**Podcast transcript: Past, Present, Future**

**Host:** Jon Dovey

**Guests:**

Ralph Hoyte

Tarim

Fanny Eaton-Hall

Constance Fleuriot

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Jon: Hello, and welcome to the Container Magazine podcast. This edition is about the role of elders in creative technology. Container Magazine is about human adventures in creative technology, and we’re interested in thinking about the role and relationship between technology, creativity, community, and social justice. Today, we’re joined by four people who have got a wide and long experience of working in the creative technology sector in and around Bristol, in the UK, and they’re all going to introduce themselves in a moment. My name is Jon Dovey, and I’m a Professor of Screen Media at UWE Bristol. I’ve also been interested in technology and cultural form for many years.

Ralph: Okay. I’m Ralph Hoyte. I’m a located audio designer poet and writer. Located audio means audio you walk within on location. I suppose the best example of this is my current project where I’m placing a sea of sound over Bristol city centre, which is all about Bristol’s relationship with the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved Africans. But I started out as a poet and a writer. I never intended to be a creative... a creative what? What are we calling ourselves?

Jon: Creative technologist.

Ralph: Yes. I never intended to be a creative technologist, but here I am.

Jon: Tarim?

Tarim: Hello. I’m Tarim. I’m a creative technologist, although I think I prefer the description someone who builds installations that people can play with.

Jon: Fanny?

Fanny: Hello. I’m Fanny Eaton-Hall. Since I’ve retired, I’ve become a textile artist. And I suppose the most interesting thing... when I was working, my relief for eight years.... I was addicted to a multi-player online virtual world.

Jon: Ooh. Okay. Thanks, Fanny. Constance.

Constance: Hi, Jon. I’m Constance Fleuriot. I’m an artist, writer, game maker. I’ve been playing with computers since about 1990, when I snuck into a different department when I was at Art college.

Jon: Okay. Well, we’ll... I’m sure we’ll learn... learn more about all of this as we go... as we go through the conversation. So, we thought it might be an interesting place to start just for us to listen to some stories about what it was about technology that was a breakthrough experience for you all, that led you into thinking, “Wow. This is an amazing world that I can do some incredible stuff with.” What were your kind of penny-drop moments where those doors opened for you? Let’s hear some stories from you about your early experiences of what we now call in this world of creative tech, and how you got into it in the first place. Yeah, Ralph, do you want to expand a bit more on moving from poet to located media expert?

Ralph: Yeah. Yeah, a bit more of the expert, please. Yes, okay. I think a really sort of seminal moment, for me, was I... I wandered along some 15, or even 16 years ago now, to a seminar at the Watershed which was being given by Hewlett-Packard Labs. And they were talking about this thing they’d invented called mediascape technology which enabled the putting of audio, of sound, into physical environments. So, the sound became part of a physical environment. And just before that, I’d been going... I think I... I’d been doing a project where I... I did a 600-metre line of poetry on vinyl strips which was stuck all the way through Bristol city centre, and on one of the boats. So, I’d been going for a walk with one of the... with the city archaeologist, and he said, “Do you realise, Ralph, that the level you’re standing on now is three metres above what it was in mediaeval times in the 16th century.” And I thought, “Wow. Now, if I could just interrogate those levels, what stories could they tell?” So then, I wandered in to this Hewlett-Packard seminar where they were talking about using what is now called located audio, audio located in places, and I thought, “Wow, that is the tool by which I can... and others, can listen into these layers.” So, that started me off on a long journey, which I’m still on today, which I still find utterly compelling. The idea that there is really, I think could call it, parallel sound worlds out there you can tap into. You can enter these parallel sound worlds through that magical thing we all have... have in our pocket, the smartphone, and experience what they’re saying. That’s what got me into... really into creative technology.

Jon: Yeah. Thanks, Ralph. I think there’s a really interesting thing in that about the way that, although it’s a tech... technological, and kind of super engineering rational world, it’s also a world that allows us to conjure ghosts. The entire world that we live in is suffused with messages, and messaging, and... and data. And that data can be used poetically, in a way, to allow the ghosts of history, and of the past, and... and of even other voices in the present to... to speak to us, yeah.

Ralph: Indeed. Indeed. There’s a word for it, isn’t there, Jon? It’s called hauntology. Yes, that’s...

Jon: Yes, hauntology. Exactly.

Ralph: Yes. So, that is a really... I think that’s a really nice word...

Jon: Yeah.

Ralph: Hauntology. Yes. Where the... I don’t know if anyone ever saw... what was the film called, The Stone Tapes? I think it was an old BBC film or something, in which some horrible murders had happened in a cellar, and the voices had become embedded into the stone. And this woman became... went crazy through listening to these voices. So, everything humans have ever said, imagine it, it’s... I don’t know where it is. Maybe it’s on some planet somewhere. It's at the far end of the universe. What if you could tap into all those voices. the hold history of humans talking to each other?

Jon: Yeah. Exactly. The city is alive with voices. So, that was an interesting moment. So, let’s hear... Fanny, what was the moment where you thought, “Wow, this technology stuff’s really interesting. We could do something really amazing with it.”

Fanny: Well, I knew... in a way, I... I’ve got a sort anti-story, which was... my background was, I trained first as a secretary, and then, I... in later, when I was in my 30’s, I did a... a media studies degree. And I ended up working for various bespoke software companies early on. And what amazed me was the user manuals were written by the technologists who wanted to show how whizzy and wonderful all the things that could be done. But they weren’t really aimed at the end user. And because I didn’t know anything about technology, I sort of wheedled myself in, and became the technical author for the company because I started using it as a user, and asking, “Well, I want to do this. How does it do that?” And so, by default, I became a technical author because people, at that time, didn’t look at what does the end user want? It was all about the technology, the technology, the technology. So, that was my light bulb moment in technology.

Jon: So, having to put yourself into a position of, actually, the inexperience and non-expert user in order to make... that that work accessible. And I think access...

Fanny: Exactly.

Jon: Accessibility and community is a theme that runs through a lot of what we’ve done. I think all of us are interested, in different ways, in widening the... the user base, and... and trying to use technology to create community, and... and create connections between people. Rather than for it to be something which is a narrow preserve of... of the engineering lab.

Fanny: Exactly. The... it’s defined by them. I mean, it... it’s interesting when you put children in front of... or then, I’m talking about the 80’s. Put children in front of computers because they start asking interesting questions.

Jon: Yeah. They do, indeed. And one of the experiences that I know that Constance and I... and I share is about asking interesting questions because one of the ways in which, as Constance said, we got into being able to use technology in... in Bristol was because we had HP’s European research labs here. And one of the things that HP used say, not about children but about artists, is, “We like working with artists because they ask impossible questions.”

Fanny: Exactly.

Jon: And they... and what they meant by impossible questions was questions that our engineers would never think of. So, I think that voice of the user, the artist, of the child is really important in thinking about, “Well, what could we do with this stuff? I know it’s meant to do this, but what could we do with it?” Constance, what’s your reflection on that? And... and how was your...? How was your...? What was your breakthrough moment, thinking about technology?

Constance: Well, I... yeah, I’d love to talk a little bit about the HP stuff, and my experience of that. But I think my breakthrough with technology was probably just sneaking into the graphics department at Bower Ashton where the students there were being taught how to use very basic Apple Macs. And just playing with those, and seeing... because I... you were never quite sure what they were going to do. So, I think I liked that idea of it was a machine, but you weren’t quite sure what the output would be. And it did take a very long time to apply one filter using, you know, the first version of Photoshop, or whatever it was we were using. And I just remember being fascinated by those processes, and... and what they could add to what I was doing. So, I was taking sort of handwritten text, scanning it, filtering it, and then, printing those sort of hidden messages, if you like.

Jon: But you were an artist on a... on a contemporary art program as a grown-up already with children, and you applied yourself to having to learn software. That must have been quite a... quite a big step, as that time.

Constance: I can’t... I... I don’t really think of it as learning software because it was fairly straightforward. You know? Scanning things in, and... and playing with Photoshop. I suppose I was learning a bit of software. I mean, I went on from the fine art degree to do a Masters in IT at UWE. So, that was my follow-on from doing fine art, I think, because I’d got quite intrigued by computers, and what you could do with them, and how you could use them to communicate with people. There was also the sort of vague idea that I might get a well-paid job which sort of took a while. And the, because of... because I ended up on Masters, I ended up doing a PhD looking at sort of the user experience, and looking at the ways that people were using computers in the home. Because back then, we were just beginning to see the rise of the PC, if you like. Up till then, all the research had... well, I’m talking 1993...

Jon: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That was the mid-90... yeah.

Constance: All the research was beginning to happen. Just beginning to happen about the domestic uses of technology. Whereas, before, it had all been focussed on corporate stuff really. And... but because I was doing the PhD, I went over... I ended up getting a job at HP Labs because I’d got the artist background, and was doing the PhD as well. So, they wanted someone with that mix of skills. So, I think they were always a very interesting place to work because they tried to bring in people from other disciplines into the team that I was working in. And then, I started working with Phil Stenton, and we started Mobile Bristol which was about, if you can take all these technologies and apply them to a... the city, if you like, how will people play with technologies? So, that’s what... the thing that Ralph was talking about. The event at Watershed. That would probably have been one of our Mobile Bristol launch things.

Jon: I think it’s really interesting the point that you just made about this was a period in the mid-90’s when computing was becoming a domestic process. And actually, up until that point, it had been corporate. I think it’s really interesting for people to think about that for a moment, and that, actually, you know, there was a moment where computers were something that happened in... only in the office, and at work, and... and usually in bigger offices. Not in smaller offices. And that, actually, the... the 90’s was the period where... where these things gradually began to appear in our homes, and we be... we gradually began to understand what they could do in our daily lives. And it hasn’t always been there. There haven’t always been there.

Constance: Yes. There was a conference called Computer Supported Co-operative Work, or some sexy title like that. And I think I went to that, and it was like a workshop on domestic technologies, and it was like the first time people were actually discussing it at a conference. You know? It hadn’t been on the agenda before. And that was really interesting as well.

Jon: Fanny?

Fanny: Well, I... actually, it reminds me of something rather amusing when I was doing my media studies. My dissertation was entitled, this is in early 80’s, Viewdata: Public or Private. Because at that point... I mean, this was the precursor to the internet. And mainly, it was companies who were using it, and... you know? They... I’d looked at Canada and France, and what they were doing. But it’s fascinating, now, we come back to that. Is it... you know? Now, it is, actually, completely public.

Jon: Yeah. Also, well, the question of ownership of data is still, of course, very, very pertinent. Who owns data, and who gets access to it, is really important. Now, Tarim, tell us a bit about what your pathway into this space was.

Tarim: My breakthrough was more about people and interaction with technology. So, I’ve been working with technology for a number of years, and then, in the early to mid-80’s, I started working on multi-user games which, at that point, was dial-up. It was pre-internet. It was text only. But there I... I realised that people are a much more important part of the system. So, as a technologist, you think of a... a system that you build, and actually, what goes on in people’s heads is far more relevant to... to that system. And it’s the most interesting part as well, I think. And that was a... a big kind of revelation, for me.

Jon: Which... which is one of the reason why so many labs, and development labs recruit psychologists, and why psychology is part of your... part of UX design these days. You know? Because that is the most interesting part.

Constance: Both the teams that I worked with at HP were led by psychologists.

Jon: Yeah. They... they used to be all over the... they used to be everywhere, didn’t they? Yeah, in... in... in the field of computing development.

Constance: Yeah.

Jon: My breakthrough moment, actually, was much earlier, and wasn’t to do with computing at all. It was to do with video. When video was a new technology, and I’d been trying to make films as young person, and having to go... go to places like the London Film Makers Co-op, and... and print my own films using development baths. And... and it was incredibly messy, and complicated. And then, I picked up a video camera, and pressed a button, and I got a moving image, and... and recorded sound, and it was amazing. And at that moment, I thought, “Wow, technology can really change the world. Because with this technology in our hands, we can start to make our own television. We can start to make our own movies. We can start to make our own media. We can talk back to the mass media, and we can have a different world.” And for me, that’s always been a generating, and generative part of my involvement with... with technology and culture which is what interests me as a... as a... as a creative, and as an academic, is that, actually, we can use technology for our own means to talk back to the mainstream messages that we get most of the time. And that’s really exciting when that happens, and when you see people pick up technology to express themselves in a way that’s critical, or politically interesting, or creatively interesting, and... and original. Ralph?

Ralph: I just... sorry, just listening to that just reminded me of a rather funny story. I think I... at... at the time, I was... I was working full-time for Bristol City Council in... in community development, but I really wanted to be an artist. Anyway, I... I got a... a residency at Tintagel. I was appointed residence at Tintagel Island. So, it’s Arthur, and all that hokum really. And somebody... a... a friend lent me a video camera to take down there. So, I was wandering around with this video camera, and then, I took it back afterwards, and showed him the rushes. And he said... and he said, “Oh, that’s an interesting sound.” I said, “Oh, what? I didn’t realise it was recording sound.” So then, being technologically inept can be quite interesting really.

Jon: And actually, the... the... all the stuff that we now have in our... in our hands... in our... in our pockets, in our phones was a... there was a point when I started working with that kind of stuff where you were lugging round a massive camera, and a recorder which was in my... when... the first time I started using it was a reel-to-reel video recorder, and there were... the editing equipment was really, really crude. And now, all this... all this is stuff that can happen in... on your phone, which is extremely cool, and very exciting. What’s happening now, in our world that’s interesting to us? We’ve already sort of, I guess, covered the fact that we’ve seen a lot of different technological developments, and we are apt, as elders are, to talk about things like, “Back in my day, it was such, and such, and such, and such. And we didn’t know how to do this or that.” And so on. But actually, what’s going on now that’s interesting to you? What’s...? What are the things that are in the cre... world of creative technology that you find interesting, and exciting? Or conversely, that you find worrying, and would wish to sound a critical voice around?

Constance: I can think of something I’m thinking of doing. So... on a positive note. So, from my sort of creative practice side of things, I feel as though I’m just at the point where I’m merging some of my creative interests, and things that I like making with some new software which I’ve sort of looked at over the years. I’ve been looking at using my experience of building 3D environments, if you like, when we were doing Mediascapes, and all those sorts of research projects, but using that to build virtual worlds just for me. But not as a meeting place for people. As a way of creating a virtual world that I want to share which has elements of stories I want to tell in it. It’s that thing of thinking, “Well, now I’m 60, should I be really trying to learn new software? Or should I get someone else to try and realise it for me?” And actually, thinking, “No, I’ve got to do it myself because otherwise, you know, it will cost me too much money. This way, it might cost me time but at least I’m still learning.” I think there’s that thing of still wanting to learn new things using software. On a negative note, I do worry about all the stuff around being traced, and tracked, and... but I don’t worry about it enough to learn how to deal with it properly. So, it... it’s one of those things of thinking, you know, you sort of see the rise of different political movements, and you know that people are targeted with different ads that will help whip up a frenzy against whatever. And you think, “I don’t really like that but I don’t know how... I don’t really know enough about it to disengage with it properly.” So, that’s my negative thing. So, my positive thing is quite personal, and my negative thing is more about worrying about society, I suppose.

Jon: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Fanny, thanks.

Fanny: My exciting thing at the moment, I’m in... as I’ve said, past times, workwise, I was predominantly sort of text... using the computers with text, and desk... desktop publishing, and things. And since I’ve retired, I’ve become more of an artist, especially with textiles. And the project I’ve recently started is very exciting. We’re trying to develop a textile, or an object made, or fabric or whatever that uses electrical devices to convey emotions, basically. Or personality. Or culture using light, sounds, vibrations, haptics. So, this a project that I’ve now start... and as... as... as Constance said, this idea of pushing yourself to learn something new. I’m older than you, Constance, and I’m still pushing myself, and it’s very exciting. And the idea that this object will be able to convey a person’s personality, their cultural identity... because one of the things about older people, often, is they begin to fade into the background. And this is going to be something that goes, “Hey, look at me. Here I am.” It’s very exciting. And it’s new technology. I’m using new technology in a new way, I hope.

Jon: Can you just say a bit more about what... what... what this object might... might be? Do you know yet what elements are involved in the creation of this... of this thing?

Fanny: Well, it is under development. I mean, we’re just putting in a... a... a... a bid for the contract. We’ve talked about either we design the fabrics that incorporate various electronic things like light, or what... a vibration, some sort of haptics. Or we create an object of a fabric that then has add-ons. We’re thinking maybe a pocket, and you can put your phone in, and then, the phone will interact with it, and light it up, or make it make sounds, or vibrate, or whatever. We’re still at the early stage. Or a badge, or... or just an object, maybe, that someone can hold. And that can be shared.

Jon: Do you know what kind of sensing... well, I mean, is it going to be sensing from a phone, or from the body?

Fanny: Well, this... again, it... it... initially, from the body. I mean, we’re talking to people who are interested in robotics, and haptics. We’re not sure where it’s going to go. It’s very, very early stages, at the moment, but we think it’s got legs.

Jon: Yeah, great. Thanks. Okay. Ralph, I noticed you want... coming in there.

Ralph: Yes. Well, for me, I... I’m just thinking, for me, what’s really exciting is that the old art form categories are completely blurred, if not some smashed to bits by digital technologies. And I know, like Jon, you were talking about sort of when you used to make films, first started making films, it was a messy process involving being in a dark room with loads of chemicals and baths, and all sorts of things. And all of a sudden, the whole process is on this machine. For me, I started of... I started off as a poet. But my practice has always been incredibly diverse. I was a... I was a performance poet, a spoken word artist, I’ve always been interested in maps. Suddenly, I realised that mapping technologies, and located audio technologies, were a way of combining my interest in words with my interest in maps. And photography nowadays, as we all know, is... you... you get a card, and you take three... three thousand shots to pick the one you want. Where’s the art gone? But what’s interesting is that everything is going towards the sort of timeline things. And that really offers artists the opportunities to do anything they want. When I have a project, I’m not looking at what is the technology, I’m looking at what do I want to do? And then, I either find the technology which will do it, or a... as Constance was saying, you know, it’s a case of weighing up, “Well, can I learn it well enough to do that? Or do I need to get somebody in who has a lot more expertise than me?” Then of course, you have to ask, “Well, how am I going pay the... the bugger?” Sorry. Yes, but this... this idea that everything become digital is, in one sense, immensely threatening. But on the other hand, it offers such amazing creative technologies. The mobile phone, for example, which most people seem to consider is... is a phone, isn’t actually phone. It’s an extremely powerful mini computer with a rather dodgy phone connection added on.

Jon: Can... can you say a bit about how you think about the balance between the physical and digital in your work which is a kind of a theme? I... I... I completely get the... the idea that all those different kinds of creative means of expression are sort of collapsed into the digital domain. But of course, they lose some of their specificity...

Ralph: Hmm.

Jon: And materiality in that process of collapse as well, right? So, actually, we are left then, as artists, with a... a need to kind of recreate something experiential around that mediated content. How do you manage that mix of physical, and virtual, and digital in your work, Ralph?

Ralph: Well, I... I would disagree because in... in my work, I’m putting the physical back into the digital because it’s locational audio.

Jon: Right.

Ralph: So, you have to go to the place...

Jon: Yeah.

Ralph: To experience the work. So, it’s not something you experience on a screen, and I, and the people I work with, we work solely in audio, and don’t want people staring at screens. You’re putting yourself into the physical environment. It enhances... you could say it enhances. Yes, okay, it supplements en... environments. But for me, it’s... it’s a bit like it brings out something in the environment. So, I’m going to tell a very quick story. My son, when he was about six, came home from school, and showed me a picture. The picture that he’d drawn at school. And the picture was a sort of wavy green line, a few dark blobs coming up. And... and so, I said, “What are those?” He said, “I...” He said, “Those are trees.” But underneath this green line, and a brown line, there was a blue line with yellow stars... yellow and red stars in it. So, I said to him, I said, “Stefan, what’s that?” He say, “It’s the singing line underneath the earth.” Six-year-old. Talk about out of the mouths of babes and sucklings. And I... that was a real... again, a real light bulb moment. What I am doing... what I... feels like I’m doing when I’m making locational audio, is I’m tapping into a singing line underneath the earth, and making it audible.

Fanny: That’s really lovely.

Jon: Yeah, that’s great, Ralph. Thank you. And I like that response about, you know, it’s actually re-physicalising. It’s at... because... because you’re taking... because you’re forcing people out into the world to listen to the stuff. You know? You have to be in the world. You’re not behind a screen. And that feels really important, to me, in terms of thinking about what... what we might think of as... as important futures for creative technology. Tarim, tell us a bit about how your... what your journey into... into our world was. Because I think you’re probably the only proper engineer in the room who comes from a... more of a traditional computing science background. Though, you know, you also happen to be an expert juggler, as well. So, you know, a man... a man of many parts.

Tarim: So, I’ve done many, many different contracts, over the years, for a lot of different companies. So, I’ve never worked for one company for a... a long period of time. So, I’ve seen a... a lot of different aspects out there. I think one of the things that I’d like to... yeah, I’m going to risk being a bit negative here. And one of the things that I’d like to talk about is some of the... the upcoming problems, or some of the existing problems with... with technology. So, with online systems, you get lots of collection of... of data about people which gives a great amount of power to companies who collect it. Not over the individual. I don’t think that’s a problem. But over the population. On social media, you get a lot of misinformation, and spreading of misinformation. And both those technologies have really great uses, but I’d like people to be aware of those problems, and start to look at solutions to those problems.

Jon: Oh... oh... okay. Yeah, I... I think... I think we’re... we’d all probably share that... that fear. I mean, I guess I might say, as a kind of media historian, that there hasn’t been a new technology of mediation that hasn’t produced massive fears of dystopian control, or... or the corruption of youth, or... or those serious effects upon family lives. So, I mean, I think new technologies tend to scare us. And so, it’s worth, actually, just have... just remembering that. But also, I think, the... what we can see going on with the commercial and political manipulation of mass databases is pretty scary as well. And I also feel concerned by that. I... I find it hard to think about what the solutions might be, given that the political climate of the time means there’s been absolutely no real political will behind regulation. In the past, actually, media has been regulated by the state in various kinds of ways, and you had to go through various kinds of regulatory hoops in order to have a license to broadcast, or to print a newspaper. And although, of course, it’s been in... ineffective, and... and... and... and... and partial, even though those things have been there. Google, Facebook, Meta, or all those... all those people are completely unregulated. I mean, challenged in the courts in Europe, particularly in France and Germany, but actually, essentially globally unregulated. And so, it’s very difficult to see what the... what a way forward that might be. What’s your sense of that, Tarim? I mean, how do you think...? How do you think we move forward to combat some of those obvious dangers?

Tarim: I agree, yeah. There... the solutions aren’t really there at the... at the moment. I can’t give you solutions to those problems. I don’t think there is a simple solution. For me, it starts with being more aware of the problems. And I think, yeah, I mean, in... in my work, I like to think about the... the kind of implications of using technology. Which isn’t to say don’t use it. But simply to... to look at what can happen. And hopefully, if more people do that, then we’ll start to see possible solutions to it. But I’m afraid I can’t give you solutions from, you know, right now.

Jon: Certainly, a lot of people just use... use alternative software, or they use software that are more secure, or they... or they just stop using Google, or the stop using Meta services, and those kind of things. So, I think that’s one way. It’s just opt for a different platform. Yeah, Constance?

Constance: No, I was just thinking back to the very early days of Mobile Bristol with the first version of the software we made. Because the person who... who designed and wrote the software was Ric... Richard. Richard Hull who then went onto be in Calvium. That very first version didn’t actually identify the person who was using it. And that was a deliberate design decision, on his part, that it didn’t. But of course, I mean, I have not idea what’s happened with sort of further iterations. But those sorts of software probably do attract people now. But at the time, we were having those discussions about should this identify who the person is. But of course, as these things become more commercial, and you’re trying to... you know? Are you selling advertising space? Or are you doing... do you need to know who the person is? I think it was interesting knowing someone who had... but it... if he hadn’t thought that... thought about that on his own, it would never have been a thing. It might have just automatically tracked people, and identified people. Because a lot of people who are designing these things aren’t, actually, themselves aware be... you know? Especially, if you’re talking computer science. Students who aren’t being taught about, you know, the implications of what their creating. So, I think, for me, it’s that being self-aware as a... as an end user. But also, being aware as someone who is involved in that field, where people are creating stuff, is... is making those people aware that they are designing something that has implications.

Jon: Yeah. There are eth... there are ethics in... in design, and... and people need to be aware of that.

Contance: Yeah.

Jon: It’s very interesting, I think, for listeners to... to be aware of the fact that, actually, you know, in... in... in the 1990’s when the internet was becoming something that was not just used in... in certain kinds of corporate labs, and was becoming more public, there was, actually, a massive debate about whether or not the internet should be used for commercial purposes at all...

Constance: Hmm.

Jon: And there were protest against people that use... that... that first used advertising on the internet in the early 90’s. That the internet users tried to stop advertising becoming the driving force of... of the internet. Which is incredible to think about now, because of course, it’s the entire revenue model for global media, is underpinned by internet advertising now in various kinds of ways. Yeah. Ralph?

Ralph: Yeah. I think the solution is very simple, and very obvious, actually. The machines are simply going to take over, and so, it won’t be a problem anymore because we won’t have any say in the matter. I mean, I’ve outlined this is my... I wrote a... a full-length bonk buster, called ‘Something needs to be done about the humans’ which lays out some AI sentience, and the singularity, and all the rest of it. I think humans, we are going to become more and more machine enhanced until there’s no difference between us and the machine. And it was James Lovelace, wasn’t it, who wrote about technological evolution? So, the next stage of human evolution is technological evolution, and the whole thing’s going to be solved for us. The machines do it which is going to be very good for humanity because it will give humanity a common enemy which we can all get behind, we can all fight the machines then. So, all our worldly problems are solved.

Fanny: Yeah.

Constance: I think you’ve been watching Terminator, Ralph. You’ve been watching Terminator. I always say, well, who programmed the first of those machines, though? That’s going to be a human, you know?

Ralph: Well, but surely they’re programming themselves now, aren’t they? That’s the whole point. It’s like there are things happening...

Constance: Well, we’ve got data science students who are learning how to do AI, and I think... and machine learning. And I think they are actually... you know? They have a big responsibility as to how that machine learning develops by the things that they put in the first place.

Ralph: Ah, yeah, but financial trading systems, for example, there’s a whole meta-universe down there in... which is an ecology all of its own, and in which the algorithms fight each other to produce the result they’ve been originally human programmed to produce. But now, they’re doing it all by themselves. We don’t know what’s going on down there.

Jon: Tarim, what’s your take on this?

Tarim: I disagree with... with Ralph, there. AI, machine learning algorithms that are in use today, show a lot of bias which comes from the way that they... they learn. So, to say that the machines... new computers are going to sort it out for you is... I think, is... it’s just plain wrong.

Jon: Yes. It... it seems to me, too, that machine learning as opposed to a... actual AI, machines just learn... learn from the crap that they’re fed. So, if they... if you... if you feed them some information of some human culture, and human culture is biased, then they finished up with... with a reproduction, and an intensification, actually, of the kind of biases that exist in... in human... in human culture. This is very grim. This is all very, very grim.

Ralph: I don’t mean sort it out from the human point of view. When I say we are going to be sorted out, I don’t mean it’s going to be a good out... outcome for humans. I mean, that it’s going to be a completely different world in which... which is sorted out according to a completely different criteria.

Jon: This... this is a very dystopian space that we’ve lurched into here, and I... so... so, in terms of thinking about those kind of original moments of creative breakthrough, and thinking about the possibility for community and... and making difference, and making critical contributions to the world, what are the things around now that you would say to... to young people that are exciting, and inspiring? What are the messages you’d like to give? Or if your mentoring, you know, what sorts of things might you wish to be talking about with people who are just beginning to come into this rather dark dystopian space that you’ve all conjured of the post-human, machine dominated, Terminator future?

Constance: I would say learn how to use the tools.

Jon: Learn how to code.

Constance: Well, not... yeah, learn how to code. Learn how to use the tools, or learn how to understand the tools, and so, you know what’s being... so, you’re aware. I think the thing, for me, is awareness of what’s happening because if you’re not aware of what’s happening you can’t begin to change it.

Fanny: My advice to young people was... would be if you have an idea, try it. Play with it. Research what’s already there, but don’t let that put you off. Ignore it if need be. Make it yours, right? It’s using the technology to express the things that are inside you. Learn the way that you can do that, as Constance says.

Constance: Yeah. And I think, also, if you’re an artist, there will always be someone who’s had a similar idea in the past. But what... yeah, like Fanny’s saying, is make it yours, and it’s... because if it’s about your own self-expression, and your own process, then that’s what’s important.

Jon: Can I ask you something about that? Because of course, there are millions of TikTokers who think that they’re expressing themselves when, actually, what they’re doing is really reproducing the latest meme that is... that... that... that is out there in terms of dance or music. And they feel as though they... if you asked them what they were doing, they would say, “I’m expressing myself.” But actually, they’re really doing something which is utterly standardised, and there’s no originality whatsoever in what they’re doing. So, how do you get between that ‘I’m expressing myself by doing the latest dance moves for my mates of TikTok’, and something which is actually original, and really about you, as you were saying, Fanny. What’s the...? What’s the uniqueness of your work in this?

Fanny: But I think that’s what I mean. I... I... like... like you, I mean, this... this whole idea of sameness of what you see... I don’t do TikTok but, you know, things that I see like on are the television, or through Facebook, or whatever, it is all very similar. At some point, they’re going to get... like we all do, you’re going to get bored with that. Someone’s going to have the innovation. Some spark is going to come through. People are going to get bored with the sameness. That’s human nature.

Constance: But I think, also, it might... I mean, there are... it... it could possibly to do with the age of people, and people wanting to conform at the same time as being self-expressive. It’s a... it... it’s a bit like when, you know, I have... we have family parties, and I can’t get over the eyebrows that my nieces have got. They’ve all go the same eyebrows. It’s like everybody paints the same eyebrows on...

Fanny: Yes.

Constance: I find it absolutely fascinating, especially as an older woman where half my eyebrows are missing. But you know, to actually start wearing eyebrows, at my age, would feel really weird. But to me, it feel as though they’re all sort of... you know? That’s them. That’s the face they present to the world. But it’s a very polished, very made-up, you know, face. It’s... they’re not showing... to me, they’re not really showing what’s authentically inside them. And I feel as though TikTok is a bit like that. It’s that they feel safe and comfortable performing that face that is, you know, the epitome of what it means to be a woman, or what it means to be a man, or... or whatever. And they might be being a little bit whacky, but they’re not actually allowing their true self to come through because that’s really frightening. And we’re taught not to do that. So, school, and creative processes at school... unless you’re really, really lucky and go to a school where your teachers encourage you to be creative, and own yourself, and express yourself you will learn to conform, and do something... you know? It’s like the story in the Little Prince of drawing the elephant inside the snake, and someone thinks it’s a hat. You have to... to overcome that, most people think, “Oh, I can’t draw.” Everyone can draw. It’s just you all... you just have to learn to look, and then, express that. And if other people say it doesn’t look like what you think it is, then... I can’t think of a polite way of putting it. But it is that... but it is that thing of learning to express yourself without fear, is maybe something that’s easier to do when you’re really old, and have had lots of therapy.

Fanny: Yeah. Well, yes. I was going to say we come back to the psychologist element, don’t we? Because for all kid... all people growing up, you go through, shall we call it the teenage phase, which is the balance going from conformity. I mean, certainly, my daughter, when she was eight or nine, wanted my hippy lifestyle to conform to normality. You know what I mean? But then... and then they get the teenage years, so they get a bit rebellious. But it’s still within their peer group.

Constance: And they still don’t want you to be rebellious.

Fanny: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Constance: And then, when they’re older, they use your rebelliousness as a fuse to do the same shit to their kids.

Fanny: Yes. Yes.

Jon: I... I... I must say... I must say, I think there’s a... a real... you know? Given... given the way that arts education is being kind of systematically deconstructed in the... in... in schools, and so on, that actually, there’s a... there’s a real need for...

Constance: Spaces to be creative.

Jon: But those of us who’ve benefitted from spaces where... where we were able to find a way to our own creativity, to try and find ways to... to reinstitute those spaces of discovery for people who are coming out of the education system... you know? Coming off the end of that conveyor belt where you... where you land in your post-graduate year, and you haven’t got a clue about how you’re going to make your way in the world. And how those people get kind of looked after, and... and... and told that, actually, you know, finding their own creative voice is really, really interesting, and really, really important. And actually, society will really value you finding your creative voice because we need creative people to find creative solutions to the problems that we... that we face. You know? Creativity is really important.

Constance: But also, you don’t have to be working in the creative industries to be a creative person.

Fanny: Yes.

Constance: I think that’s one thing, for me, is you don’t have... you know? You could be working as a bricklayer, and be writing novels. You know? You don’t have to make money from your creative process if, for you... if it’s a personal thing, it’s about your process not the product. And I used to have this argument when I was running a playgroup where we would make Easter cards. And I would let the kids stick the yellow fluff on the card wherever they wanted, and other people said, “But it doesn’t look like a chick.” And it’s like, it doesn’t matter. We shouldn’t be telling three and four-year-olds where to put their bits of yellow fluff...

Fanny: Yes.

Constance: Because it’s a pro... you know? It’s the... they should be learning how they want to express it, how they want it to look. It’s not... like, “Oh, but the parents will be disappointed.” Well, the parents should bloody learn that your children are expressing themselves, and the process is more important than the end product. And I think, for me, that’s the thing that goes through all the stuff I’ve done. All the... that’s probably why I... I really love doing research, and I’m shit at writing it up in any way that makes sense. Because for me, it’s the process. You know? When I... we worked with Mobile Bristol, and we worked with the artists, and we worked with schoolchildren, and worked with the old people reminiscing about their childhoods during the war, in Bristol. And for me, the process of them talking, and sharing, and being creative was so much more important than a product we could package, and then, sell to people.

Fanny: It’s about allowing a space for playful experimentation, isn’t it?

Constance: Yeah.

Fanny: Right? You... you know? You play with ideas, whatever... no matter how whacky, or un... nonsensical they seem.

Constance: Yes.

Fanny: Yeah.

Constance: And our education system, basically, trains small children to sit still for the first year that they’re in school. They get... my... my grandson got... got, you know, his report was a thing was he had... he can’t sit still. It’s like...

Fanny: Yeah.

Constance: He was four. You know? He shouldn’t be sitting still on a...

Fanny: Yeah.

Constance: Square of carpet. You know? He should be experimenting, and being creative.

Jon: Ralph, yeah?

Ralph: I... I mean, I think, okay, if you’re going to call me an elder, I’ll take on the mantle of an elder. I think I’m still... I think I’m still hopeful about... what shall I call it? The... the humanness of humans. And looking at the four of the five of us, and the experience that we’ve had, I think what we represent is possibility. And that you can’t force possibility on people. You can just do what you do, and some... show people, and some will pick up on it, and some won’t. I mean, I come from... I... I come from an entirely uncreative background. I went to school in Jamaica where the two... and I was supposedly quite intelligent, so I was usually in the A stream, or the B stream. That was when we had streaming. And of course, the A stream did the sciences. And the B stream. The losers. Did the arts. So, here am I, supposedly intelligent, creative guy being forced to be a scientist when all I really wanted to do was be creative. And my creativity, at the time, was channelled into building model railway installations. I think we can show possibility, and that’s all, really, we can do.

Constance: Yeah. I think that chimes with my experience. I... I may have mentioned before about deliberately failing my physics and chemistry exams so that I could do cooking and art at my grammar school, you know? Because that thing of, if you’re intelligent, you don’t want to do art. And I was quite lucky because my parents had both gone to art college post Second World War and, you know, they... my dad had been an art teacher. So, I knew that you could be an art teacher. I knew that those things existed. You didn’t have to, you know, do other things. But I think it feels as though those opportunities, those experiences, aren’t there for children. Or like you were saying about showing possibilities, Ralph, I really like that idea. You know? It is possible to have an interesting, and creative life. It might not necessarily be terribly lucrative, but you can do interesting things along... along the way, and explore your ideas, and research things. And you can still make a living out of it.

Jon: Yes, Tarim?

Tarim: I think what I’d say to... to young people is... is don’t believe the hype. Don’t feel you have to use the latest whizzy technology to do things. And coming back to our family, of course, talking about you can test ideas, you can test interactions very, very simply, and get a lot from that by way of exploration. So, you... you can test things with... with a pencil and paper which is a... a really useful technology, and... and shouldn’t be ignored.

Fanny: Yes.

Jon: Thanks for that. That’s really good advice. That you can, actually... you don’t have to use expensive, or latest kit. If you’ve got an idea, you can test it out in really low-tech ways. There’s something I want to come back to... to this group with on the basis of that conversation there, which is can you imagine the reaction of a younger person listening to this conversation, and going, “Yeah, but you’re just a bunch of privileged boomers who had all this free education, and mortgages were available, housing was available. And now, none of those things are true.” You know? People are coming out with 30, 40, 50 grands worth of debt from their educational years. Getting on the housing ladder, so-called, is really difficult. The kind of housing that I enjoyed when I was coming out of uni, which was, basically, squatting or housing co-ops. A lot of that stuff doesn’t really exist anymore. It feels, to me, as though the worlds of the young are very much more constrained than our worlds were 50... 40 or 50 years ago. And... and... how would you...? How would you respond to that?

Constance: I... I would say, yes, things are worse. I mean, I’ve watched... you know? I’ve got five children. I’ve watched the differences between, you know, the first one who didn’t have to pay tuition fees, and the... the last one who did. And there’s been, you know, very little support for them. I would say about squats. Yes, it’s harder to squat. Housing co-ops. You can still set those up, although it’s more expensive these days. I mean, I think I sound privileged, and I might look privileged. But I left school at 16 because I was pregnant. Had three kids, worked part-time, got involved in local community action. Was homeless for a while with three children. Was in council housing for 10 years, and then, in social housing for a bit longer. And I, basically, went to university when I had three kids, and then, I had two more while I was doing my PhD. So, I... I sort of haven’t made life easy for myself. And I suppose, financially, I didn’t have the student debt, this is true. But I would also say this, that you don’t necessarily need to go to university. I think going to university is a really good place to experiment with ideas if you can get onto a course where you are allowed to experiment, and you’re not having to just tick boxes, and pass exams. And I think most of the benefit of going to art college, for me, was the people that I met, and having a space where my children weren’t in that space. So, I think that, for me, was the main thing I liked about doing my degree. And yes, I still got benefits because I was a single parent. I don’t know what I’d say to young people now except maybe try and research all those old alternative ways that people learnt to do art before universities were allegedly accessible to all. You know? Sort of those histories of collective, and co-operative, and supporting each other to do things. And those sorts of ideas which I got from being involved in a community project like the City Farm, which was full of creative people doing all sorts of things. But yeah, it is hard. It is really hard. It’s not going to get any easier if we just let it roll over us as well. So, there is that think of having the energy for creative collective resistance against it, I suppose.

Fanny: I have a similar thing. Not quite on the scale of Constance but I’d worked for eight years as a private secretary. I’d been married, and I stopped working to have my daughter. And within four months, I’d separated from my husband. So, I was a single parent, and after... when she was two, I applied to university at that age. And I was lucky because, as a single parent, I got a full grant. But it made it very difficult to do a lot of the studying. You know? I wanted to actually do television work, but that was studio based so I was advised not to do TV work. To do investigative journalism instead. Which was... stood me in good stead, and got me jobs. I do think it’s hard for young people today. I think it’s incredibly hard. But as Constance says, you know, life is difficult. And the creativity comes from overcoming those. From finding new ways of doing things, of dealing with those problems. I do appreciate it’s hard because consumerism, money just is... it... it... it... it... it influences everything in your life.

Jon: Thanks, Fanny. Yeah. Ralph?

Ralph: Yeah. Well, I think life is just life, and in all... all ages, and all times, the difficulties have... have varied. But in every situation, in my experience, there are possibilities, and chances. Go for it. Some of the chances turn out to be bummers. Okay. You pick yourself up, and try another one. But I mean, look at us now. I mean, our... the other three. I mean, me for example. I never went to university. I never studied creative writing. I never... what else did I never do? I didn’t do creative writing. I don’t have a university degree. I didn’t go to university. I used to... I did all sorts of bumming around jobs till I was probably around 45. When I decided I was going to be a writer, I had to fight like hell to be a writer like... I shouldn’t be saying this, but my... my wife was going around saying, “I’m going to talk to your boss, and tell him you’re... you’re not allowed to... to drop any hours because you’ve got a family to support.” You know? Chances happen in life in every circumstance. The point is to be flexible about them, to keep an open mind, to try them out. Anyone know the Stockholm bus thing? You get on the bus. You decided to do this. And the bus trundles off. And then, after four or five years doing your arts, you find out that somebody else is doing it exactly the same. And you think, “Oh, bummer.” You go back to the Stockholm bus central, and you start it all over again. The thing is, stay on the bus, and take the chances. I’m very fond of doing things.

Jon: Yeah. Thanks, Ralph. I think that’s... I think that’s a very strong... strong message, and also, one that I... I’ve recognised in my own teaching with students over the years. That we go back to that idea about what’s the uniqueness of you? And what’s your creative spark? And that, actually, everybody has a unique way of experiencing the world. And learning how to hear that, and to cultivate that for yourself, and then, finding ways to express that is, actually, a very long process. And perhaps the most important thing that you can say is, if you want to do that, you’ve got to be prepared to keep on keeping on for as long as it takes, to the point where something is coming into the world that wasn’t there before that you feel proud of, and you feel good about. And that, actually, that... that maybe all you can hope for, and that’s great. If you get there, then you’ve won.

Ralph: Yes. Yes. Just... you... you are allowed to do it. Give yourself permission. Do it.

Constance: The other thing I would say is that, for me as well, speaking as someone who had children first, and then, started being creative again after I’d had them. Is that there is a great power in hooking up with other women in the same situation. So, you support each other while you’re making work. So, you take it in turns to look after each other’s children. You know? I know women who’ve worked as writers, and as artists, who have had regular days where someone else is looking after their child so they can write all that day. And then, the next day, they’re looking after the other children. And I think there’s a book that came out yesterday on this, about supporting artists who are mothers. And I think, for me, it’s great to see this but part of me thinks, “I wish this had been around 40 years ago when I had small children. I really wish that I’d known ways of navigating this as a parent. But also, as a single parent. As the primary carer etc.” So, I think, you know, all those sorts of issue... you... you can’t always overcome those by yourself. So, I... I... I am a great believer in sort of collective community social... you know? Giving to other people when you’ve got the energy, and then, they reciprocate when they’ve got the energy.

Fanny: Collaboration is really important, especially the young people today who are... I feel, are becoming rather isolated in themselves. I think that is a danger. And it’s particularly for creative types. We do go internal. Collaboration gives you new ideas.

Constance: Yeah. I mean, I... I think... yes, I... but I think... but I think, also, you can still be selfish with your art practice...

Fanny: Yeah.

Constance: And collaborate in other ways. So, like the support structure is be collaborative. But you are still allowed to express yourself in the way you want to express yourself. I’m still... I’m just learning this one.

Jon: Thanks very much, everybody. That was great. Thanks to Tarim. Thanks to Fanny Eaton-Hall. Thanks to Ralph Hoyte. Thanks to Constance Fleuriot. And thanks to Alice Quigley for setting us up to have this really interesting conversation this morning. On a rather chilly autumnal morning, in September, in Bristol, where we’re just beginning to think about the autumn. And if you want to hear more, go to containermagazine.co.uk, and you’ll find more of our articles around the issues of technology, creativity, community, and social justice. Thanks for listening.

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