME; WE ARE TIME

RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES,
OPENING UP NEW POSSIBILITIES

ACT NOW:

Build an encyclopaedia of futuring practices, rituals and blueprints for marginalised people who are ‘still here’, who persist and live on in the face of adversity

Participants speculated on some of the reasons that dystopian thinking seems to stick more persistently than utopian ideas and considered the role of cultural institutions for trauma-informed and therapeutic practice. Arts-science collaborations were proposed as ways to bring feelings in, to explore emotions, and to legitimise love, care and compassion in institutional settings and bureaucracies.

ACT NOW:

Co-create with artists and scientists experiences, activities and objects which can be simple, mundane, low-tech immersion which address our senses holistically and open up dialogue

In some national settings, museums are seen as elitist, expensive, tourist-facing. Conversations explored who is controlling visions of the future, who these visions work for, how other people’s imaginations come to dominate our lives through immersive media, and whether ‘visioning the future’ can in fact be part of the problem, offering patronising and elitist perspectives.

ACT NOW:

Advocate for cultural institutions to reform governance systems to include more diverse and multi-species communities

We recognise the importance of listening to the minor keys, emergent ideas which float in as reflections or newly formed thoughts. Quiet voices that aren’t always heard. We talked about how to keep going considering real material pressures of funding and political intransigence, how best to engage with bureaucracy, guidelines and regulations.

ACT NOW:

Pursue programmes of design justice by working with ‘seamfulness’, and beware the technological fix

We discussed how researchers, funders, designers and developers, artists and science communicators can forge alliances to co-create tools and spaces for immersive public futures. We need unafraid people, diverse publics, the curious, the creators, pro-democracy or digital rights advocates and philanthropic campaigners against extreme wealth. We ask them to steward responsible financing of immersive technologies which address real community needs. Where there are significant challenges, these can act as frictions from which to imagine alternative immersive futures.

ACT NOW:

Contribute to guidance and regulations for immersive public technologies informed by the principle of ‘do no harm’

We talked about the place of religion and spirituality, recognising ‘good’, ‘bad’ and ‘organised’ lies, and working in the seams and gaps between ourselves and in the world. We consider how technological and system ‘gitches’ can offer a portal to open worlds and selves, finding some value in broken seams and gaps.

ACT NOW:

Bring together creative industries, designers and researchers around the affordances of different types of immersive technologies for developing individuals

We discussed the importance of addressing, across all these sectors, emerging questions of capability, the dynamics of agency across the life course, mediated and/or collective agency. We explored this in relation to a wide range of technologies – including predictive systems, VR headsets, social VR.

ACT NOW:

Explore new potentials of immersive technologies for social imagining and storytelling

Highlighting the place-based and situational nature of augmented reality and world-making in virtual reality, this group explored the possibilities for social VR, story-living, content production and perceiving the unfelt.

ACT NOW:

Perhaps it is time to make a ‘Museum of the not quite sure’

Thinking beyond certainty, prediction and futures, we explored whether it might make more sense to imagine and create museums in which uncertainty and unknowability are embraced and valued.

ACT NOW:

Remember the importance of listening and the audio

We discussed the importance of making sure all voices are heard and the powerful possibilities of working with the audio instead of the visual to democratise discussion, re-learn how to listen, and create new practices to demand a hearing by power.

ACT NOW:

Create principles to examine design assumptions in public futuring practices

Too often, designers assume they know their audience and their expectations. There is insufficient attention to diversity of relationship with the future, emotions, attachments, vulnerabilities, orientations and expectations. We need to find ways to challenge group-think and virtue-signalling as well as harm and patronisation in public futuring events and practices.

RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES, OPENING UP NEW POSSIBILITIES

Challenges	Possibilities
Fear of immersive tech being monopolised	Radically open source and community-owned immersive techs and experiences
Need to defend spaces for collective imagination	Creating liminal, temporary and speculative spaces and institutions of boundless imagination
Sense of urgency can be disabling	Slowing down can lead to better solutions, the pause is a moment of agency
Despair, anger or even repressing feelings can be demotivating when thinking about futures	Embodiment of alternative futures
Falling into binaries of utopian and dystopian modes of thinking	'Possitopias' which expand the imagination
Immersive experiences tending to be one-off	Art is an ally to help embed agency
Immersive tech can make people feel like they're losing control	Immersive tech could be used to reflect on what it is to be human
Immersive tech can feel individualising	Immersive tech could be used to make new publics, to connect people who want something different
Museums are too full of contested knowledge claims and difficult histories	Museums can generate new social practices, art can create new ways of seeing, being and relating
Ecological collapse and the absence of nature	'The river as a teacher' and more-than-human pedagogies could regenerate ecologies

Lines of inquiry

- Who is controlling the visions of the future?
- Whose future is this working for?
- Are we spending too much time in other people's imaginations?
- How can we create comfort with tension and paradox?
- Can we get beyond utopias and dystopias, beyond the usual binaries?
- Is apocalypse a radical beginning?
- What new alliances can be forged?



I AM THE FUTURE

I HAVE BEEN HERE IN
THE MODERN ERA
I'M POWERFUL AND IMBUED
WITH MEANING
I'M WHAT WE HAVE HOPED FOR
AND FOUGHT FOR
I'M OUT OF TIME...



I AM CONNECTION
I AM A STRING
I AM A SINEW
I AM A TWISTING PATH
I AM THE ETHER
I AM ATOMIC
I AM RIGID STEEL
I AM SOFT GLOOP
I AM INSTANT
I AM HARD EARNED

A plurifesto for immersive public futures-making in authoritarian times.

WE REMEMBER: To take risks, that crisis is a call to transformation. The stories not told, the stories not heard. The sacred, the hidden and the ancient. That endings are beginnings. That tools designed for human enhancement can become tools for human diminishing. That public futures are fragile and vulnerable moments that we create together. **WE RECOGNISE:** The need to slow down. The need for new narratives. The joy, beauty and novelty in slow, relational work. The importance of strengthening alliances. Our responsibility to keep the implicit promise that the futures we imagine will have power, that we are not creating false hope of change.

WE COMMIT: To engaging and galvanising those resources of hope that are already at hand. To creating time and space for people to think and dream together. To social technologies that enable collaborative visioning. To using immersive tools for individual agency and collective action. To be truthful to ourselves, while not assuming we hold any indisputable truth. To protecting multiple timelines and to slowing down in response to urgency. To harnessing imagination to break and remake systems with delicious, spacious invitations. To cultural spaces prefiguring a world in which power over others is unthinkable. To listen deeper to what lies beneath articulation. To love, to radical acceptance of our differences, of what makes us human. To imagining (glitchily) beyond our sense of what is. **WE DEMAND:** That the menu for the future is not left to those in power. Technologies that connect not disconnect. **WE CARE:** For values not valuations. **WE REFUSE:** The compulsion towards dichotomies. **WE ACKNOWLEDGE:** That we are always in relation. **WE DEFEND:** Friction and the need to endure discomfort. The plurality of positions, difference and disagreement with respect. **WE STRIVE:** To find a commonality that unites humanity. To reconsider our relationship with nature. **WE INVITE:** A pivot, a move, to worlding. Imagination to disrupt hegemonic social imaginary. Each other's differences, without trying to overcome them.

SELECTED BIOGRAPHIES OF PARTICIPANTS

Aisha Shillingford

Artistic Director, Intelligent Mischief. Aisha Shillingford is an artist and world builder, originally from Trinidad & Tobago. Her mixed media collages, text-based work, street art, murals, installation and experiential design work reflect visions of Black utopias, inspired by abolition, Black radical imagination, solidarity economics, climate futures, marronage and dreamspace. She has been an Artist in Residence within Laundromat Project's Creative Change Program, a mentor at the New Museum Incubator, and a Project Fellow at NYU Tisch Interactive Technology Program.

Alistair Gentry (1973–2026)

Artist and writer. Alistair made live art, performance lectures, artistic interventions, digital installations, online and real-world participatory experiences and live role-playing games, often focusing on communities and audiences outside of conventional gallery or performance spaces.

Andrea Bandelli

Executive Chairman, Woven Foundation for Creative Climate Communication. Andrea is a cultural strategist and scholar working at the intersection of experimental art, public science, and civic activism. His focus is participation rather than transmission: not how to explain science better, but how to share agency in how it is imagined, governed, and used. He steers new collaborations through the Woven Foundation for Creative Climate Communication and advises museums, universities and funding bodies in Europe and beyond. He serves on boards and panels including the Deutsches Museum (Munich), Unverscience (Paris), and the Swiss National Science Foundation's Agora programme.

Annette Mees

Award-winning theatre maker of immersive speculative experiences. As Artist-in-Residence at CenSoF, she explores 'theatres of the future' as new infrastructures for collective imagination, communal technology and climate.

Arathi Sriprakash

Professor of Sociology and Education. Arathi is a sociologist of education. Her current research examines reparative justice in educational systems and practices.

Bridget McKenzie

Researcher, trainer and participatory artist in response to the Earth Crisis. Founder of Climate Museum UK, Culture Declares Emergency and Flow Associates. <https://bridgetmckenzie.uk/>

Carolina Valladeres Celis

Senior Research Associate, University of Bristol. Carolina's research critically explores the integration of digital technologies in education. Her work explores structural inequalities affecting educational processes. Her work in Latin America and the UK has explored how the future of education is being imagined and acted upon in the present as well as who participates (or not) in designing those imaginaries.

Dan Lockton

Professor of Design & Imagination at Norwich University of the Arts. Dan directs the new Institute for Sustainable Worlds. He is a designer-researcher working on tools for collaborative reimagining, in an age of crises and transitions in climate, health, and social inequalities.

Daren Ofako

Doctoral Research College, School of Education, University of Bristol. Research interests in Afrofuturism, Critical Pedagogy, Adult Learning, EdTech, Race in EdTech.

Fabio Rubio Scarano

Curator, Museudo Amanhã. Fabio Rubio Scarano is the Curator of the Museum of Tomorrow (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), where he is also the chairholder of a Unesco Chair in the field of Futures Literacy. He is Professor of Ecology at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, and fellow of the Linnean Society of London. He has served the UN scientific panels on climate change (IPCC) and biodiversity (IPBES), and has held lead executive positions at the Botanical Gardens of

Rio de Janeiro and at the NGOs Conservation International and Brazilian Foundation for Sustainable Development (FBDS). His most recent book is *Regenerative Dialogues for Sustainable Futures* (Springer Nature, 2024).

Finn Strivens

Founder of Studio Futurall. A hybrid arts and consultancy practice that uses designed experiences that help organisations and communities reimagine and enact their desired futures.

Gabriele Zipf

Head of Exhibitions at Futurium since 2015. Gabriele loves working on multidisciplinary topics concerning the needs of societies and the hopes of individuals in a complex world, bringing together science, art and playful experiences.

Genel Ambrose-Joseph

Strategist, researcher and curator. Founder of Good Mirrors.

Helen Burns

Lecture in Education, University of Glasgow. Helen's research is concerned with imagination as a route to personal and social agency, particularly in relation to the role of art and museums within this process.

Helen Manchester

Professor in Participatory Sociodigital Futures at the University of Bristol. Helen has particular interests in collaborative and creative methods for thinking otherwise.

Jen Ross

Professor of Digital Culture and Education Futures, and co-director of the Centre for Research in Digital Education at the University of Edinburgh.

Jess Hoare

Research Associate, Centre for the Creative Economy, Cardiff University. Jess is interested in how heritage and immersive environments shape and critically reimagine the futures of museums and cultural institutions. Her previous research combined data studies with empirical visitor research to explore equity, experience and emotion in cultural engagement.

Jessica Pykett

Political Geographer at University of Birmingham. Jessica works at the intersection of research and policy, exploring how changing forms of expertise about the mind, brain and emotions influence governance practices. She creates ways for marginalised groups to consider who is benefiting and to make change in these spaces.

Johannes Stripple

Associate Professor of Political Science at Lund University, Sweden. Johannes works with speculative and immersive methods to investigate how imaginaries of transformation, time, and crises shape political life and possibility.

Justin McGuirk

Director of Future Observatory at the Design Museum.

Keri Facer

Professor of Educational and Social Futures, University of Bristol. Keri studies social learning in service of ecologically and socially sustainable transformation. She focuses on cultivating 'temporal imagination', ideas of change that open up perception of possibilities in the present.

Kirsten Cater

Professor at University of Bristol. Kirsten has a track record of galvanising innovation, implementing change and making a positive impact in education and research. She specialises in Human Computer Interaction, designing elegant immersive tech solutions for enhancing people's experiences and interactions.

Laurène Cheilan

Postdoctoral Researcher at Graz Sociodigital and Participatory Futures Studio. After working in theatre and facilitating arts/sciences projects, Laurène's PhD (MSCA programme) was an auto/ethnography of public engagement in a science network. They now focus on sociodigital futures research, with particular interests in queer theory, creative and participatory methods.

Dr Lisa Bailey

Director of Australia's award-winning future-focused museum at Adelaide University. With a PhD in Biochemistry, Dr Lisa Bailey transitioned from bench research to science communication, developing programmes across exhibitions, digital content, events, and film festivals. Lisa's work focuses on creating accessible science experiences and exploring how museums can better engage diverse audiences with complex ideas and futures thinking. At MOD she leads a team developing innovative approaches to science communication and cultural engagement.

Lisa May Thomas

Dance artist and researcher. Lisa May Thomas investigates the intersections of dance, embodiment, immersive performance and digital futures. She is a Research Fellow in Performance & Interactive and Immersive Technology at the University of South Wales.

Mandy Rose

Professor of Documentary & Digital Cultures at UWE Bristol. Mandy investigates the relationship between technology and cultural form, and the potential of documentary to contribute to equitable, post-carbon futures.

Marija Antanavičiūtė

Policy & Research fellow at University of Birmingham. Marija is interested in ethics practices and anticipatory ethics.

Marisela Gutierrez Lopez

Researcher at the ESRC Centre for Sociodigital Futures. Marisela is working at the intersection of social sciences, engineering and futures studies. She has led projects that connect academia, industry and civil society to develop methods, practices, and tools to support more inclusive futures.

Mitch Turnbull

Senior Research Associate. Mitch explores how immersive tech engages audiences with nature. An award-winning producer/director/writer with 20+ years' experience, she creates factual content for clients including BBC Studios, National Geographic, Meta, Magic Leap and the UN.

Paul Clarke

Professor of Performance and Creative Technologies and Co-Director of the Centre for Creative Technologies.

Rachel Smith

Artist, developer, creative technologist and maker, Bristol.

Dr Richard Cole

Lecturer in Digital Futures at the University of Bristol. Dr Richard Cole's research focuses on how video games, virtual reality and artificial intelligence systems allow for and pose new forms of humanistic inquiry.

Richard Sandford

Professor of Heritage Evidence Foresight and Policy, University College London.

Rob Morgan

Experience designer & spatial storyteller across VR, XR & immersive theatre. Designs award-winning narrative-driven games & XR experiences for the world's largest IPs and cultural institutions. Author of the world's first dedicated XR storytelling manual.

SELECTED BIOGRAPHIES OF PARTICIPANTS

Rūta Kazlauskaitė

Political scientist at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki. Rūta Kazlauskaitė's research focuses on disinformation and propaganda in extended reality (VR/AR/MR), with particular attention to how immersive technologies reshape political communication and collective memory. She is a co-founder of the Social Sciences and Humanities in Extended Reality Network at the University of Helsinki. She currently leads the Kone Foundation-funded project *Halbwachs in the Metaverse: Storyliving and Democracy in the Age of Immersive Spatial Computing* (2025–2028), which examines how XR technologies are transforming political communication and democratic governance.

Sara Pastore

Postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Social Sciences at the University of Naples. Sara specialises in the sociology of education, with a focus on art and digital education. Her research examines intersections of technologies, pedagogies and sociotechnical imaginaries, with particular attention to how dominant sociotechnical logics shape educational practices and politics. Her current work investigates counter-imaginaries of artificial intelligence, exploring how alternative sociomaterial frameworks, together with speculative, art-based and embodied methodologies, can open up possibilities for non-predetermined and more diverse technological futures.

Steve Benford

Co-founder, Mixed Reality Laboratory. Dunford Professor of Computer Science at the University of Nottingham. Steve co-founded the Mixed Reality Laboratory. He is a UKRI funded Turing AI World Leading Research Fellow exploring 'Somabotics: Creatively Embodying Artificial Intelligence'. He also directs the EPSRC-funded Horizon Centre for Doctoral Training. Steve's research explores artistic applications of digital technologies through performance-led methods that engage artists in creating, touring and studying unique interactive experiences. In turn, these have inspired fresh perspectives on interaction such as trajectories and uncomfortable interactions.

Terry Marshall

Founder and Executive Creative Director, Intelligent Mischief. Terry is an artist, writer, cultural innovator, creative strategist and cultural studies scholar living in Brooklyn by way of Barbados and Boston. He has 25 plus years of experience as a labour and cultural organiser and previously founded the *Hip Hop Media Lab* and *Streets is Watching*.

Verity Jones

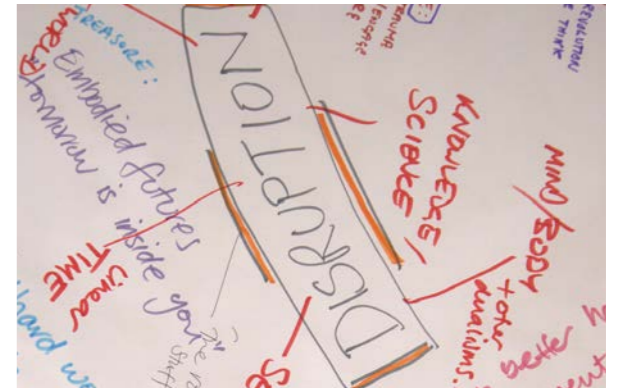
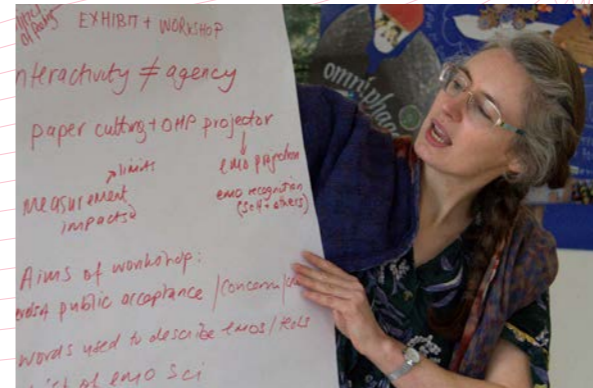
Associate Professor at University of the West of England, Bristol. Verity has a long-standing research interest in routes to sustainable futures. She is Education Lead for Global Goals Centre and the development of education experiences at SPARKS, Bristol.

Verity McIntosh

Associate Professor of Virtual and Extended Realities at the UWE Bristol. Verity is also Director and Principal Investigator of Immersive Arts, a UK-wide programme supporting artists to engage with immersive technologies.

Vitória Holz

Researcher at the UNESCO Chair on Planetary Well-being and Regenerative Anticipation and collaborator at the Museum of Tomorrow (Brazil). Vitória is a PhD candidate in Ecology at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, researching futures, sustainability and Seeds of a Good Anthropocene.



I AM

I AM THE CATCHER OF HOPE SNIPPETS
 I AM THE SAILOR LOOKING FOR
 (HOPE) ISLANDS
 I AM THE DOUBTER
 (BUT NOT OF SCIENCE)
 I AM THE LINKAGE BETWEEN PAST
 AND (WHICH?) FUTURE
 I AM THE CREATIVE

THE SUITCASE OF GIFTS

The Suitcase of Gifts was a collection of images symbolising what feeds our imagination, documenting the diversity of histories, cultures and identities at the conference. During the event, people generously shared with Marisela a mix of wondrous life memories, inspiring places, traditions and objects, and mementos of hope, joy and change. The images, with a line of their stories, were printed as tags (or gifts) and gathered into a suitcase for our journey, inviting curiosity, sharing, and enjoyment of each other's imagination. At the end, the gifts were distributed so each person left with a new gift to inspire their imagination wherever they may go.

Marisela Gutierrez Lopez

Researcher at the ESRC Centre for Sociodigital Futures.



As a creative response to the symposium, **Daren Ofako** produced an **Afrofuturist** soundtrack in the form of an electronic music concept album.

The album experimented with Afrofuturism as a multimodal method for documenting a knowledge-sharing 'Futures' event. Working with audio, silence, musical forms and spoken word statements, Daren wove in sounds that reflected the act of thinking together, our geographical locations and journeys, and our personal involvement in the symposium into four movements for the Immersive Futures Symbiont Positronic Lyceum.



You can listen here: <https://www.benny-russell.blackconnectivefutures.org/index.html#about>

You can order a CD or record to keep here: <https://elasticstage.com/benny-russell/releases/benny-russell-vol-3-album>

Here are some projects and people that may inspire you to imagine immersive futures-making practices differently.

Alistair Gentry artist in residence at CENSOF: <https://alistairgentry.net/>

Annette Mees artist in residence at CENSOF: www.audiencelabs.org/about

Climate Museum UK, including explaining idea of Possitopia: <https://climatemuseumuk.org/>

Future Observatory, a national research programme for the green transition hosted by the Design Museum, with the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK <https://futureobservatory.org/>

Future Places Toolkit, providing immersive community engagement on future of places for architects, civil engineers and planners with Augmented Reality: <https://futureplacestoolkit.co.uk/>

Futurium, Berlin, Germany, national museum opened in 2019 to spark conversations about the future and encourage participation in shaping the future. <https://futurium.de/en>

Intelligent Mischief New York, creative studio cultivating hope, connection and visions of more beautiful futures: <https://www.intelligentmischief.com/>

Museum of Discovery Adelaide, Australia's leading future-focused museum at the intersection of science, art and innovation: <https://mod.org.au/>

Museum of Tomorrow Rio de Janeiro, Guided by the values of sustainability and coexistence: <https://museudoamanha.org.br/en>

Mixed Reality Lab interactive technologies to enhance everyday life <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/mixedrealitylab/>

Rachel Smith artist in residence at CENSOF: <https://rachelsmith.xyz/about.html>

Somabotics: Creatively Embodying AI UKRI Turing AI Fellowship, exploring how people make meaning through art and embodied experience: <https://www.somabotics.ac.uk/>

Sunsets and Sunrises: Lost Futures and Emerging Hopes, how lost futures can help people collaboratively reimagine alternative futures: <https://norwichuni.ac.uk/research-and-knowledge-exchange/projects/sunsets-and-sunrises-lost-futures-and-emerging-hopes/>

Temporal Imagination, working creatively with time to open up new possibilities, <https://www.temporalimagination.org/>

Woven Foundation, helping science reach heads of state and the hearts of the public by harnessing the emotional power of art and culture: <https://www.woven-foundation.org/>

Feminist Ageing Futures in Datafied Worlds: this project works with older women (60+) to co-design, make and test new arts and design-led methods for critical engagements with questions around datafied futures as they relate to the lives and (perceived) vulnerabilities of older women. <https://fellowship-geschlechterforschung.uni-graz.at/en/projects/projects-call-2025/feminist-ageing-futures-in-datafied-worlds/>

Imagine Futures: workshops for schools, young people and museums developed by the Climate Museum UK collective <https://imaginefutures.net/>

Earth Talk: community of practice & courses on engaging people with the Earth Crisis through imaginative activism <https://bridgetmckenzie.uk/earth-talk>

Exploring sociodigital futures in-the-making

Founded in 2022, the Centre for Sociodigital Futures (CenSoF) is a flagship £10m research centre, funded by the ESRC and led by the University of Bristol in collaboration with 12 other universities globally. Our purpose is to explore sociodigital futures-in-the-making. We live in a sociodigital world – a world where society and digital technology are increasingly bound together.

This presents us with an array of possible ‘sociodigital futures’ across different areas of life and work.

While we can’t predict ‘the’ future, how we think about, imagine and act upon possible futures in the present matters a great deal.

We bring together world-leading expertise from social sciences, engineering and the arts, as well as partner organisations and businesses.

Together, we create new approaches to sociodigital research that enable a move towards fairer and more environmentally sustainable societies.

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged.

Grant reference ES/W002639/1

Get in touch via:

Website:
www.bristol.ac.uk/research/centres/sociodigital-futures/

LinkedIn:
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Bluesky:
bsky.app/profile/sociodigfutures.bsky.social

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Thank you

The learning team would like to thank;

Kate Ward
Amy Janson and
Jude Hill

without whom this event would have been unimaginable.

The **core team at Censof** make all of the research possible and we are infinitely grateful for their project management, creativity and humanity in making good things happen.

Our thanks also to;
Marisela Gutierrez Lopez,
Laurene Cheilan,
Daren Okafo and
Marija Anatanavicuite
for their co-design and creative facilitation and support during the symposium.

Report design: **Suffia+co**
Photography: **Melissa Seal**

