



Conversation with Kay Watson

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself? Tell me about yourself and your role here at Serpentine Galleries?

Kay Watson: My name is Kay Watson. I'm head of Arts Technologies at Serpentine where I am managing our art and technology program that combines a couple of different strands of work, which is a commissioning program, which involves us undertaking large-scale production of projects with artists using advanced technologies and something called our program of research and policy-focused work, which focuses on the role of arts and culture in the development of technologies for the benefit of communities.

Ashley Hopkinson: Fabulous. Tell me what you think it is about the work that's happening at Serpentine that makes it distinctive? Particularly, in the space of public art and technology.

Kay Watson: There are very few organizations working at the depth that we are with advanced technologies on multiple levels...The way we work with artists on commissions is that we build teams and we develop workflows. And what's really important for us is understanding how these technologies work. By working with the artists and building workflows and building software or developing AI models or developing licenses, we are embedding within our organization the knowledge and the expertise in what these things are actually doing in the world, how they function, how they operate, which I think is really important. In addition to the other side of things, which is about telling stories, building narratives, discourse. I feel like in order to be able to build those stories and those narratives, we need to understand what we're dealing with, particularly with advanced technologies and the complexities that come with those. The way that we approach (projects) is perhaps more research and policy-focused work. There is a long history of social practice, of

participatory practice in the cultural field that's existed for decades or forever. That's art. But I think we have developed what is a pretty unique program or set of capabilities here in the UK in which we are really sort of centering. We're positioning art and culture as a really valuable actor in society when it comes to the development of society as a site of experimentation. So we work with civic actors, technology actors, and other organizations on the prototyping of technologies and of structures or systems. That is a pretty unusual thing to be able to do in the context of art. The other thing that we are trying to do is connect that to policy, cultural policy and beyond. And that's definitely a work in progress (determining) how you might then impact policies that are emerging in society.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's yet to come.

Kay Watson: Yes, it's the future.

Ashley Hopkinson: Do you have an example of a recent project or collaboration that you think has served the public in a dynamic way and also was exciting to the art community as well?

Kay Watson: I think it's really great to talk about, and I won't take any credit for this. The work of my colleagues...the project with Holly Hendon and Matt Dryhurst, because it represents one of the first times we've been able to bring these two elements of our work together, both the commissioning and production and this kind of R&D prototyping civic or ecosystem or societal focus work. That project will be an exhibition here for the second time in autumn 2024. We are working with artists-technologists Holly Hendon and Matt Dryhurst on an exhibition about what it means to be an artist in the age of AI. So part of the thing we are doing with them is that we're developing a Coral AI model, building the data set to make that model by recording choirs, mostly amateur choirs in different regions and locations around the UK.

So being very context specific and then building an AI model that will be the basis of what will be experienced in the show. So within the show you'll experience some of this input data, so you'll experience some of the recordings and then output, which will be when Holly and Matt develop new music to be experienced within the gallery. Now there is more to it than that, but that's kind of like the overview. But what's very interesting is that we'll be testing out this data trust, kind of an ownership structure in the development of the AI model. So every choir that we record with will be going through a process of actually learning about what it means to be involved in a data trust, sort of making it up as we go along. So they will become part of this process.

We've hired a data trustee in collaboration with the Centre for Data Futures at King's College, London who will be working with us very specifically on this process and in designing it. Then the choirs will

agree to this ownership structure for how their data in the model is used going forward. And that data trustee then, as in all trustees of any kind of organization, will then have a role in advocating for all of those who have data within this project. So it's a really interesting case of art as a context being a site for this kind of prototyping of new sorts of structures that have relevance far beyond art.

Ashley Hopkinson: So you're talking to someone who loves art and you're an artist, but I would love to hear your take on it. What do you think is the great influence of the arts?

Kay Watson: The importance of art is it's about changing the way you see the world. That is where art and culture is so important. It's really about seeing things in a different way and artists and institutions provide essentially a context to be able to do that. So that's why I love art in general and that can happen in lots of different ways. I'm talking about this through technology and the last 10 years I've gone down this route, but that doesn't mean my interest is only in artists that work with technology, but just across the board that's how I feel art is so important. It's also a kind of cultural barometer or a barometer of society. It's also an important place of convening or bringing people together and this is why we do the work that we do. ..In order to be able to continue to support art, we also have to evolve.

Ashley Hopkinson: How can art help create or facilitate more equitable systems? Systems that serve communities and the planet better. What role do you think art has in that?

Kay Watson: There are a couple of ways of thinking about it, which is that art should be working together with all of these other sectors in order to develop what that is. It's not necessarily a thing that should just exist on its own. Art should be part of this, a constellation of different kinds of actors who are working for the public benefit.

Ashley Hopkinson: Like as part of the ecosystem?

Kay Watson: Exactly, it's bigger than us. It's bigger than one thing on another, but we all bring these important approaches that can be part of a really interesting conversation about what society is and how it functions. On the other level, art as a context is a great site of convening and is a great way to bring in different ideas and cultures and expertise to look at things. We're ultimately, coming from a public art perspective, we're not driven by profit. Our mission is artists for all. And so we are doing this in a very free and experimental (way)..we are doing this in a context that's not predefined or it's not so rigid. There is possibility within the context of art that doesn't exist maybe in other contexts. So there's that. And then there's the other thing, which is storytelling and narrative. That is what art and culture does in a really brilliant way. This kind of bringing together of experimentation, convening and storytelling is really important.

Ashley Hopkinson: How do you manage the fear (that surrounds using AI) or challenge around technology when it comes to art? It feels like you're embracing it in a very experimental and exciting way, but how have you managed to approach it like that?

Kay Watson: Sometimes these mainstream narratives are very black and white. "All of our jobs are going to go," narrative, or "robots are going to take over everything" and all of those things might happen in some shape or form in different ways. What we are trying to do particularly here, is have a more nuanced conversation about what AI or other advanced technologies are doing, that it's not all really, really bad or it's not all really, really great. Because there is also this very utopian idea that technology democratizes art, and it's not as straightforward as that either. Just having the internet doesn't mean that people can access art. It does help in some shape or form, but what's the engagement that's happening? Digital poverty exists, nothing is straightforward. So we really want to have more nuanced conversations ..and try to understand where agency lies for people, for our audiences. You can read everything, but what happens when you have a slightly different experience of something, and this is why I think it's so important that we build things and we make things is because you just have a completely different understanding of something when you've tried to make an AI. I'm not saying that everyone should make AI, but it's a slightly different understanding of what these things are doing. So that is to say, what we are trying to do is have a very nuanced position, and understand how the arts should position itself in the conversation as well. How do we support artists in that situation and start to think about it with a bit more complexity?

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you see as a gap or challenge with art at the moment? This can be from your perspective as a curator.

Kay Watson: This will 100% be from my perspective. Art is so massive, and even within this institution, we all sort of specialize in our own areas and work with different communities or with different sectors in the work. Culture, art and culture's relationship to technology has always been a difficult one to explain. What we're doing and have been doing for the last 10 years is moving away from technology as a tool to either bring people to physical sites to look at objects or as a tool for interpretation or the tool for optimizing our understanding of audiences or data. And really starting to think about technology's role in culture as being a lot more holistic. It's a challenge that we enjoy dealing with, frankly. Then there's also the knowledge required within the art world in order to have a slightly more nuanced and complex understanding of technology because it does obviously require knowledge. On that front, a big part of our mission is positioning art as having a key role in the way technologies are developing in collaboration with everyone else that's involved in that. That we're not this kind of entity that's just over here, separate to everyone else, that we are part of this broader conversation with civic

actors, technology partners, policy etc. that we are an important cog in the wheel of working and thinking through technology for public good.

And that can only come about by doing projects, and building our reputation in this area, not just for us, but for anyone who's doing this work. There are lots of people doing these things. I've been in New York and [Gray Area](#) and all these amazing people that work with technology, we're not the only people. But it's also within the context of the UK because since Brexit, international collaboration becomes a little bit harder and cuts to funding and all this kind of stuff. So we have our own sort of contextual issues. I think everyone in the world is dealing with cuts in funding, whether you're in art (or not).

The other thing is just working a bit more in the long term. The way that we are set up and actually the way that most charities in the UK are set up is that you're funded year-on-year. So it does make it slightly harder to do these things in the long term, which ultimately when you're doing this kind of work, you do need to be working more in the long term and looking five years ahead. So there's also that, how do you reconcile these structures and frameworks of working to be able to just keep moving forward?

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support and by right support, funding for example is there, you have the people you need as well. What would you like to see grow and expand?

Kay Watson: What a great question, because it's quite difficult. It's the blue sky, isn't it?

Ashley Hopkinson : Yes, sometimes we need to dream and go there for a little.

Kay Watson: ...One of the other areas that interest us is systems of measurement, which is kind of the metrics of value and impact and all of these things and how they work in culture. This is also a bit of a thing that can sometimes hold us back, because as I mentioned earlier, primarily, we are judged on quantitative data. So we look at the number of people that walk through the door, the number of people that click on a website...there is a different level of complexity in how we operate and what we do requires a different set of metrics to understand its value. And so with that, I think this is something that we've also been thinking about. How do we start to think about what those metrics can be and how do we understand value and impact?

Ashley Hopkinson: And how do you measure success in this particular area?

Kay Watson: There is a limitation because you have to prove yourself before you get to that. But it's also an interesting challenge.

Ashley Hopkinson: Would you say that's because it's a constant proving?

Kay Watson: Yes, it's a constant proving. It's not just the case with working with technology, it's the case for anyone who does anything... that's not seen as traditional art practice. Historically, artists working with technology struggled to get into the mainstream art world. It's changing. So I think that's a bit of an issue but in terms of where we want to be, I would love to see some really healthy support.

One thing I would like to see is the art is involved. That the arts are involved in developing significant research around technology. So as it stands when it comes to things like research projects, art is often not really a part of those processes. I would like to see that art becomes part of these interdisciplinary research projects, technologies involving academic actors, civic actors. That we are naturally brought into a dialogue with these other fields around these kinds of ideas.

I would love to see some healthy public funding for this. I would also like to see greater support for creative education. We are not responsible for educating 16 to 18 year olds, but I think it's part of our pipeline, of the way that we operate. Without people, without students who are from diverse backgrounds going through creative education and coming through into these fields, then who are we making? Who are we working with? Who are making this for? Who is the next generation to come through and also take this further?

That's now a problem with the cutting of creative education across the board in the UK. And I'm sure it's the case everywhere.

Ashley Hopkinson: I like that you spoke to interdependence more than once. And the importance of art in the conversation about systems change.

Kay Watson: That exactly. We are part of a system and we come with really valuable insights and abilities and capabilities, and we want to be part of this bigger conversation. I can talk a little bit about what we're doing with Tomas Saraceno.

Ashley Hopkinson: That would be great.

Kay Watson: The key to Thomas' work has always been, he has this relationship with an Indigenous Salinas-Grandes community in Argentina. Thomas Saraceno is an Argentinian artist, and through the kind of prototyping of a technology called partial common ownership that we've been doing with Radical Xchange, the aim there is to support any actors or stakeholders within a project, through a new stewardship model. And a key element of Tomas' work is his work with a diverse range of communities who he's seeking to support. So it was a natural fit for a first prototype of this technology

to be able to find a way of using stewardship to support this community who are really struggling through lithium mining and Argentina. There are so many ways that this kind of activism manifests. So that's an example of an artist supporting a specific community.

There are other things like Holly Hendon and Matt Dryhurst doing all this work around artists' consent, like opt in and opt out, in terms of AI data sets, that's a different approach. Whenever an artist is getting involved with some kind of societal issue, whether it is person, it might be related, it's always human based. It's always based on people and their relationship to the world. But there are so many different ways of doing that and technology is a component that I think is interesting.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's good. Thank you Kay.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*