

(UK)

Director, Somerset House Studios
Course Leader and Senior Lecturer in Creative Computing, Creative Computing Institute, University of the Arts London



Arts–academic collaborations have the potential to surface more experimental and critical modes of thinking and making. Together they can redirect technical development and policymaking priorities towards the messy lived pluralities of sociotechnical systems.

Marie McPartlin & Murad Khan

Rethinking collaboration: Towards a new interdisciplinary practice

At a moment in which the rhetoric of technological progress threatens to produce a singular perspective on the complexities, ethics and social impact of emerging technologies, arts–academic collaborations have the potential to surface more experimental and critical modes of thinking and making. Together they can redirect technical development and policymaking priorities towards the messy lived pluralities of socio-technical systems.

Somerset House Studios and University of the Arts London (UAL)'s Creative Computing Institute's (CCI) shape-shifting partnership has functioned as a form of R&D for institutional collaboration, focused on producing environments for new forms of interdisciplinary creative practice. Our relationship invites a continual redefinition of our terms of engagement, resisting established paradigms for arts–academic partnerships as well as historical precedents such as Experiments in Art and Technology at Bell Labs (E.A.T.) and Google Artist + Machine Intelligence. In doing so, it diverges from archetypes that confine collaboration to solely encouraging artistic experimentation with pre-existing research technologies, motivating the development of marketable applications, or producing digestible translations of academic research for public engagement.

In our inaugural collaboration, for example, as part of the Alan Turing Institute's Privacy, Agency and Trust

in Human-AI Ecosystems project, we leveraged our collective expertise to integrate artistic perspectives into the design of a framework for more ethical and equitable AI. The collaboration produced several notable interventions, including Nouf Aljowaysir's *Ana Min Wein* (Where Am I From?) which used film footage, family photos and Google Images to trace the artist's immigration path to the US and her family's migration through Saudi Arabia and Iraq, exploring misidentification and dataset bias in computer vision systems. The work's subsequent recognition – winning the Lumen Prize for Moving Image and featuring in *The New York Times* Oscar-winning Op-Doc series – demonstrated how arts–academic collaborations can facilitate the development of complex, cross-cultural work capable of interrogating the problematics of computational development.

Our Experimental Technologies Fellowship, an evolution of this initial collaboration, has embedded practitioners within CCI's academic, student and technical communities for one year, supporting them to develop work that reorients their practice through contemporary computational media. This immersion has reduced traditional barriers between artistic and academic environments, with fellows Revital Cohen and Tuur van Balen, Louis Morlæ and Aziza Kadyri not only accessing educational resources and equipment to transform their thinking and making proces-

(1) *Ana Min Wein* (*Where Am I From?*), 2022, Nouf Aljowaysir, Still, Channel 01, Courtesy of Somerset House Studios

(2) *Aut-000-Arcadia*, 2024-2025, Louis Morlæ, Installation View, ©Jack Elliot Edwards



(1)

(2)

ses, but contributing to academic discourse with students and faculty. This framework has enabled artists to push the boundaries of their individual practice beyond the scope of what would be possible with the support of an arts institution alone, producing new insights that tackle complex sociotechnical questions.

Though these collaborations have satisfied conventional institutional metrics, they have been limited in their ability to bring artistic perspectives into dialogue with industry practices and regulatory frameworks beyond questions of cultural production. This fact reflects a persistent, widening gap between institutional measures of success and industry trajectories. For arts–

academic relationships to create meaningful change we need new models that are explicitly designed to engage with and reshape the domains and ideas with which they interact, in a sustained way.

Our newest collaborative initiative, n-Space, launching in October, represents a fundamental reconceptualisation of our collaborative engagement. Where other initiatives have not, n-Space focuses on establishing the conditions necessary for the cross-pollination of ideas and disciplines in a physical community of practice. This 18-month fellowship programme cultivates experimental forms of arts-led research and innovation, convening a mix of local and global practitioners from the

arts, humanities and sciences as well as industry leaders and policy-makers in sustained dialogue and experimentation. Embedded within the existing Somerset House Studios community, CCI and other partners will provide expertise to develop research methodologies and prototype interventions to realise insights. In this way, n-Space represents an experimental response to the limitations we've observed in traditional arts–academic collaborations and an initial proposition for an alternative model, directing outcomes away from individual practice or agendas towards collective forms of knowledge production and more impactful forms of practice-based research.

Bio

Marie McPartlin is the inaugural Director of Somerset House Studios, a space for experimentation for artists across disciplines, which she has shaped and led since 2015. The Studios supports up to 70 artists at any one time to develop new creative projects and collaborations, many of which she has commissioned for Somerset House's cultural programme and online platform, Channel. Current resident artists include Lawrence Lek, Xin Liu, Sophia Al Maria and Keiken. Before joining Somerset House, Marie twice served as a festival director, and worked extensively as an independent programmer and producer with organisations including Barbican Music, Frieze, Sydney Festival and the National Trust. She is a recipient of a Paul Hamlyn Breakthrough Award for exceptional cultural entrepreneurship, and a current Trustee at Whitechapel Gallery.

Murad Khan is course leader and senior lecturer for the diploma and graduate diploma at UAL's CCI, as well as co-lead of UAL's Experimental Infrastructures research hub. His research spans cognitive science, machine learning, research architecture and philosophy of science and technology. He has presented at xCoAx, Serpentine Galleries, Edinburgh Futures Institute and the Goethe-Institut, as well as publishing in MIT Press, Open Humanities Press and eflux journal. As co-founder of Unit Test, a sociotechnical design and research studio, he has been artist in residence at Lancaster University and developed work for Edinburgh's Design Informatics, The New Real/Alan Turing Institute and Unsound Festival.