

Artscience, cultural policy, and epistemological empathy

Towards imaginaries of the future as a new commons in the Philippines

Presentation given as part of a panel titled, “Cultural Governance: Commoning Institutions, Infrastructure, and Public Engagement”, at the 6th Conference of ANCER - Asia Pacific Network for Cultural Education and Research, Hong Kong.

<https://www.ancernetwork.org/mainap/6th-ancer-conference/>

Diego S. Maranan, PhD

Professor, Faculty of Information and Communication Studies,
University of the Philippines - Open University

Deputy Director for Research, University of the Philippines Intelligent
Systems Center

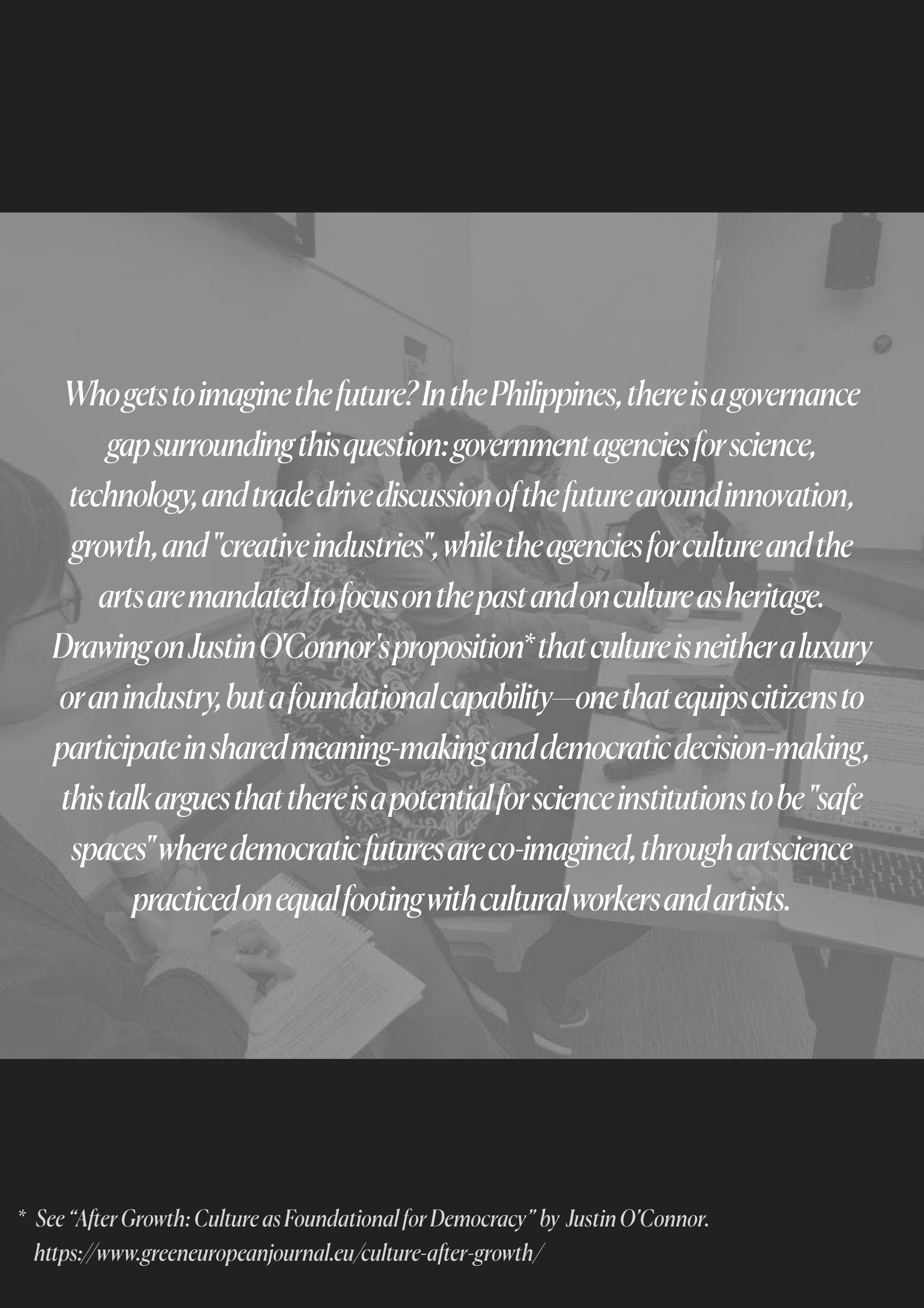
dmaranan@upou.edu.ph

Co-Founder, Space Ecologies Art and Design (SEADS)

<https://seads.network/member/diego>



Cite as: Maranan, D. S. (2025, December 13). Artscience, cultural policy, and epistemological empathy: Towards imaginaries of the future as a new commons in the Philippines [Conference talk]. Panel on “Cultural Governance: Commoning Institutions, Infrastructure, and Public Engagement” 6th Conference of ANCER - Asia Pacific Network for Cultural Education and Research, Hong Kong. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17960536>



Who gets to imagine the future? In the Philippines, there is a governance gap surrounding this question: government agencies for science, technology, and trade drive discussion of the future around innovation, growth, and "creative industries", while the agencies for culture and the arts are mandated to focus on the past and on culture as heritage. Drawing on Justin O'Connor's proposition that culture is neither a luxury or an industry, but a foundational capability—one that equips citizens to participate in shared meaning-making and democratic decision-making, this talk argues that there is a potential for science institutions to be "safe spaces" where democratic futures are co-imagined, through artscience practiced on equal footing with cultural workers and artists.*

* See "After Growth: Culture as Foundational for Democracy" by Justin O'Connor.
<https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/culture-after-growth/>

Our imaginaries of the future are (or should be) part of our shared commons.

Who gets to imagine the future?

The future belongs to all of us, that much is obvious. But this raises a crucial question: Who gets to imagine the future? We orient our actions and decisions along the axes of our imagination. We navigate toward desirable futures and away from undesirable ones. How we imagine the future shape policy, investment, and culture. Our imaginaries of the future are also a form of commons.



UNESCO Chair on Images of the
Futures and Co-creation  **erasmus**
HOOGESCHOOL BRUSSEL

UNESCO Chair on Visual
Anticipation and Futures Literacy  OPEN
UNIVERSITY OF
CYPRUS

**Who gets to imagine
the future?**

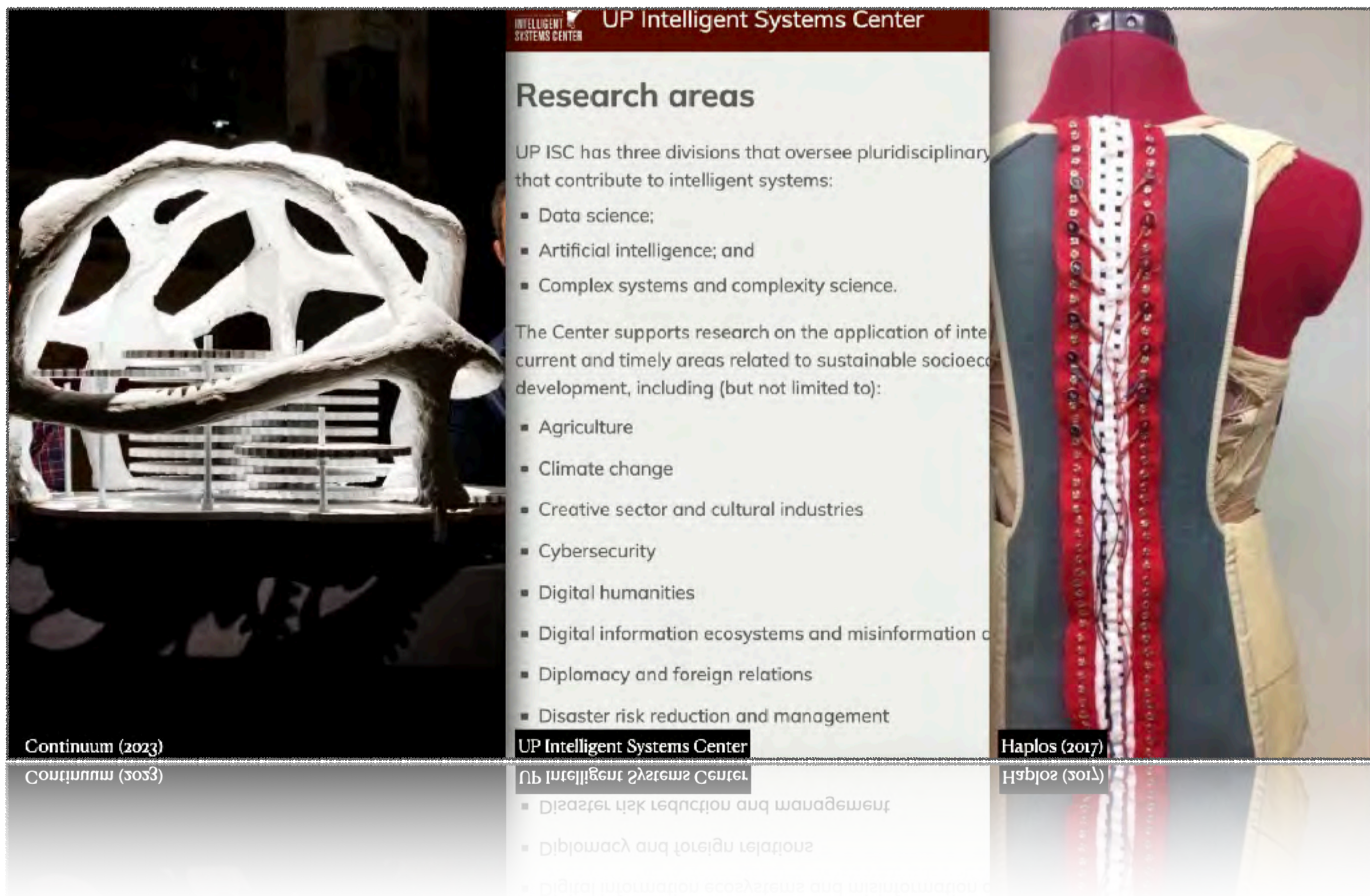
**Who is encouraged
and supported in
imagining the
future? And by
whom?**

ΑΡΧΩΣ

ΕΡΕΥΝΑ ΚΑΙ ΠΡΑΞΗ

In fact, how we imagine the future is important enough that UNESCO has established multiple chairs dedicated to it—for example one on "Images of the Futures and Co-creation" at Erasmus Brussels, another on "Visual Anticipation and Futures Literacy" at the Open University of Cyprus. These institutions signal something vital: imagining futures is a learnable, distributable capability. In the Philippines, who is encouraged and supported in imagining the future? And by whom?

So there are a few things you should probably know me and about where I'm from for the rest of my talk to make sense. I'm a professor of art, media, and design at the University of the Philippines and have my own artistic practice, but I also lead a research center on data science, artificial intelligence, and complex systems. This straddling of the arts and sciences is not typical well-supported in the Philippines academic institutions. For example, my undergraduate degree from Canada is a BS in Computing Science and Contemporary Dance. My PhD from the UK was completed at a cognitive science institute and resulted in a wearable technology for body awareness inspired by mind body practices. These kinds of intersectional degrees simply are not supported in the Philippines at the moment.

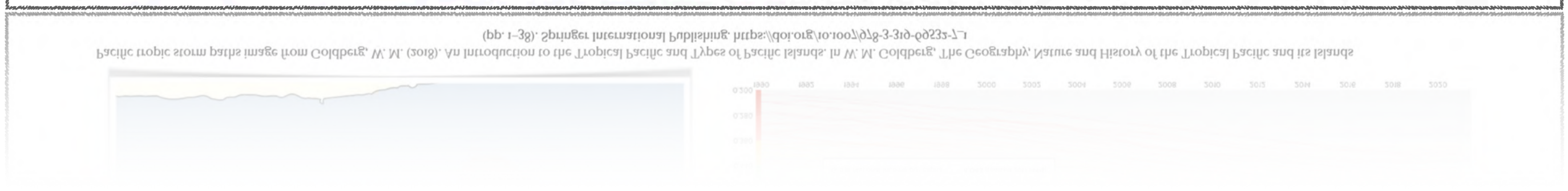
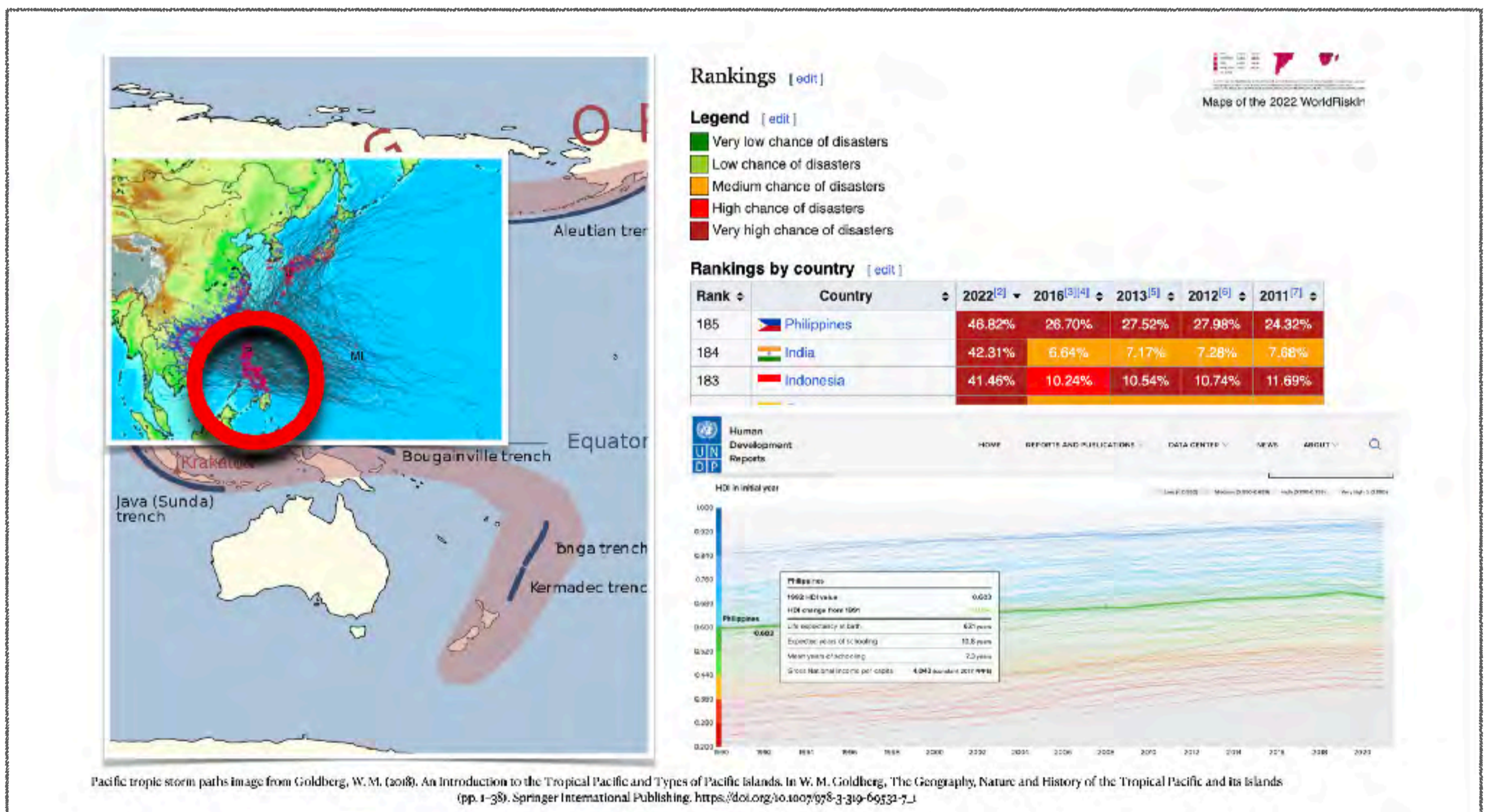


Continuum (2023)
 Συνεχισμα (2023)

UP Intelligent Systems Center
 UP Intelligent Systems Center

Haplos (2017)
 Ηαβλος (2017)

And in case you didn't know, the Philippines is a lower-middle-income country of 115 million people in Southeast Asia. It's one of the most disaster-prone nations on Earth. We face typhoons, flooding, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and climate volatility with alarming regularity. We also have one of the highest income inequality rates in East Asia. We need collective futures-making: How do we imagine resilient, equitable, livable futures in the face of cascading risks?



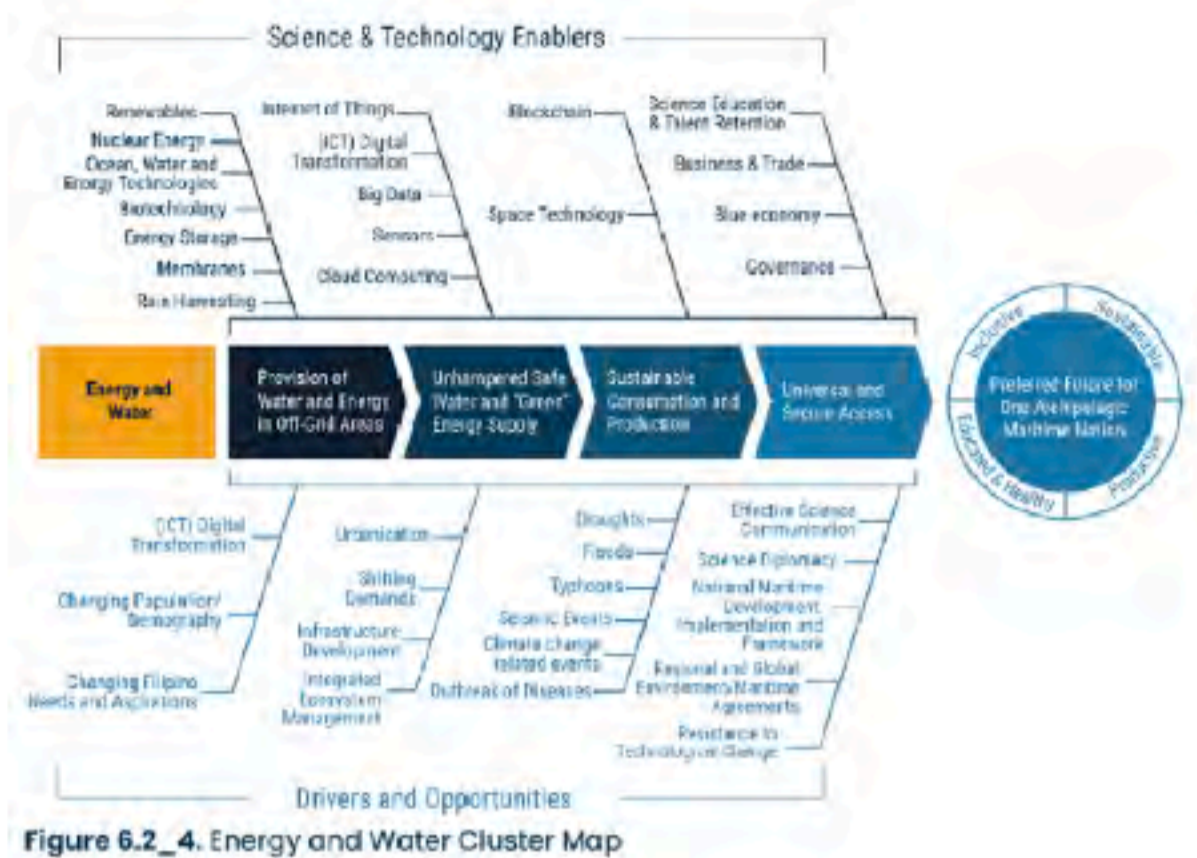
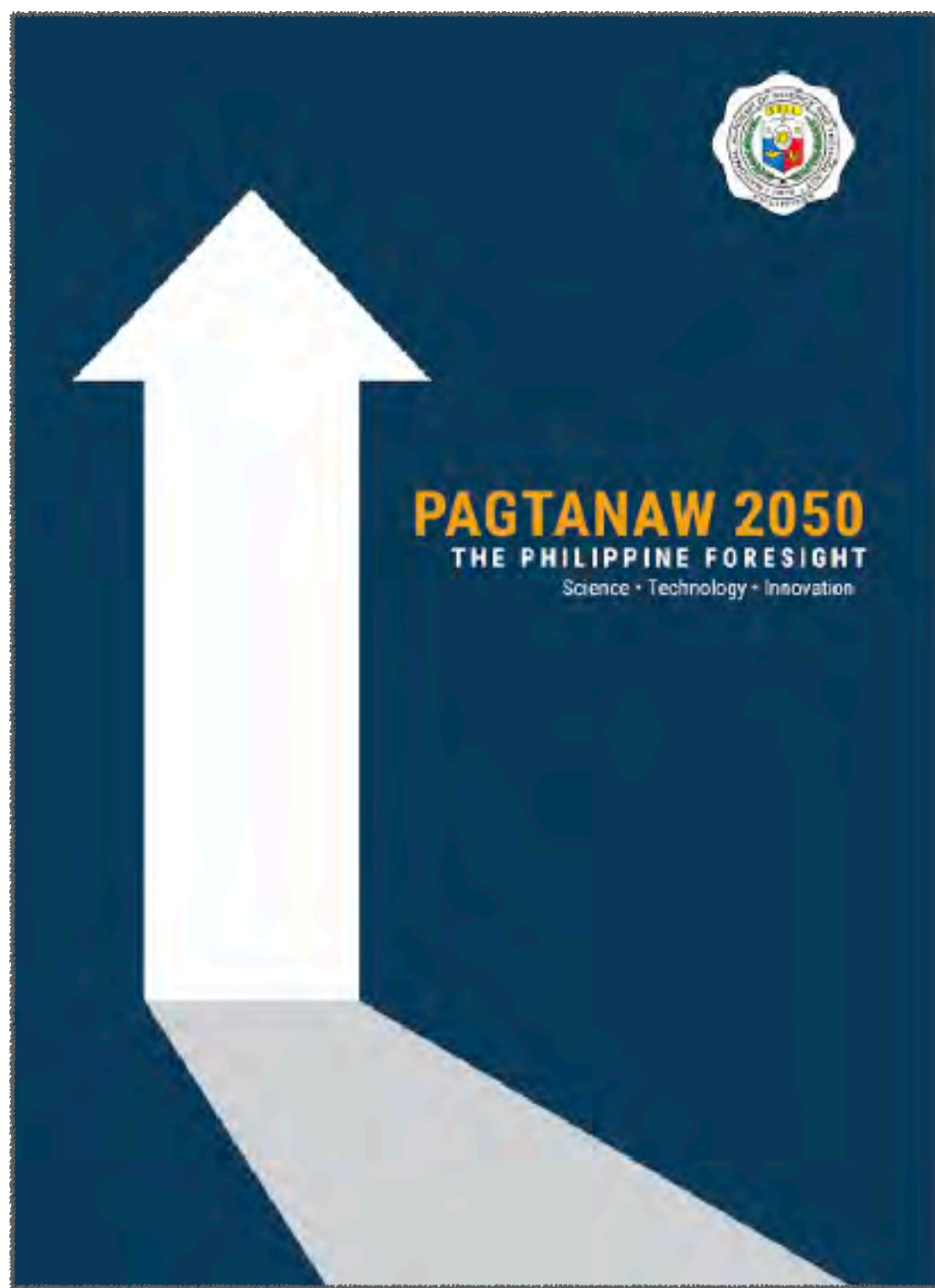


Figure 6.2_4. Energy and Water Cluster Map

The problem is that to a large extent, futures and strategic foresight work in the Philippines is dominated by science, technology, and economic agencies. In 2021, the Philippine government released PAGTANAW 2050—literally, "Looking Ahead 2050"—a flagship foresight document on science, technology, and innovation. It was commissioned by the Department of Science and Technology (DOST). The thing is, in the landmark foresight document, the words "arts" and "culture" do not appear at all. Not once. We could give the authors PAGTANAW 2050 the benefit of the doubt and argue that it never intended to plan for the future of culture and the arts. But then the question is, who is?



PHILIPPINE DEVELOPMENT PLAN

2023 - 2028



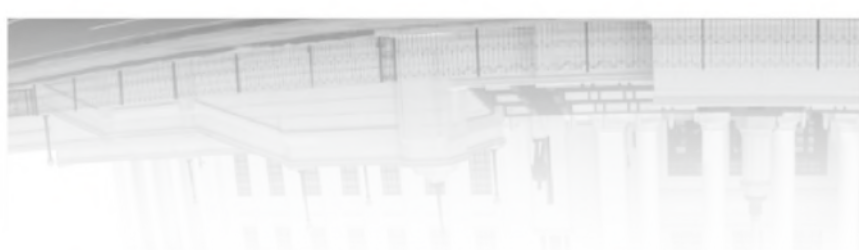
Philippine Creative Industries Development Plan 2025-2034



The Philippine Development Plan by our Department of Economy, Planning, and Development acknowledges culture, but only in the context of social cohesion through heritage preservation and tourism. Nowhere does it position culture as a source for imagining futures. Instead, it confines culture to the past. On the other hand, our Creative Industries Development Plan treats creative industries as essential to economic growth, global competitiveness, and so on. But this time, culture is mobilized for its economic and strategic value—for exports, soft power, and job creation. If that is the only frame, then we are imagining the future in a very narrow bandwidth, wherein the value of the arts is reduced only to its economic utility--something that Venka had cautioned about yesterday. Neither of these plans offer a pathway to support citizens in collectively imagining and governing their shared future.

So what about government agencies for culture and the arts? What are they saying about the future of the country? Or at the very least the future of the cultural sector, of galleries, libraries, archives, and museums?


The Philippines doesn't have the equivalent of Hong Kong's Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau, or Singapore's Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. We do have a National Commission on Culture and the Arts (NCCA)—which is supposed to represent cultural interests in government—and a National Museum, both of which are focused on heritage preservation, cultural identity, and decolonial recovery. These are important. We were first a colony of Spain for 333 years, then a protectorate of the US for 50 years, then occupied by Japan for 3 years during World War II. Reclaiming cultural identity is reparative work, but it is inherently past-facing.





EXHIBITION

Another World Is Possible

 Advisory: Some Mature Content

Tickets to this event are eligible for purchase with SG Culture Pass credits. Visit sgculturepass.gov.sg for more information. Clicking the "Via SG Culture Pass" button will take you to a third-party website. Please note that Sands LifeStyle benefits are not applicable on third-party websites.

Another World Is Possible is an exhibition on the future, exploring the practice of world-building across cinema, architecture, design, and speculative fiction.

The exhibition reflects a distinctly Singaporean approach to the future, one shaped by long-term thinking, environmental pragmatism, and an ethic of collective responsibility. In contrast to the dystopian tone common in Western popular culture, Singapore treats the future as something to be designed, debated, and actively constructed. This sensibility is woven through the exhibition's architecture, design, and art—from WOHA's biodiverse vertical cities to Pomeroy Studio's floating farms.

Showcasing the visionary work of filmmaker and speculative architect Liam Young, alongside regional and international creatives such as Björk, Torlarp Larpparoensook, Osborne Macharia, Ong Kian Peng, Jakob Kudsk Steensen, Ming Wong, and more, *Another World Is Possible* proposes alternative ways of living, thinking, and being, and adopts a more hopeful approach to the future.

Another World Is Possible is co-curated by ArtScience Museum and Liam Young. This exhibition is presented in partnership with ACMI, Melbourne, Australia, and is a sequel to the exhibition, *The Future and Other Fictions*, originally curated and developed by ACMI. *Another World Is Possible* is part of ArtScience Museum's SG60 season, celebrating Singapore's 60th anniversary. It is a key event of Singapore Design Week 2025, and is sponsored by the DesignSingapore Council.



Chapter 0 - The Space Remembers You

[View details](#)



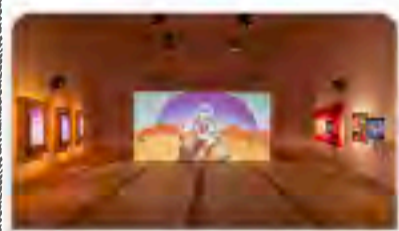
Chapter 1 - We Are Authors of the End

[View details](#)



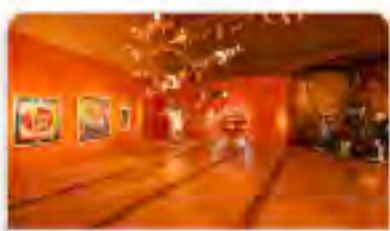
Chapter 2 - Imagination Echoes Through Us All

[View details](#)



Chapter 3 - It Begins with Freedom

With Freedom Chapter 3 - It Begins



Chapter 4 - Silk, Spice, a Punk

Spice' a Punk Chapter 4 - Silk'



Chapter 5 - From Console to Cosmos

Console to Cosmos Chapter 5 - From



Contrast this with, say, how say, Brazil created the Museum of Tomorrow in Rio de Janeiro—a dedicated institution for public futures-making through science and artistic curation combined. Or how Singapore integrates culture into national foresight through its Arts Plan, or how it has a ArtScience Museum dedicated to science and art as co-equal ways of knowing and working, or how it has a "Forward Singapore" initiative that treats culture as central to the nation's future. This is the current exhibition at the ArtScience Musuem, called *Another World is Possible*, highlight visions of the future that come from artists, designers, and policymakers from Singapore, Southeast Asia, and the Asia Pacific.

Consider this exhibition text from *Another World is Possible*.

The Spiritual Station

Torlarp Larpjaroensook (Thailand)
2023

Found objects, wood, vases, metal,
copper, electronic lamp, car paint,
and hand-painted technique
Courtesy of the artist

Torlarp Larpjaroensook is a contemporary artist based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. His spaceship-like sculptures transform everyday objects into vessels of memory and imagination.

The Spiritual Station represents both a shelter for space travellers and a vehicle that connects the past and the future. Inspired by his grandmother's journey from war-torn mainland China to the city of Ayuttaya in Thailand, Larpjaroensook merges daily household items and objects from his Thai-Chinese heritage into a sculpture akin to 1970 spacecrafts. He pays homage to the space race era, while incorporating elements of light that mimic the candles that symbolically send messages to the moon during Mid-Autumn Festival nights. Larpjaroensook encourages us to reflect on humanity's search for meaning and the relationship between ancient rituals, the everyday, space exploration and our collective future.



<https://www.marinabaysands.com/museum/exhibitions/another-world-is-possible.html>

“ The exhibit explores speculative genres such as *Silkpunk*, *Spicepunk*, and *Islandpunk*, which draw on regional mythologies, material cultures, and environmental contexts to imagine futures that are culturally specific to Asia. Where *Afrofuturism* engages with space, sound, and spiritual liberation, *Silkpunk* retools classical East Asian traditions through biomimetic technology and epic narrative. *Spicepunk* interrogates colonial trade legacies and maritime imaginaries in the archipelagic South, while *Islandpunk* reclaims Pacific and Southeast Asian island narratives through speculative design and environmental adaptation. Each of these genres rejects the notion of a singular, universal future, insisting instead that futures are plural, situated, and shaped by culture. ”

**More long-term
foresight is needed in
cultural governance.**

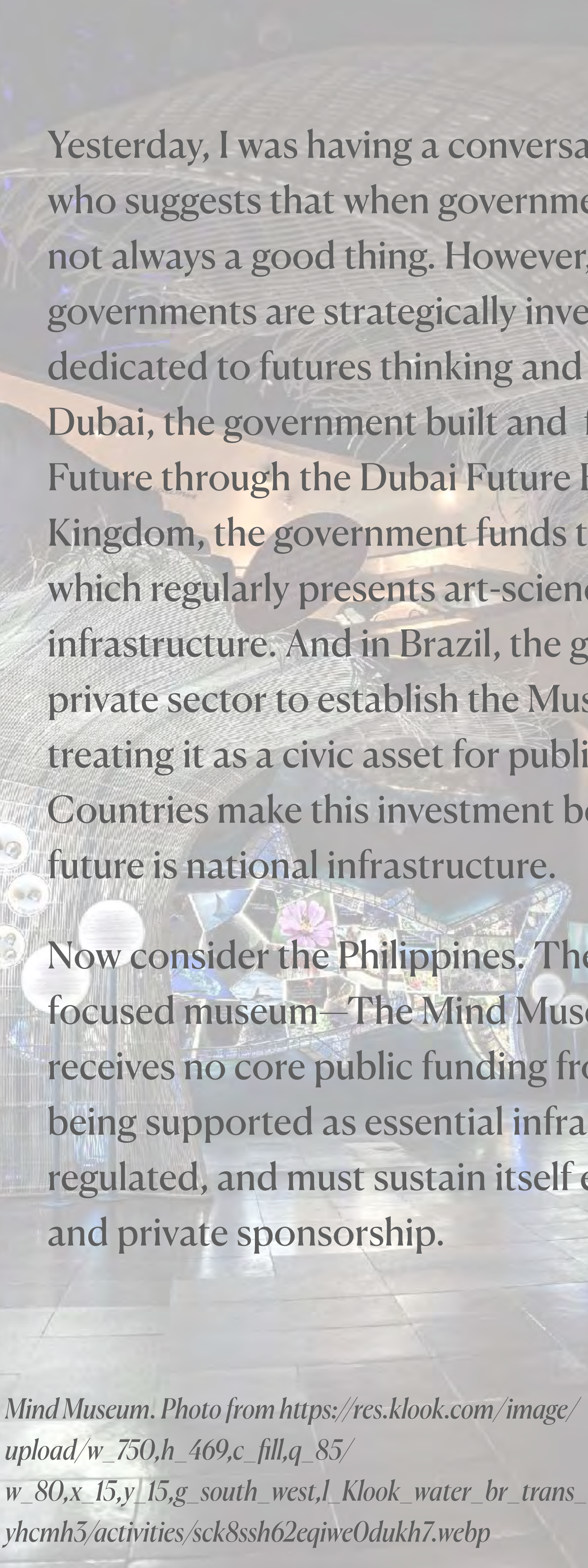


**More cultural
perspectives are
needed in strategic
foresight.**



In the Philippines, there is a governance gap in two ways. First: cultural governance is absent from foresight. When the Philippines plans its future, cultural agencies have no seat at the table. Second: foresight is absent from cultural governance.

When cultural agencies plan, they are tasked only with preservation, not anticipation. The result: culture is excluded from imagining the future, and the future is imagined without culture. There is no national cultural futures strategy. No *sustained* museum-based future-making initiatives. No GLAM institutions hosting *consistently* participatory futures labs or scenarios workshops.



Yesterday, I was having a conversation with Alexandra Seno, who suggests that when government gets in the picture, that's not always a good thing. However, across the world, governments are strategically investing in cultural institutions dedicated to futures thinking and art-science collaboration. In Dubai, the government built and funds the Museum of the Future through the Dubai Future Foundation. In the United Kingdom, the government funds the Science Museum Group, which regularly presents art-science exhibitions, as core public infrastructure. And in Brazil, the government partnered with the private sector to establish the Museum of Tomorrow in Rio, treating it as a civic asset for public futures engagement. Countries make this investment because imagination about the future is national infrastructure.

Now consider the Philippines. The most prominent science-focused museum—The Mind Museum—is a private institution receives no core public funding from the government. Instead of being supported as essential infrastructure, it is taxed and regulated, and must sustain itself entirely through ticket sales and private sponsorship.

How might we address these governance gaps? I suspect there are multiple pathways, and yes, we obviously need to get the arts and culture sector seated at the strategic planning table alongside technoscientific and economic policy bureaucrats. But I want to propose something more immediate and that I myself can work on right now. What I'm interested in nurturing within my scientific and creative communities is a kind of disciplinary empathy. An epistemological empathy. Not just so that artists and scientists can appreciate and celebrate their different ways of thinking, working, and meaning-making. But also so they can discover and leverage their deep commonalities: discovery, experimentation, pursuit of insight, risk-taking, curiosity. And most of all: imagination. When you bring artists and scientists together as genuine intellectual equals—not as consultant and client, but as epistemological partners—something shifts. They begin to imagine possible and preferable futures together. They ask different questions. They see possibilities that either discipline alone would miss.

I want to point towards what that state of affairs looks like by talking about a few artistic projects initiated by Space Ecologies Art and Design, a network of artists, scientists, designer, engineers, and activists that I co-founded.



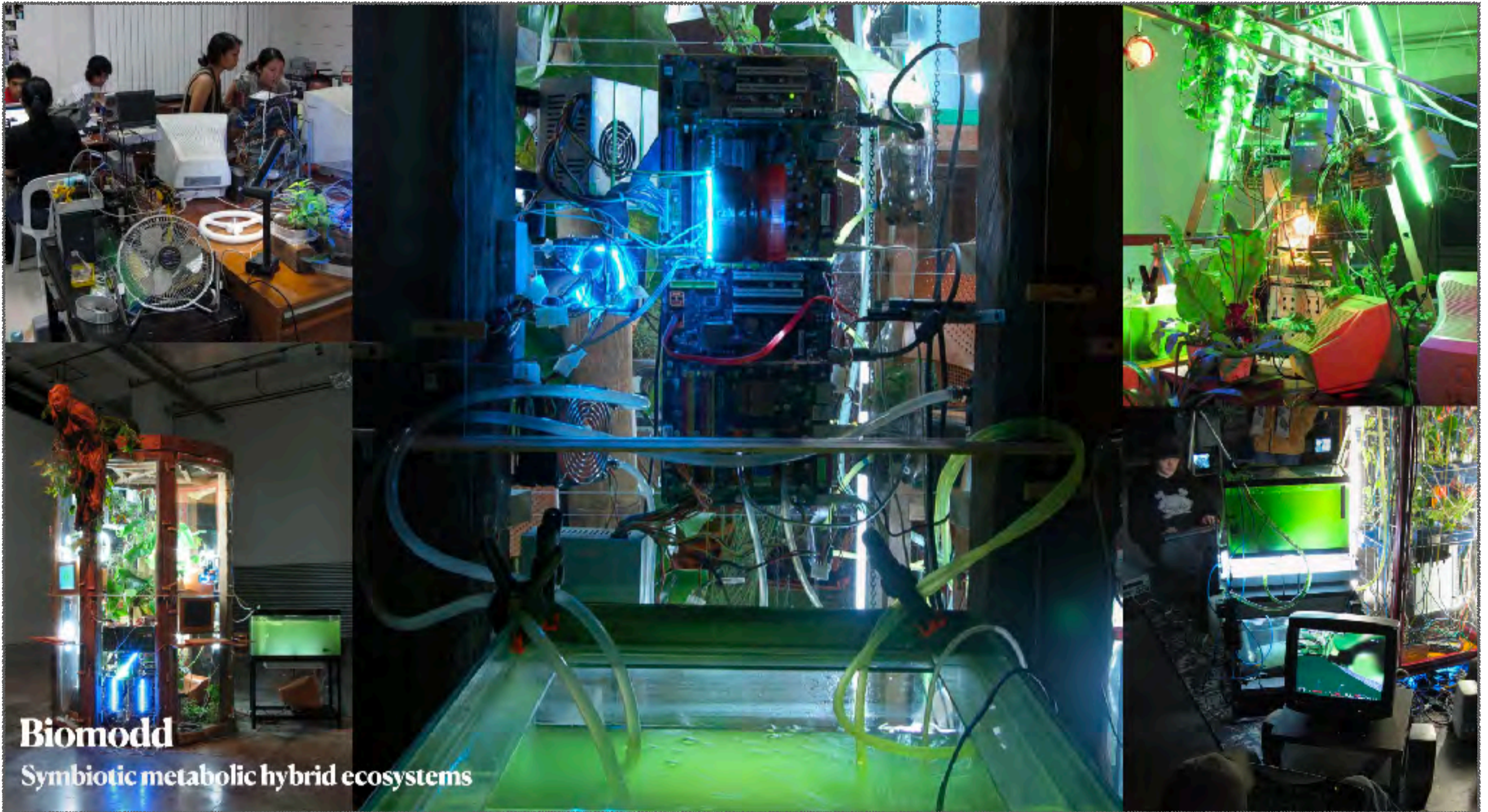
Continuum (2023)

Space biology experiments and reflections on cultural immortality

space biology experiments and reflections on cultural immortality

Continuum (2023)

This is Continuum, a tactile kinetic sculpture that attempts to make visible and palpable the passage of extraordinary lengths of time. The heart of the installation is a series of gears that rotate in time ranging from the very short (every 5 seconds) to the exceedingly long (every 21,425 years). Audiences are invited to touch or hold the installation and observe through their eyes and feel in their hands the passage of time, and reflect on our place in the universe. This mechanism is encased in a protective structure, which features biologically-inspired contours that evoke our fluid and subjective experience of time. The structure is meant to evoke fungi such as basket mushrooms, referencing the longevity of certain fungal species (e.g., *Armillaria bulbosa*) that live upwards of a thousand years.



Biomodd
Symbiotic metabolic hybrid ecosystems

Συμπροσφισ μετσπροσφισ μλριη εσολσφισμσ

Biomodd

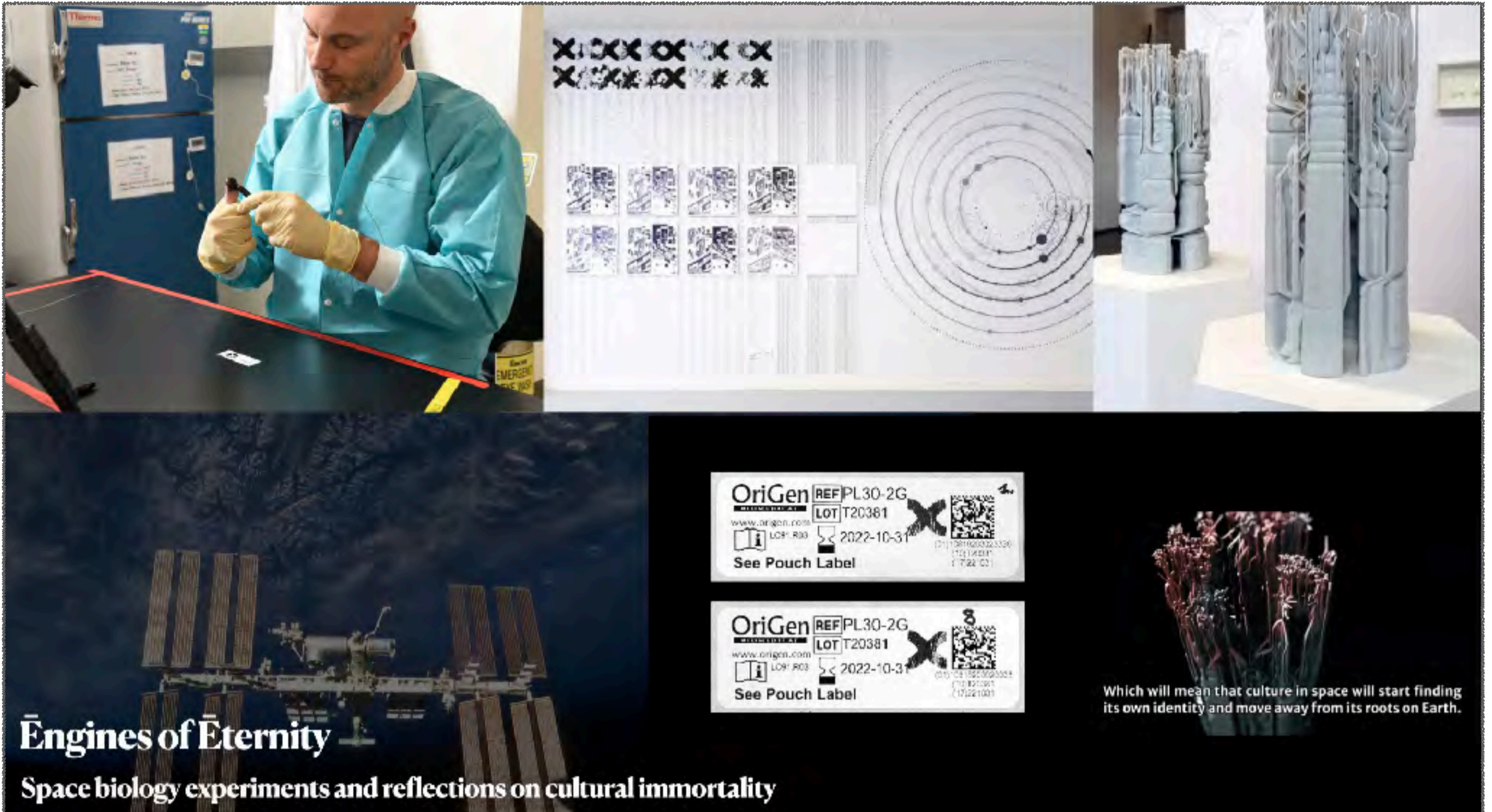
When we look at the problem of or sustainability, or the relationship between technology and nature, what we need is better systems literacy—an understanding of how stakeholders and actors interact, of unintended consequences, of unusual synergies within complex ecosystems. And one powerful way to develop systems literacy is of course through hands-on exploration. This is Biomodd—a global series of art installations where computer technology and ecology converge. The core idea is to build computer networks from upcycled components, and embed living internal ecosystems within them. In a symbiotic exchange, plants and algae live alongside electronics and use the waste heat they generate to thrive. Sensors and robotics provide additional ways for the organisms and machines to interact—not as separate domains, but as co-evolving, interdependent wholes. Biomodd explores symbiosis, waste, and cycles of transformation are not just ecological concepts. They're frameworks for how we might imagine futures together—frameworks for more-than-human design. Biomodd asked a core question: How can artificial systems, living systems, and human social systems come together and support each other?



Seeker
Evolving nomadic starship habitats

Evolving nomadic starship habitats
SEEKER

Seeker is a series of collaborative, participatory art installations—family of evolving nomadic starship habitats that people design, build, and then live in as part of a structured performance. The idea is to bring together small teams or communities and challenge them to inhabit these experimental, DIY starship environments for a limited time. It's creative play, survival simulation, systems thinking in action, and speculative art, all rolled into one. The starship then is exhibited in festivals or museums. Seeker isn't about perfecting closed systems. Instead, it's about learning how you adapt in a 'prototyped future'—how you negotiate space and resources, how you share the work of living, how you improvise rituals and routines when the future is literally something you have to invent together, day by day. Each Seeker habitat becomes a laboratory for collective hope, resourcefulness, and coexistence.



Space biology experiments and reflections on cultural immortality

Engines of Eternity

See Pouch Label

Which will mean that culture in space will start finding its own identity and move away from its roots on Earth.

Engines of Eternity is a collaboration with space biologists from the University of Namur and Université Libre de Bruxelles who were conducting biological experiments with rotifers on the International Space Station. We piggybacked on their scientific work to explore artistic and philosophical dimensions. We sent a tiny artwork into outer space imprinted on the labels of the plastic bags containing remarkable micro-animals called rotifers. We also created data visualization artworks from the genomic data generated by their experiments, as well as a video essay reflecting on what it means for human civilization to contemplate deep space settlement and cultural immortality.



When artists and scientists work as epistemological equals, they produce frameworks for imagining futures that neither discipline could generate alone.

The question becomes: How do we create the conditions for more of this work?

As a leader of a science research center,

what I'm going to work towards is creating dedicated institutional space and resources where artists, scientists, designers, and cultural workers convene as equal intellectual partners, mentor each other, experiment together, and co-author the future.

Science institutions already have foresight mandates, research infrastructure, stable funding, and policy legitimacy, so they offer a potential to start such third spaces, safe spaces, where intellectually vulnerability is expected and valued.

This is not about colonizing cultural work into science. It's about genuine co-governance—each discipline bringing irreducible ways of knowing to shared questions about what futures are possible, preferable, and necessary.

(I have recommendations to make to our various policy, science + tech, and cultural sectors, but these are things I will bring to and discuss with them.)

Dear science and technology sector...



Establish dedicated third spaces for co-authored futures work—artist-scientist residencies, collaborative labs, co-curated research initiatives. Model these on existing global centers: not as add-ons, but as core institutional commitments.

Fund pilot institutions or labs for futures thinking and art-science collaboration, as other countries are doing. Treat futures-focused cultural infrastructure as a public good.



cultural infrastructure as a public good, countries are doing. Treat futures-focused thinking and art-science collaboration as other

Dear policy and planning sector...



Ringfence funding for anticipatory artscience, distinct from heritage preservation and from science communication. Fund it at (or close to) the scale that other countries fund their future-focused institutions.

Support joint governance models where GLAM institutions and agencies have co-leadership in national visioning processes.



national visioning processes, institutions and agencies have co-leadership in

Dear cultural and creative sector...



Develop an explicit "cultural futures" agenda that claims a legitimate role in national visioning, grounded in the principle that democracies need cultural participation to imagine shared futures.

Partner proactively with science institutions to pilot gallery-or laboratory-based futures initiatives. Make participatory futures work visible and tangible.



visible and tangible, initiatives, make participatory futures work



I want to end with a story of the transformative potential of artscience in creating profound, affective, almost visceral responses in those who engage with it. I once went with a work colleague to this TeamLab exhibit in Tokyo. This work, Crystal Universe, is fully immersive experience of infinity. I noticed that she was quite teary while she was in the exhibit. I asked her what she was feeling and thinking.

“I feel like I’m just a small speck in the universe,” she said, “but that nevertheless I still have to participate in it.”

This is the potential power of deep engagements between art, science, and technology: to move us intellectually, affectively, and relationally.