# Research and Curation across Art, Technology, and Eco-Social Change

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**Furtherfield is London's longest-running centre for art and technology. Its mission is to disrupt and democratise art and tech through co-creation, in-depth exploration, open tools and free thinking. Since 1996, Furtherfield has developed an international reputation for initiating experiments in artistic co-creation across digital networks. As a global hub that has grown up on the web, the time and energy of its team and participants have focused on decentralised and distributed peer-to-peer practices, fostering new projects with artists, and seizing and challenging debates about the role of art and technology in society.[1] Furtherfield Gallery is in the heart of Finsbury Park, less than 10 minutes from Tube and National Rail Stations. Roughly 55,000 people per week use the park, which sits at the borders of three London boroughs in a neighbourhood described as 'super-diverse' due to the nearly 100 languages spoken locally by large migrant communities. The 150-year-old park is a well-known site of protest and festivals. The Furtherfield Commons (or lab) is based at the corner of Finsbury Park and provides a co-working space and workshop venue. The Furtherfield Website (and associated social platforms) has hosted discussions on art and technology since the mid-1990s. As an arts organisation that straddles digital and physical space, working locally and translocally with various communities, we are invested in citizenship concepts and placemaking practices.[2]**

This essay revisits some of Furtherfield's work with researchers and universities. We are a relatively small but deeply influential organisation, and we hope this piece of writing will act as a guide/inspiration to other organisations/cultural practitioners and the research community on issues concerning culture, technology and social good. It is an autoethnographic account of Furtherfield's experience, context and relationship as an organisation working with art, technology, and social change, and its collaborative research with others. Actively building and learning through combined ambitions to explore, change and study the world through art production has been a fascinating way of existing. For nearly thirty years, this has evolved through being connected to various grassroots entities and enterprises, using technology and local (physical) environments and places. These include being part of networked communities online but always remembering that we are part of society, whether it involves technology, the Internet, or our gallery and lab in Finsbury Park, London. Through these different environments, Furtherfield has dedicated much of its energy to negotiating themes, projects and infrastructures to highlight societal issues as part of an ongoing critique and study of the world we live in with others and a fresh openness towards other stories and complexities.

The research is gathered from events, exhibitions, and projects. The material examines and communicates narratives beyond the established art world. Belonging to a small-scale group brings an interdisciplinary set of skills where the politics of scale is all too realistic concerning survival. This understanding brings about situated pieces of knowledge with artists, researchers, techies, activists, and the public living in the local area, drawing from what Donna Haraway has termed *Situated Knowledges*,[3] a nuanced and rooted understanding of some histories, ideas and themes. It maps out awareness for people who have been traditionally

1    Garrett, Marc. *Furtherfield: Twenty Years of Art, Technology, and Social Change*. 2021, https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/46084/.

2    Ibid

3    Haraway, Donna J. *Situated Knowledges Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 1st edition (New York, USA; Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1991), p. 191.

outsiders. For example, the working classes and those within 'categories of race and sex that have been so exuberantly produced in the histories of masculinist, racist, and colonialist dominations.'[4] It concerns re-marking and reorientating in a world designed for a globalised history of masculinist capitalism and colonialism. The material examined ranges across ten years, from 2013 to 2023. At its core, Furtherfield's work has been to understand how to change society as part of its relationship with the world, which relates to taking culture as its material and medium. For this to work, we have always regarded all participants and collaborators as part of an ever-changing community. Other 'New' Media Art organisations are driven by institutional concerns and top-down status, thus reconfirming societal norms and hierarchies. We have intended to connect horizontally with those who ask similar questions. Connecting up others with smaller groups or self-institutions such as NeMe Arts Centre (CY), Access Space (UK), Cube Cinema (UK), Aksioma (SL), Drugo More (B), Arts Catalyst (UK), and many other small to mid-sized organisations. We all have similar motives in not choosing whether innovation is just new or part of the ideology of profit generation for economic growth. That innovation is also a critique of colonial ambitions and part of the community, where grassroots, human values equally deserve respect as a way forward.

This essay loosely employs three auto-ethnographically based narratives to help build relatable and contextual insights where social context is part of the written dynamic. Autoethnography is a form of ethnographic research in which a researcher connects personal experiences to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings.[5] It is considered a form of qualitative arts-based practice. It involves critically observing an individual's lived experiences and connecting those experiences to broader cultural, political, and social concepts. More narrowly defined as "insider ethnography," referring to studies of the (culture of) a group of which the researcher is a member.[6]

The auto-ethnographic approach draws on three main themes: biographical, cultural, and collective. It examines people, cultures, organisations, and institutions outside a privileged class and the bridges that build connections. They look at critically informed solidarities with individuals and groups and investigate their ideas, life and culture as part of their academic and artistic practice. Thus, we gain an appreciation for a more 'touchable' world with shared biographies. The cultural story of Furtherfield reflects a sociological narrative where stories are told, and shared visions are explored and developed as deliberate emancipations. Furtherfield's contribution is referenced throughout as a source for analysis and reflection. The diversity of these collective stories all involve social change, justice and activism in some form.

4    Haraway, Donna J. *Cyberculture Theorists* (Routledge Critical Thinkers) - SILO.PUB. https://silo.pub/cyberculture-theorists-routledge-critical-thinkers.html

5    Leavy, Patricia. *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (3rd ed.). The Guilford Ford 2020.

6    Hayano, David M. *Auto-Ethnography: Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects.* Human Organization. (1979). 99–104.

## Stepping outside of the Silos

In her book *Staying with the Trouble,* Haraway says nothing makes itself. Building walls around ourselves and staying fixed in our self-prescribed silos is not going to reflect or cut it regarding how shared knowledge and emancipation progress. Knowledge needs to be shared and experienced, not only as information but as physical material made real. Haraway also discusses the context of *Worlding,* for a symbiosis as a sensible materialism, investigating these materialisms as a form of innovation in its own right. Thus bypassing the Singularity that technology is king and being more open to a flexible, generous set of ecologies as part of rebalancing our unequal society.[7]

Numerous techno-visions proclaim how technology will positively change our lives and futures. In *You Are Not A Gadget: A Manifesto* (2010), Jaron Lanier describes Ray Kurzweil's excitement regarding Singularity as apocalyptic and says, 'Singularity books are as common in a computer science department as Rapture images are in an evangelical bookstore'[8] (Lanier 2011, p. 25). Kurzweil argues that 'progress would eventually become virtually instantaneous—a singularity' (Satell 2016). The future will 'naturally' solve humanity's problems via technological solutions. On the surface, it does look like we are heading towards Kurzweil's dream of the future. Yet, not assuming this monocultural ideal as the be-all and end-all is necessary. Because being part of the larger discussion of technology's effects on our lives is a positive and empowering act of agency, rather than sitting at the sidelines and merely commenting, Furtherfield has brought up various questions regarding technology in the gallery and lab space in the park for an everyday audience to explore with us. We've invited visitors to view art installations, software art, and networked performances and to examine how our lives — personal and political — are being shaped by digital technologies. Being contemporary is not just about adapting to technology. It's about critiquing the artist's role in the 21st century and their place in the world.

In 2018, artist and researcher Simon Poulter wrote about Furtherfield in 'Fieldwork in Human and Machine Imagination' in the park.

> *We are not isolated from the huge pressures of the global economy when advancements outstrip the ethics and the algorithms that come to define new normative patterns and processes. The role of digital creativity and artists is now fully emerging as one that reconnects them and us back into the critical space that Goya, Galas and others occupied. So, we can hold up time and re-enter it at a different point. Yes, Furtherfield offers time travel!* [9] (Poulter, 2018).

Furtherfield's critical sensibilities and situated place in the park examine different (new and alternative) forms of individual and collective critiques and collaborations beyond imposing an art ideology. Cultural identities and questions about the world and across the local community in Haringey are seen, heard, and shared as part of a mutually respectful and informed exploration and cultural collaboration.

7    Haraway, Donna J.. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 2016).

8    Lanier, Jaron. *You Are Not A Gadget: A Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2011), p. 25.

9    Poulter, Simon. *A Provocation to Furtherfield from Simon Poulter*. Furtherfield. May 3, 2018. https://www.furtherfield.org/a-provocation-to-furtherfield/ Accessed 27 November 2018]

## Here Come the Drones

The point of Furtherfield and its relationship to knowledge and research is not to impose an assumption or an agenda but to reflect on its findings and ask questions based on them with others. Breaking down our silos and putting into practice a kind of cultural intimacy is an act of generosity, not just to those we wish to work with but to whoever. One example where Furtherfield's sense of criticality and recognition of its role in asking questions with others is when we collaborated with Dave Young in 2013, an artist and researcher based in Edinburgh. Young had been deeply engaged in researching military drones, their growth, and their global uses. In 2010, RAF-controlled Reapers, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), used their weapons in Afghanistan 123 times in the first ten months of 2010.[10] Now, military drones are regularly used at a distance ambiguously without an official statement of war or national threat, literally weaponising reconnaissance.

As I have mentioned, The Furtherfield Gallery is situated in the middle of Finsbury Park and resides between the boroughs of Hackney, Haringey, and Islington. Young's investigation into drones interested us and many people who use the park. Many of those living amongst these local communities have experienced war in their homeland, and their families have been terrorised and killed by drones. Young's concerns are about the development of drones and how these conditions are changing as a symbol of conflict. Post 9-11, drones became part of the language, aesthetics, and



Bit Plane by Bureau of Inverse Technology. 1997.

transnational politics of the War on Terror. Today, in 2023, the regular usage of drones has become normalised. Still, even just a decade ago, knowledge and critical discussion around drone politics and loss of civilian lives were rare. So, having the opportunity to bring in a researcher to share his investigative knowledge on the matter was a privilege. Not only this, but it was also exciting to observe the different discoveries and interpretations with everyday people in the park.

For the exhibition *Movable Borders: Here Come the Drones!*[11], co-curated by Young and Furtherfiled, we invited artists to explore drones as part of their creative practice. A notable artwork featured in the show was Bit Plane by the Bureau of Inverse Technology (Natalie Jeremijenko and Kate Rich). An early artistic reflection 'between technology and surveillance and, as such, it can be seen as a precursor to the emerging DIY surveillance video enabled by the new availability of drones.'[12] The Bureau designed A radio-controlled model aeroplane with a micro-video camera and transmitter which was made quite a time earlier, In 1997. The live control-view video feed from the plane above Silicon Valley guided it. The pilot on the ground

10   Attack of the Drones. *the Guardian*. Owen Bowcott and Paul Lewis, 16 Jan 2011. https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/jan/16/drones-unmanned-aircraft

11   *Movable Borders: Here Come the Drones!* Furtherfield. Mixed exhibition. Bureau of Inverse Technology, Lawrence Bird, Patrick Lichty, Dave Miller & Gavin Stewart, The Force of Freedom and Dave Young. May 2013. https://www.furtherfield.org/movable-borders-here-come-the-drones/

12   Ibid.

could 'steer the unit deep into the glittering heartlands of the Information Age.'[13]

Young's practice follows critical research into digital culture, manifested through workshops, website development, and talks on subjects varying from cybernetics and the Cold War history of network technologies to issues around copyright and open source/free culture. Young hosted the workshop Movable Borders: The Reposition Matrix at Furtherfield Gallery in 2013 as part of a larger exhibition we co-curated called Movable Borders: Here Come the Drones! The exhibition and workshops were well attended, and a cross-section of the local community came along and got involved. Drones are an example of an integrated technology that has advanced dramatically for consumers, security and the military.

In contrast to '*The Disposition Matrix* [...] a database of information for tracking, capturing, rendering, or killing suspected enemies of the United States'.[14] Young appropriated the name, adapted it to *The Reposition Matrix*, and reclaimed it through a workshop at the gallery space. Participants were invited to investigate drones and unearth what the Disposition Matrix was collectively. It began with a discussion, and small groups began working together on a world map, trying to visualise complex geopolitics through mapping. There were different methodologies used, and one group examined the 'Wikileaks cables detailing US fears that Iran was using 'proxies' to get components required to build their drone and evade trade embargoes'.[15] This helped build up a larger picture of the trading networks Iran had allegedly built up onto the map, crisscrossing West Asia, North Africa, Europe, and Japan. The participating groups sometimes collided on the map where sources crossed over. There were obvious yet important nodes that appeared. For example, Washington and the FATA regions of Pakistan.

The workshop was useful to materialise the previously hidden and confusing information about where drones are being made and distributed, legally and clandestinely. I was present at the workshop that day. There was a steady rhythm with those who just sat around and watched what was happening, even making tea and sharing food while the participants mapped drones and their materials worldwide. A diverse mix of visitors and participants attended, including artists, academics, social scientists, and passers-by in the park. The combination of citizen-based and academic research brought a closer understanding of the subjects at hand through learning, discussing and collaborating. Thus creating the circumstance where cultural peer-enhanced emancipation took place.



*Movable Borders: The Reposition Matrix* at Furtherfield Gallery in 2013

13  Ibid.

14  Miller, Greg. (23 October 2012). "Plan for hunting terrorists signals U.S. intends to keep adding names to kill lists". *The Washington Post*. Archived from the original on 26 October 2012.

15  The Reposition Matrix. Regine Debatty interviews Dave Young. *We Make Money Not Art*. June 3, 2013. https://we-make-money-not-art.com/the_reposition_matrix/

## Superdiversity: Picturing Finsbury Park

One key element that glues the research and curation for the exhibitions, events, and projects is the shared desire to investigate what we (and our collaborators) previously did not know. The collaboration with Young is a good example of this, as is our work with Katherine Stansfeld from the Royal Holloway University, London, a local cultural geographer, researcher, and artist.

Stansfeld and Furtherfield wanted to know more about the people who lived in the local area of Finsbury, Haringey, Islington and Hackney, all neighbouring the park. For us, it was a way to connect to more people in the area to talk about each other's lives and histories. For Stansfeld, it was a chance to explore local people's lives to see what the area meant for different people. Asking what place and difference meant for them in the context of a neighbourhood in today's London, a global city, it also attempted



Superdiversity - Picturing Finsbury Park. 18-26 February 2017. Photo by Pau Ros.

to re-socialise 'the map' through social research practice. The collaborative exhibition, events, and project *Superdiversity: Picturing Finsbury Park* was hosted in the Furtherfield Gallery in 2017. Stansfeld received funding and support from The Ordnance Survey, the Economic and Social Research Council, and the Royal Holloway Centre for the GeoHumanities.

> *My roots are here. I'm proud to be where I am and happy to be where I am. I have very good memories and bad, I guess. I felt like one of the key things for my children is to make sure they fit in; it's so important to fit in and feel part of something, and I think that was my struggle. Finsbury Park worker and ex-resident.*[16]

Tens of thousands of people move through Finsbury Park. Landscapes alter as buildings rise, and impending verticality threatens sought-after sunshine. This exhibition explores city dwellers' experiences of increasing density and accelerated transformation, alongside so many others, and how it affects the notion of neighbourhood space. The exhibition featured visual ethnography: video, photography, and mapping to explore how lives and trajectories overlap in the area. Stansfeld observed and encountered many people to discover what type of space fosters conviviality or causes contestation. Through this process, Stansfeld uncovered social relations and captured the experience of super-diversity, evoking the particular practices, rhythms and moods that create the urban multicultural place of Finsbury Park.[17]

Photographic 'place portraits' created by Stansfeld as part of walking interviews acknowledge the everyday places that matter, accompanied by audio narrations by participants explaining their significance. Stansfeld's films of urban encounters and maps of vernacular geographies,

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16  *Superdiversity: Picturing Finsbury Park*. Katherine Stansfeld & Furtherfield. 18 Feb– 1 March 2017. https://www.furtherfield.org/superdiversity-picturing-finsbury-park/

17  Ibid.

constructed using digital mapping tools, explore whether a new cultural cartography is possible — one that is fluid and dynamic — a shifting platform to express super-diversity. Through this process, Stansfeld uncovers social relations and captures the experience of super-diversity, evoking the particular practices, rhythms and moods that create the urban multicultural place of Finsbury Park.[18]

"It feels more homely being around people from everywhere" —Finsbury Park resident.[19]

Finsbury Park is an area which faces a large population churn and straddles people from all backgrounds, where almost two-thirds of the population, and over 70% of young people, are from ethnic minority backgrounds and over 100 languages are spoken. In Islington, a third of the population (36%) was born out of the UK, and a quarter of households have an individual with a long-term health problem or disability. In Hackney, 1 in 10 people define themselves as LGBT, and the borough has significantly higher proportions of Buddhist, Jewish and Muslim residents than the rest of the UK. This data was from 2017; the last Haringey census was in March 2021. Like many other public spaces, Furtherfield had to close during COVID-19 and couldn't collect reliable local data referring to this period.[20]

> *Today, the area could be called 'superdiverse' in the sense that the migration has become diversified, no longer in the form of post-war waves for specific employment. Diversity has many forms, and residents vary in religion, ethnicity, legal and employment status, sexuality and class. The concept of 'superdiversity' seeks to recognise the unpredictable, mobile and complex forms of migration to urban areas.*[21] (Stansfeld 2017).

Stansted used real, local data to build an authentic study of those living around Finsbury Park. Furtherfield connected to new people who worked and lived nearby. After this exhibition, many who were in the exhibition or were visitors returned to other events, projects and exhibitions. For us, the exhibition and project were a success. It meant that everyday people who may not have been as likely to see art exhibitions learned we were open to them. As some of them got to know us more, they appreciated our philosophy of including their voices as part of the remit and context of Furtherfield's research and curation.



Superdiversity — Picturing Finsbury Park. 18 - 26 February 2017. Photo by Pau Ros.

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18    Ibid.

19    Ibid

20    Ibid.

21    Stansfeld, Katherine. *Mapping Superdiversity* (PDF). Printed by The Royal Holloway Centre for the GeoHumanities. 2017. https://mappingsuperdiversity.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/mappingsuperdiversity-final.pdf

Superdiversity - Picturing Finsbury Park. 18 - 26 February 2017. Photo by Pau Ros.

Furtherfield has worked with the public in the park for a while. The examples I'm presenting in this essay are just a small representation of a rich, complex and joyful set of experiences we have been lucky to be involved with. Looking back at them, another thread linking them all up is agency. Through conversations with the public who have visited the gallery, we have been informed of what is of public interest. Gentrification haunts people trying to survive in the area, the same as in other parts of London. The worst examples of gentrification prioritise the economic interests of distant property developers (often in league with cash-strapped and ideologically ambiguous Local Authorities) with scant regard for existing residents.[22]

These conditions reveal a double bind for socially engaged artists, local galleries, and creative industries. They find themselves complicit in processes that can negatively affect the lives of long-standing residents in places regarded as ripe for development. Furtherfield continues to live with the question of artists' agency and responsibility concerning development and gentrification.[23] Being in the park has been challenging yet necessary to further its relation to other communities beyond the art world and media art field.

22   Garrett, Marc. *Furtherfield: Twenty Years of Art, Technology, and Social Change*. PhD. Birkbeck College, University of London. p. 197-198.

23   Ibid.

## The Museum of Contemporary Commodities

It's difficult to practically work with others and be engaged in critical contexts while remaining relevant to those who need particular situations and circumstances to be less hidden. Such a hybrid way of working and curatorial complexity was demonstrated two years before the *Superdiversity* exhibition, and this was the case with *The Museum of Contemporary Commodities* (MoCC), an art-social science project led by artist Paula Crutchlow (Blind Ditch) and cultural geographer Ian Cook (University of Exeter) in collaboration with Furtherfield. It was a nine-month residency at the park, getting to know local people, community groups, and shops in the surrounding area. The Economic and Social Science Research Council, Islington Council, All Change Arts, Exeter City Council and the University of Exeter support the projects.[24] As part of the MOCC, the For *The Human Face of Cryptoeconomies*[25] exhibition at Furtherfield occurred in July 2015. Here, MoCC invited people to 'imagine the things they value today as the heritage of tomorrow' to reflect on the ethics of production, data, and trade embedded in the things they buy, imagining themselves as future attendees at a museum of twenty-first-century commodities.



We have worked with researchers and artists who share similar values and have enacted Harraway's critique(s). MoCC is one of those groups. We had already worked with Crutchlow on other projects, such as Make-*shift*[26], when she collaborated with artist, techie, and feminist activist Helen Varley Jamieson as part of Furtherfield's Media Art Ecologies programme (beginning in 1009). The Make-shift cyberperformance was developed initially in a residency at Furtherfield in 2010. It examined ecological themes while co-located in people's homes via the Internet. Participants were asked to find plastic they had used in the previous 24 hours before the event and were invited to join in some easy games and tasks as part of a live networked performance. Jamieson and Crutchlow were situated in different venues and homes worldwide (one in each house simultaneously). They communicated and performed via a live stream displayed on their artist-crafted online interface. The artists acted as guides while people invited to participate were encouraged to share personal stories about ecological issues. Online audiences joined the Make-*shift* platform, contributing text chats visible on the interface to everyone participating. The events always ended with people sharing food and discussing the consequences of domestic eco-waste.[27]

24  Share your Values with the Museum of Contemporary Commodities. MoCC. Paula Crutchlow (Blind Ditch) and cultural geographer Ian Cook (University of Exeter) Furtherfield. 2015. https://www.furtherfield.org/share-your-values-with-the-museum-of-contemporary-commodities/

25  The Human Face of Cryptoeconomies. Mixed exhibition. Furtherfield. 17/10/2015 — 22/11/2015 https://www.furtherfield.org/the-human-face-of-cryptoeconomies/

26  make-shift http://make-shift.net/how-it-works/ [accessed 21 October 2018]

27  Garrett, Marc. *Furtherfield: Twenty Years of Art, Technology, and Social Change*. PhD. Birkbeck College, University of London. p. 179-80.

It was a collaboration between four European arts organisations — APO33, Furtherfield, MAD emergent Art Center and Schaumbad Freies Atelierhaus — and two individuals, Helen Varley Jamieson and Martin Eisenbarth, funded by the European Cultural Foundation.[28] Elena Pérez says that Crutchlow and Jamieson consider 'the work of art as a collaboration between authors and spectators, and treats the audience in democratic terms, inviting its members to co-create artworks' (Pérez 2014). From these unusually sociable artworks, essential discussions were generated that mattered to them.



The Museum of Contemporary Commodities by Paula Crutchlow and Dr Ian Cook. Part of The Human Face of Cryptoeconomies at Furtherfield Gallery. 16 Oct - 22 Nov 2015. Photo by Pau Ros.

MoCC invited the public to join a team of volunteer researchers and art makers to participate in walk shops, workshops, and digital art social events at Furtherfield Commons and Gallery and other local spaces in and around the Finsbury Park area and online. It evolved, featuring various stalls and interfaces collaborating with the public where park visitors interacted. One of the various outcomes presented at the event and the exhibition was a repurposed Internet-connected 'smart' doll, Mikayla, acting as a guide for visitors. It was designed to appeal to young children with its long yellow hair, pink outfit and cheery voice, and respond to children's questions by consulting the web. Paula Crutchlow worked with technologist Gareth Foote to reconfigure the doll's original script to make her self-aware.

The doll talked with the visitors about who made her and how she felt about the condition of ubiquitous digital connectivity. A year after the exhibition, in December 2016, in Germany, customer complaints attracted much media focus regarding issues concerning personal security, which were inherent in the object allegedly breaching the personal privacy of children and families. The doll's software was listening and collecting data without the consent of children under 13 accessing phone data, services and hardware without clear explanation.

MoCC's work reminds us of how commercial technology and its ubiquitousness, combined with neoliberal values and defaults, can edge its way into our everyday behaviours, where we become commodities. Crutchlow & Cook playfully highlighted this with lively, irreverent and conversational experiences that would help us examine commodity cultures' infrastructures, systems, processes and practices and suggest ideas for positive change. It involved members of the public where MoCC staged various 'pop-up' events like an outdoor market and presented the findings as an exhibition at Furtherfield.[29]

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28   We Have A Situation!. Partners & People https://wehaveasituation.net/?page_id=63
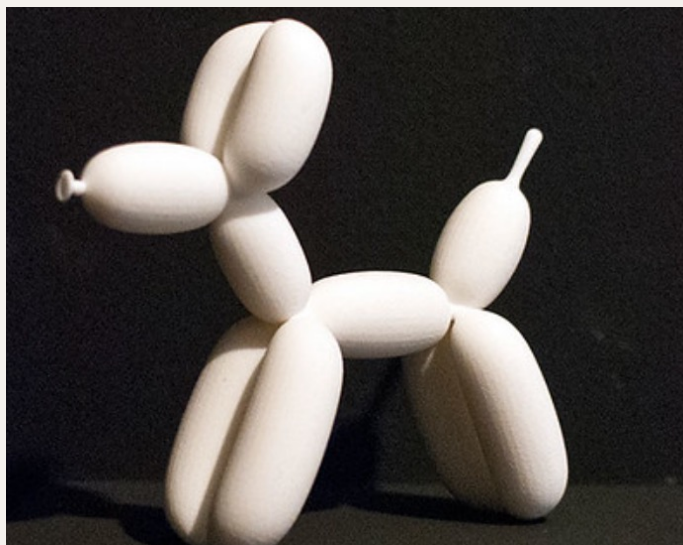29   Ibid.

## Blockchain and Cryptocurrency Adventures

MoCC's event was part of *The Human Face of Cryptoeconomies* exhibition in 2015, including Émilie Brout and Maxime Marion, Shu Lea Cheang, Sarah T Gold, Jennifer Lyn Morone, Rhea Myers, the London School of Financial Arts and the Robin Hood Cooperative. Furtherfield has been researching how crypto economies and their blockchain technology can build art alternatives for a few years. This exhibition was one of the earliest ventures into presenting artworks that reveal how we might produce, exchange and value things differently in the age of the blockchain.

When new and powerful technologies are developed, they tend to reflect the interests and values of those who develop them, impacting many people's everyday lives. Furtherfield has sought to cultivate a critically informed diversity in the conversations and practices surrounding the blockchain development space since 2015 to counter this tendency. Just as it has been necessary for artists to move into all forms of technology to disrupt the top-down narratives, today's thinkers, hackers, and artists need to engage critically with the blockchain to translate, speculate and intervene in the impacts of its global roll-out.[30]



Balloon Dog by Rhea Myers. Part of The Human Face of Cryptoeconomies at Furtherfield Gallery. 16 Oct - 22 Nov 2015. Photo by Pau Ros.

In 2016, Ruth Catlow, Co-Director of Furtherfield, initiated the making of a short film called *The Blockchain: Change Everything Forever*[31], asking what a blockchain could do and who creates a new society from this technology. Made in collaboration with Digital Catapult and filmmaker Peter Gomes, it was published on YouTube, and within a month, it received 15,438 visits. Catlow interviewed artists, developers, activists, business people, and theorists for the film. The film recognised that the blockchain was at the same stage of development as the web had been in the late 1980s and involved discussions around grave concerns about the potential for the code (of smart contracts) to become law effectively. This law would be defined by a tiny group of developers, funded by wealthy venture capitalists, operating outside of regulation, overturning centuries of evolution of global governance and law.

In 2017, we worked with Sam Skinner and Nathan Jones of the experimental publishing outfit *Torque Editions* to publish a book called *Artists Re: Thinking the Blockchain*,[32] the first book of

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30   Garrett, Marc. Unlocking Proprietorial Systems for Artistic Practice. A Peer-Reviewed Journal About RESEARCH VALUES. APRJA Volume 7, Issue 1, 2018. p, 108.

31   Catlow, Ruth and Gomes, Peter. *The Blockchain: Change Everything Forever. Digital Catapult*. Published on Oct 3, 2016. https:/www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Zp37zarSQc&t=15s&pbjreload=10/ accessed January 11 2019.

32   Artists Re:thinking the Blockchain. Catlow, Ruth. Garrett, Marc. Jones, Nathan. Skinner, Sam. Liverpool University Press. September 11th, 2017.

its kind to actively bring together artistic, speculative, conceptual, and technical engagements with the blockchain. The book featured a range of newly commissioned essays, fiction, illustration, and art documentation exploring what the blockchain could and should mean for our collective futures. The full-colour publication included documentation of artistic projects engaged in the blockchain, including key works by Plantoid, Terra0, and Bittercoin, with theorisations on key areas regarding the global blockchain and its conversations by writers such as Hito Steyerl, Rachel O'Dwyer, Rhea Myers, Ben Vickers, and Holly Herndon, Mat Dryhurst, and new poetry, illustration and speculative fiction by Theodoros Chiotis, Cecilia Wee, Juhee Hahm, and many more.
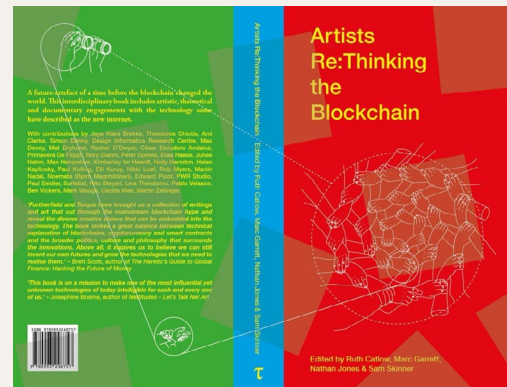
Many of the book's contributors are deeply involved in blockchain culture, whether it concerns research or art. For example, Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst have been developing their technology and protocols, focusing on digital identity, voice ownership, and augmentation. These technical systems facilitate expansive artworks across media and are proposed as artworks unto themselves. Rachel O'Dwyer, in 2023, published *Tokens: The Future of Money in the Age of the Platform* on Verso Books, which was about NFTs, Web3, Crypto and DAOs (decentralised autonomous organisations) and the political consequences of platform capitalism.[33] Ben Vickers with K Allado-McDowell, edited *Atlas of Anomalous AI* in 2020.[34] Mapping a complex relationship to intelligence, from ancient to emerging systems of knowledge, defining concepts of AI from an imaginative, artistic and revitalising perspective. Hito Steyerl has been described as a post-internet artist but is so much more and has been critiquing the uses of digital technology tools to tackle broader social issues beyond web culture. The artist and hacker Rhea Myers has been making blockchain art, writing blockchain art theory, and blockchain stories, and has worked with Furtherfield on exhibitions, projects, publications and various discussions on issues relating to technology. She embarked on her first art projects focusing on blockchain tech in 2011, making her one of the first artists to engage in creative, speculative, and conceptual engagements with "the new internet."[35] Since contributing to the book, Myers has been acknowledged as a pioneer whose work has graced the auction rooms of Sotheby's and has published the important *Proof of Work: Blockchain Provocations 2011-2021*.[36]

Along with a print edition, *Artists Re: Thinking the Blockchain* included a web-based project in partnership with Design Informatics at the University of Edinburgh. Finbook is an interface where readers and bots can trade on the value of chapters included in the book. As such, it imagines a new regime for cultural significance under blockchain conditions. All of Furtherfield's ventures relate to propositions to build possible futures through worlding or art worlding. It is radical, creative liberation as emancipation. It is part of our daily life to use DIY

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33   O'Dwyer, Rachel. Tokens: The Future of Money in the Age of the Platform. verso Boks, 2003. https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/products/2957-tokens

34   Vickers, B and Allado-McDowell, K. *Atlas of Anomalous AI*. Ignota Books, 2020.

35   *Proof of Work: Blockchain Provocations 2011–2021*. Text on MIT. https://mitpress.mit.edu/9781915103048/proof-of-work/

36   Myers, Rhea. *Proof of Work: Blockchain Provocations 2011-2021* (Urbanomic / Art Editions). Urbanomic Media Ltd, 2023.

skills and critically in-tune social contexts that arrive through tools and platforms with others.[37]

The book was remarkably successful, sold out two print runs, and is now continuing its third run. With a diverse list of writers, it is divided into three sections: Documents, Fiction and Theories, respectively hosting explanative, narrative and speculative texts. Among the contributors to the latter, Hito Steyerl elaborates on art as an alternative currency. At the sametime, Rachel O'Dwyer outlines a systematic analysis of upcoming system structures based on blockchain. Rhea Myers points out the strategic importance of trust and 'network consensus.' Furtherfield's ambition was to bring artists and a more diverse audience together with new perspectives, to debate and develop contexts around the blockchain and also crypto-economies and see what this looked like as a critical place to play. Through the publication, Furtherfield has been able to engage with a much more comprehensive range of collaborators and to bring critical practitioners into contact with policymakers and business people, as can be seen in this simple timeline of our work in the field.[38]



*Plants need bees to reproduce themselves...*
*Plantoids need humans...*
*Send Bitcoin to the Plantoid,*
*so it can hire an artist to replicate itself...*

Plantoid by O'Khaos. NEW WORLD ORDER exhibition, Drugo More, Filodrammatica Gallery, Rijeka. 15 Feb- 09 Mar 2018. Photo by Tanja Kanazir.

Building on programmes and partnerships developed since 2015, Furtherfield launched Decentralised Arts Lab (DECAL), a research and development hub for artists, using blockchain and web 3.0 technologies for fairer, more dynamic, connected cultural ecologies and economies. DECAL creates a fertile context to grow and test new systems that support creative collaboration around the most urgent questions of our time, working across local and international cultural communities and venues, enabling more diverse people to access the benefits of decentralised technologies —  networks, data/protocols, applications and governance — through interfaces and experiences that add value to their lives.[39]

37   Garrett, Marc. *Living the Proposition — Art Worlding and The Hologram. Turning Art into Real Life.* 2022. https://marcgarrett. org/2022/09/24/living-the-proposition-art-worlding-and-the-hologram/

38   Garrett, Marc. *Furtherfield: Twenty Years of Art, Technology, and Social Change.* PhD. Birkbeck College, University of London. p. 284-5.

39   Catlow, Ruth. DECAL. Decentralised Arts lab. <http://decal.is/> [accessed 11 January 2019].

## Networking the Unseen

The exhibition *Networking the Unseen* at the Furtherfield Gallery 2016[40] focused on the intersection of indigenous cultures and digital zeitgeist practices in contemporary art. Artist, independent researcher and curator Gretta Louw brought together concepts and experiences of remoteness and marginalised cultures with artmaking in contemporary society by working with Five culturally and geographically disparate Australian artists: Jenny Fraser, Lily Hibberd, Brook Andrew, and Curtis Taylor, as well as artists, including Neil Jupurrurla Cook, Isaiah Jungarrayi Lewis, and Sharon Nampijinpa Anderson from the Warnayaka Art Centre in Central Australia. The work was presented at the intersection between avant-garde digital media and installation art, the sociological study of digital and networked culture, and activism. While digital networks manifest physically as tonnes of cabling and electrical or electronic devices, the social and cultural impacts of the structures remain somehow invisible, eroding human-scale geography, place, culture and language.[41] The exhibition asked for a radical rethink of widely accepted stereotypes concerning the impact of networks on contemporary global cultures, digital art and indigenous art-making.



The Phone Booth Project. Lily Hibberd and Curtis Taylor. Networking the Unseen exhibition. Furtherfield Gallery, 2016. Photo by Pau Ros

Tackling subjects ranging from digital colonialism and cultural marginalisation — or, conversely, diversity/empowerment — within an increasingly connected online world to universal concerns with the cultural change of technological migration, it subtly proposed ways to reclaim power from centralised forces of control and use these tools for positive change, intercultural exchange, and empowerment for marginalised communities on their terms.[42] Louw's collaboration with the Warlpiri artists focused on how the Indigenous Aboriginal aesthetic practices and techno-ethical life have generated a creative confrontation with contemporary digital telecommunications. They were strategically breaking with the colonial assumption that Aboriginal art should only exist as 'traditional' painting as self-ethnography. The collaboration questioned the Aboriginal community's ethical continuity in the face of sometimes slow, sometimes fast, but never total technological change.[43]

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40   *Networking the Unseen*. Furtherfield Gallery. 18 June - 14 August 2016. https://www.furtherfield.org/networking-the-unseen-2/

41   Garrett, Marc. *Furtherfield: Twenty Years of Art, Technology, and Social Change*. PhD. Birkbeck College, University of London. p. 199.

42   Ibid

43   Ibid

The *Networking the Unseen* exhibition raised various questions concerning Digital Colonialism, making us reconsider our complicities. The digital, indigenous philosopher Karaitiana Taiuru originally defined digital colonialism in July 2015[44] as a PhD candidate researching Māori customary rights with genetic research in New Zealand. He is 'an advocate and proponent for online and digital Māori rights/representation, data sovereignty/digital colonialism, Māori revitalisation using digital technology, cultural appropriation and Mātauranga Māori'[45] (Taiuru 2015). Amit S. Rai reviewed the exhibition and wrote,



YAMA, Gretta Louw and Warnayaka Art Centre (Neil Jupurrurla Cooke, Wanta Steve Jampijinpa Patrick, Isaiah Jungarrayi Lewis). Networking the Unseen at Furtherfield Gallery. 2012-16. Photo by Pau Ros.

*In those Indigenous contact zones of colonial violence and exception, in which the Aboriginal subject is both a sacred fetish and necropolitical target, technologically repurposed and postcapitalist futures are also stirring. Networking the Unseen poses this future as a return to dreamtime and the co-evolution of a cyborg Aboriginal future. [...] Aboriginal technologies and techniques that, in different degrees and with different relations to the sacred and divine, help navigate the Warlpiri people across time, place, and ecology.*[46] (rai 2016)

Louw's collaboration with the Warlpiri artists focused on the Indigenous Aboriginal aesthetic practice and techno-ethical life, and it has generated a creative confrontation with contemporary digital telecommunications. They were strategically breaking with the colonial assumption that Aboriginal art should only exist as 'traditional' painting as self-ethnography. The collaboration also opened up space to reimagine experience at the edge of total technological determination, acceleration and or immersion of our lives, to look differently at ourselves concerning nature and climate change.

> *The crucial invention at stake in Networking the Unseen concerns how techno-ecological practices among the Warlpiri develop these pre-colonial forms within and at the limits of contemporary neo-liberal logistics, prosumer subjectivities, and their control societies.*[47] (Amit S Rai, 2016).

Appreciating an alternate space for understanding what it is like to imagine pre-colonial contexts of domination brings in variants that offer enlightening discoveries and perceptions. The collaboration was informed by Gretta Louw's research and her process of building relationships between aboriginal artists and galleries in the UK and Europe, where their voices

44    Definition: Digital Colonialism. Karaitiana Taiuru. https://www.taiuru.maori.nz/definition-digital-colonialism/ [accessed 11 December 2018]

45    Taiuru, Karaitiana. About. Karaitiana Taiuru. https://www.taiuru.maori.nz/about/ [accessed 11 December 2018]

46    ANOTHER FUTURE FOR ABORIGINAL DIGITAL ART. By Amit S. Rai. Mute Magazine, 28 July 2016. https://www.metamute.org/community/your-posts/another-future-aboriginal-digital-art

47    Ibid.

are part of a post-colonial mutualism. In one sense, mutualism is the ecological interaction between two or more species where each species has net benefits.[48] It is also a common ecological interaction from a parasitic interaction. However, Louw's and Furtherfield's idea of mutualism meets in terms of accepting others, forming an interspecies understanding and post-colonial intentions.

Thus, post-colonial mutualism informs shared guidelines that focus on opening information, dialogue and structural behaviours and tendencies around a minority culture to inform us from their perspective rather than the other way around. It helps unblock Western assumptions of digital art when created by artists who live in less privileged cultures. When working with art and technology, it is also important to ensure and recognise that when working with an ethnic minority, they are the main stakeholders, especially when considering that their knowledge and resources are being digitised.

48   Bronstein, Judith (2015). *Mutualism*. Oxford University Press.

## The Treaty of Finsbury Park (Creatures research collaboration)

*The Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025* is a collaborative project depicting the dawning of interspecies democracy. It presents a new era of equal rights for all living beings, where all species come together to organise and shape the environments and cultures they inhabit in Finsbury Park (and urban green spaces across the UK, the world, and beyond) Like many urban parks, Finsbury Park is fraught with environmental issues, from harmful gasses and traffic noises to governance struggles and financial sustainability. If colonial systems of dominance and control over living beings continue, we will all face an apocalypse. In 2019, a planetary health check revealed over a million species on Earth are at risk of extinction because of human action.[49] The initiative was called *CreaTures — Creative Practices for Transformational Futures*, an EU Horizon 2020 research project investigating creative practices in art, design, and related cultural fields to support positive eco-social change.

Treating the location of our gallery in Finsbury Park, London, as a microcosm of the whole imperilled Earth, we co-devised a five year series of exploratory LARPs (live-action role play) events. LARP is a game of collective make-believe where people adopt new characters and interact with each other in a fictional setting. There are no lines to recite, only improvisation in response to fictitious events.[50] Furtherfield hoped to use the power of play with park communities to rediscover and renew their relationship with nature. This constellation of LARPs, which went under the heading of *The Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025*, sought to stimulate action socially and ecologically sustainable futures — for instance, by scaffolding people's imaginations, providing equitable spaces for exploration, and building new networks and capacities.[51] In doing this, we sought to catalyse the blooming of bountiful biodiversity from interspecies political action.



The Interspecies Festival of Finsbury Park 2023. Image: Courtesy of Furtherfield.

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49  IPBES (2019): *Global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*. E. S. Brondizio, J. Settele, S. Díaz, and H. T. Ngo (editors). IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany. 1148 pages. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3831673

50  LARPs exist on a spectrum. At one end sit historically detailed, play-by-play battle re-enactments. At the other end are the immersive, improvised, future-fiction or fantasy, art performances of Nordic LARP. Treaty is made in the Nordic larp tradition.

51  https://creatures-eu.org/about/

*The Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025* is part of a larger project in collaboration with various international and UK-based organisations associated with creative approaches to transformation and sustainability. In the LARPs, players were matched with one of seven Mentor Species of the park. They were supported through



The Interspecies Festival hosted by Furtherfield took place on three scorching days in June 2023 in Finsbury Park, North London.

costumes, scenarios, and ceremonies to spend games inside the mind and body of their Mentor Species — with their human self as witness to all that occurs. Interspecies LARPing supports group-driven, place-based discovery by allowing people to feel differently.

In Professor Ann Light's words, "Not only to feel different but to feel relationships that are not ubiquitously available at present."[52] Professor Light was a senior researcher on *CreaTures*. This framework involved three years of intense research and collaboration between creative practitioners, artists, policymakers, funders and others both inside and outside the *CreaTures* project.[53] We have learned more about other species in carefully crafted scenarios such as interspecies festivals or multi-species assemblies. It has involved the combination of research, art practice, and ecology, which has initiated new dimensions of social and material reality beyond the limits of human sense perception. Building new empathy pathways to other life forms connects with nature's webs of life in new ways.

There are four main parts to the project:

Part 1. *The Interspecies Assemblies* – these are games where everyone gets to plan the Interspecies Festival of Finsbury Park 2023; an event which will celebrate the drawing up of the treaty itself (this part was realised within the CreaTures project). More details are provided below.

Part 2. *The Vote* – once artists have had a chance to gather everyone's input, they will present three proposals for the Interspecies Festival, and everyone will be invited to choose the one they want to participate in.

Part 3. *The Interspecies Festival of Finsbury Park* – all the species of Finsbury Park will be invited to join the festival in Summer 2023. More details are provided below.

Part 4. *The Treaty is drawn up and signed* by park stakeholders in Summer 2025.

52 Ann Light (2023) *In Dialogue With The More-Than-Human: Affective Prefiguration In Encounters With Others, Interactions*, https://interactions.acm.org/archive/view/july-august-2023/in-dialogue-with-the-more-than-human-affective-prefiguration-in-encounters-with-others

53 *The CreaTures Framework.* https://creaturesframework.org/index.html

Snapshot from an Interspecies Assembly happening live in Finsbury Park. Image credit: Furtherfield. Photo by Hydar Dewachi.

As cities now hold some of the world's greatest biodiversity, we can't help but wonder if they also hold the greatest potential for positive impact. It's time to spark new ways of being, feeling and acting together locally, nationally, and internationally.[54] One of the advantages of having experiences that go beyond an exhibition in the singular is that it creates a deeper exhibition engagement. Plus, the contexts of the works, the artists, their values and the stories behind them are not lost. Strong research brings about a situation where all actors are closer together in recognising all the participants' skills, ideas and practices.

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54   *The Treaty of Finsbury Park*, Furtherfield https://treaty.finsburypark.live/

## Conclusion

Furtherfield has dedicated much of its energy to negotiating themes, projects and infrastructures to highlight societal issues as part of an ongoing critique. Narratives provide powerful access to dialogue, which those outside of academic and many cultural frameworks can initially feel impenetrable. This essay has brought various projects where research, the arts, communities and other actors have come together to build new insights and innovative explorations beyond the projects' duration. Their legacies expand further than their initial time scales and feed, mutate and continue into a larger set of infrastructures, projects and activities that evolve and include many others. Relationships came about with researchers contacting Furtherfield because of our strong connections and dynamic history, with a large, local and international community practising in arts and technology. This has brought about resources and new grounded and explorative forms of knowledge between practitioners, theorists, makers and artists, along with other opportunities for collaboration and funding. This builds together ecologies and economies for individuals, groups, and institutions to form closer alliances in asking the critical questions of the day while initiating an intersectional dialogue between these actors.

Research helps us connect more closely to elements and contexts beyond a default position or from a top-down perspective. It is also useful when considering different constituents involving various contributions, such as situations, individuals, groups, organisations, institutions, galleries, cultures, movements, and platforms. It allows aspects of collective genius and shared ideas and stories to be recognised with a more generous spirit and social respect, which they deserve, in contrast to the overused rhetoric based on the notion of genius and individualist tropes. Thus bypassing the habitual behaviour of drowning out up-and-coming talent and grounded contexts by imposing already accepted defaults and established hegemonies. By actively being open to supporting and unearthing previously hidden histories and their less obvious narratives, people usually provide narratives that could be more absolute and clear-cut when asked why and what they do. It is how individuals recognise their own lives and best understand the lives of others. If we want to delve deeper into a cultural agency, we must get closer to the mess of it all. Research is a key part of that process.

**Dr Marc Garrett**
**Co-Founder Furtherfield 2024**

## Biography

Dr Marc Garrett recently completed his PhD at Birkbeck University, London, UK. His work explores postdigital contexts from a working-class perspective as part of an intersectional enquiry. He co-founded the arts collective Furtherfield as a collaborative platform online in 1996 with artist Ruth Catlow. It has two physical venues: a gallery and a Commons lab, both situated in the park in Finsbury Park, London. Individually and collaboratively, Garrett has curated over 70 contemporary Media Arts exhibitions and projects nationally and internationally.

He has written many critical and cultural essays, articles, interviews, and books about art, technology and social change. He has recently published *Frankenstein Reanimated: Creation & Technology in the 21st Century*, 2022, Torque. Currently editing the book *Furtherfield: 30 Years of Art, Technology and Eco-Social Change*, published by Torque.