

Collectively Reclaiming the Future in the age of AI

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Where are you? If you are sticking to the idea for this coffee paper, maybe you're having a delicious cup of that ubiquitous beverage. Are you alone or are there people around? Me, as I begin to write this, I'm coffee-less and I am on a bus, traversing Seoul. People get on and off, I see parasol-wielding pedestrians walk past shaded seating areas as four lanes of traffic stop and start abruptly in both directions, my bus part of this urgent choreography.

And each of these 9.58 million people in Seoul (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2026) has a whole internal world that most other people will never see, and only a few will glimpse partially. So much knowledge. So many hopes. An elderly woman who knows where to find wild edible plants. A young person who habitually screenshots every passing interest only never to look at the images again. These internal worlds, which are shaped by our social contexts, are a crucial part of our relationship to environmental crises (Ives et al., 2020).

With diverse expertise and diverse life experience, sometimes it's difficult for strangers to come together, to communicate. It becomes more so when there is less social glue, when we unlearn how to make social contracts. Social interaction has dramatically changed in what's called the Digital Age, with relationships becoming shallower, increased isolation and narrowing of social horizons (Yıldız & Nur, 2024). While "you do you" is a statement encouraging people to follow their own path (Mosthof, 2015), it also represents grammatical distancing method (Shoulson, 2020) that plays into the dissolution of the social bonds that protect us from fascism (Macready, 2021). Facilitated by the **never-ending** stream of potential contacts online, the absolution of social contracts atomises society, weakens our ability to discuss and constructively disagree, and shifts power further into the hands of tech corporations (Dwyer, 2025).

No one wants to be trapped or forced by ties of love and responsibility, yet to divorce ourselves from the emotional ties of care is to lose also our ability to be, live and work together. Because if you do you and I do me and we don't ask anything of each other, we are free to be selfish and alone.

Why is this important? Because the far right is rising, hate is in the air, and the only hope we have is to work together to envision a world that we collectively want. The one envisioned by people with the most power and money (many of whom are not elected) isn't the future I want.

Over the last 20 years in my professional career, I have worked with participatory methods to address complex environmental problems. Starting with developing transdisciplinary platforms and methods (Du et al., 2006; Bell et al., 2023), I introduced DIY and open science into my artistic practice, then bringing in co-creation and participatory artistic research (K. Austen, 2026). I have collaborated with researchers to develop bottom-up methods for designing infrastructure (Bell et al., 2024), bridging what people want and need for their lives with the infrastructures that surround them.

Solidarity is a topic that's long been in the air. I was recently at the studio of renowned conceptual artist Ahn Kyuchul. The artist reflected on his experiences of the dictatorship in Korea in his younger years, how young men who grew their hair would have clippers taken forcibly to their locks and a cross shaved across their pate. Repression takes a different flavour when enacted by modern connected technologies. Alongside overt enforcement of norms is the insidious creep of more sophisticated forms of disinformation alongside the systemic undermining of the bases of certainty, which prompts further retreat, further atomisation, disengagement. As we fight for our future, our ability to comprehend the present is being washed away in a tide of AI slop made by models which suck up power and water from the poor and spew out heat and poison to a destabilised, overwhelmed and distracted populous (Crisley & Saunders, 2025; Zhakin & Mukan, 2025).

Let's not sugar coat it, the majority of AI models in current use were trained on extracted data - often gathered and licensed with no intention to use it to train AI (Longpre, Mahari, Chen, et al., 2024). Datasets made before AI was even a technical probability were used in the first training of models, along with human curation. In 2017, this approach changed to large-scale scraping of the content of the internet, often ignoring licensing. This extraction continues with the models' training, by often underpaid - or unpaid - and under-protected people, according to social norms of representing the skewed views of a minority of Silicon Valley startup founders (Crawford, 2021). Now, driven by the pressure to survive in a capitalist tyranny of efficiency, people desperate enough, overworked enough or lost enough not to care give away their personal details, their best ideas and their darkest secrets to companies that charge them for the privilege (OpenAI Help Center, 2026). Collectivity currently means being unwittingly subsumed into ChatGPT and the like

(Morreale et al., 2024; Pasquinelli & Joler, 2021). This is not to mention the problem of bias arising from training using data taken from the prompts written by the self-selecting corpus of Gen-AI users.

When we look at it from the perspective of embodiment and the human condition, the data on which AI is trained is woefully incomplete, because it is impossible for digital media to capture the feeling of the sun on your face, the smell of gas, the dryness of skin. AI models only know a portion of what is present in the corporeal realm - only what humans already know or have built sensors to detect, and then only what can be codified into digital media (Pasquinelli & Joler, 2021). Furthermore, data sets are traditionally gathered with an intention, a question that the data set should answer. But when data sets are scraped and input into AI training, often the metadata, and the original question, are missing (Albalak et al., 2024; Longpre, Mahari, Chen, et al., 2024). This data, then, is used out of context and often without consent (Longpre, Mahari, Lee, et al., 2024). Its underlying assumptions - or prejudices - are woven into the data but now are not acknowledged. What models output is built on the past - its knowledge, yes, but also its prejudices and ignorance.

If we accept that there is some potential for AI to create benefit, this benefit must be offset against its enormous energy consumption (IEA, 2025), the wildly large water needs both now and projected (Herrera et al., 2025; Ren and Leurs 2025), and the fact that data centres cause local temperature increases, creating local microclimates an average of 2 degrees centigrade warmer than the surrounding area, the so-called data heat island effect (Marinoni et al., 2026), which is projected to affect 340 million people worldwide in a widespread infliction of heat injustice in the commons caused by the use of proprietary, extractive, capitalist technologies.

This being the case, the outputs of what is made with AI must help us collectively move towards a better future (COWLS et al., 2023). Rather than dividing, AI must help us to collectively envision. But how can it do that when division and prejudice and inequality is woven into the technology itself? What if we want to look at the future with AI? What if we want to aim for better?

We must of course learn to ask better questions of AI, and implement it more effectively (Gupta & Chaudhuri, 2025). More, we need models that are non-extractive at their core, trained on better data; data that helps envision *better than what is and what has been*.

WHAT IF WE BUILD AI NOT ON THE FRAGMENTS OF THE SHAPE OF THE WORLD THAT IS, BUT ON THE SHAPES OF THE WORLDS TO WHICH WE COLLECTIVELY ASPIRE?

Envisioning collectively - Cocreation for community

Of course AI is not the only route to our being able to coenvision and work together. In fact, 2026 was predicted to be the year analogue comes back (Maskell, 2026; Wilshire, 2026) and it's already possible to see the signs of it out in the wild. Book clubs and evening salons are popping up in my corners of the cultural sector. When the internet is flooded with untrustworthy information and outright falsehoods, what instinctive recourse is there for people concerned with truth but to go back to more embodied interactions?

We need to build spaces not just for trust and truth but also for hope and aspirations. Will AI have a place in this? Probably. If so, then it is the many who should control what place that is, and on what and how that AI is trained, so that we shape the type of outputs it will generate (Hong & Tarkowski, 2024; Choi & Bucher, 2025; Meloni, 2025).

We are already cyborgs. Our lives, decisions, movements and relationships are influenced by technology in ways that is seldom truly understood. The power of the companies that steward technology is in plain sight yet substantially unchallenged. While we rely on technological infrastructures outside our collective control and oversight to mediate relationships, collective agency and the ability to form powerful peer groups will always be in jeopardy. Totally rolling back technological advances is unrealistic, but reconfiguring stewardship and ownership of these infrastructures is not. Just like waterways and railways, energy grids and road networks, positioning social technological infrastructure with profit as the bottom line means that the power of this infrastructure is mutated to enrich the few rather than share its benefits with the many. Social technological infrastructure could and, I would argue should, be federated or under the control of appointed public bodies, with transparent oversight, or a mixture of both.

Models are an abstraction of the complexity of reality, a tool by which we facilitate sense-making through the reduction of variables (K. F. Austen, 2016; Pasquinelli & Joler, 2021). Crucially, the abilities of models created through machine learning models rely on the data provided for training, which is the foundation of the shape and scope of the model (Liu et al., 2025). The inner workings of generative AI training is somewhat a black box and the outcomes when the system encounters new data is unpredictable (Dupoux et al., 2026). Better data, rather than more data, has been shown improve the outcomes of AI models (Cayce & Bailey, 2025). In 2024, I began an experiment to create a model that would move beyond data of existing realities, to create a tool that might help humans envision a more symbiotic and sustainable relationship with the environment (K. Austen, 2026). Focussing on human-ocean relationships, I worked with coastal communities in and around Galway in Ireland to develop and annotate a data set of hand-created images envisioning a reciprocal, symbiotic relationship with the Atlantic Ocean. Through a series of experiments this dataset was used to train generative AI models, one of which was implemented into an extended sensing environment tailored to the dataset. This immersive multi-media installation, "Not Breaking. This Wave Drowns Hate" responds to collective visitor movement with audio and real-time AI-generated visuals composited with imagery from the Irish West Coast, creating an evolving space where visitors and the installation co-envision sustainable ocean futures.

Compared to scraping reams of online data, generating around one hundred hand created images and sculptures through small workshops is extraordinarily labour intensive. The data set is Creative Commons licensed and has a governance structure created in response to the collective concerns of the data creators. The model was ultimately trained using 100 per cent renewable energy. In exhibition, the artwork both raised awareness of AI ethics and environmental impacts, and created emotional and inspirational engagement with the coastal environment. This small experiment was a first step in exploring methods by which co-creation can address some of the ethical and environmental concerns of the expansion of AI and, crucially, how co-creative methods can work with technological advances to actively envision the future that we collectively want.

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