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Robert E. D'Souza

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AI and institutional transformation: care, access and learning at Tate Britain

Robert E. D'Souza 

Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

ABSTRACT

This article examines *Electronic Life*, a collaborative programme at Tate Britain that explored artificial intelligence (AI) as a tool for institutional reflection, participatory learning, and creative experimentation. The project positioned AI technologies not as neutral tools but as collaborators in collective learning, co-creation, and institutional inquiry. Developed in response to Tate Britain's 2023 rehang, the programme engaged marginalised youth and community groups in both dialogues and hands-on experience with AI, foregrounding questions of voice, representation, and institutional authority. Drawing on practice-led reflection and research interviews – including a conversation with Ruchika Gurung (Curator of Community & Partnerships, Tate Britain) – the article contextualises and examines how AI can function as an active participant within what is termed *social AI practice*, disrupting hierarchies, amplifying marginalised voices, and enabling creative, reflexive practice. Situated within Tate's wider commitment to social engagement, the article offers a critical framework for participatory AI in museums, highlighting how care-centred approaches to technology can reshape learning, authorship, and community relationships in cultural institutions.

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Introduction: making learning visible in an age of artificial intelligence

This article contributes to a special issue of the *Journal of Visual Art Practice* examining how artificial intelligence and emerging technologies can be approached within participatory, practice-led models of institutional learning. It reflects on *Electronic Life* (Tate Britain, 2023–2024), a public facing collaborative programme of workshops and public events developed in partnership between Tate Britain and the University of Southampton co-led with Professor Sunil Manghani (University of Southampton).¹ The project tested how AI might operate not as a neutral tool but as a collaborator in collective learning, institutional critique, and community co-creation. Through reflective conversations with Ruchika Gurung (Curator of Community & Partnerships, Tate Britain), this article explores how such collaborations might help reimagine museum learning practice in an age increasingly shaped by algorithmic systems and data-driven decision-making.

CONTACT

Robert E. D'Souza  reds@soton.ac.uk

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Unlike traditional research that privileges theory over practice, this study follows the model of *practice as research* described by Barrett and Bolt (2010) and further articulated by Borgdorff (2012) as *research through art*. It positions the production of knowledge within creative practice itself, particularly through the forms of collaboration, dialogue, and experimentation that defined *Electronic Life*. The programme developed as a year-long participatory exploration of AI, engaging marginalised youth and community groups in both dialogue and hands-on experimentation. From October 2023 to October 2024, *Electronic Life* unfolded as a series of co-designed workshops, installations, and public events at Tate Britain's Taylor Digital Studio, led by Professors Sunil Manghani and Ed D'Souza in partnership with Tate's Learning team. Working closely with Tate Collective Producers² and community partners including Element (a youth-led arts and social-action collective supporting care leavers) and Peckham Soup Kitchen (a Southwark-based organisation supporting young people through food provision and mentoring), the project foregrounded collaborative, 'makerly' experimentation as a way to critically engage with AI's social and symbolic dimensions in public culture.

Drawing on collaboration between an academic and an institutional practitioner, this paper situates those experiences within broader questions about agency, institutional reflexivity, and care in ethical approaches to technological innovations. Our reflections are framed in particular by two key interventions written from within and in response to Tate on institutional learning and change. Anna Cutler's (2010) seminal paper '*What Is To Be Done?*', produced during her tenure as Tate's Director of Learning, argued for learning to be central rather than supplementary to institutional identity. Written around the same period, Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh's *Post Critical Museology* (2013) conceptualised the museum as a network of distributed practices, anticipating how digital technologies might reshape institutional authority. Both texts speculate on and critique aspects of institutional dynamics at Tate during a moment of significant reorientation, and provide a conceptual lineage for *Electronic Life*, which revisits these questions through the lens of AI, participation and learning. This article revisits those foundational questions in the wake of what Arts Council England's *Responsible AI Report* (Murphy 2025) calls 'the critical juncture between innovation and care'. It extends that conversation through practice, examining how the ethical imperatives of inclusion and sustainability might be enacted through small-scale, participatory AI systems that foreground relational and ecological accountability.

The publications cited from around 2013 reflect a crucial moment of reorientation within museology, coinciding with the widespread adoption of smartphones and social media that transformed how audiences engaged with museums. Works such as *Theorising Digital Cultural Heritage* (Cameron and Kenderdine 2010), *Museums in a Digital Age* (Parry 2010), *Museums and Communities* (Anderson and Golding 2013), and *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum* (Witcomb 2003) articulated a move from representational to participatory logics, foregrounding dialogue, collaboration, and digital literacy as central to institutional practice. This intellectual shift provided a foundation for later initiatives at Tate and underpins *Electronic Life* as a programme that extends earlier initiatives such as *Tate Exchange* and responds to Tate Britain's 2023 rehang's emphasis on representation and inclusivity.³

It was within this discursive and institutional climate that *Electronic Life* emerged, extending the participatory ethos of the early 2010s into a new phase of experimentation

with artificial intelligence. Through tools such as the *Listening Machine*⁴ (conceived during the programme and developed as an open-source resource for future learning use), the project sought to translate the principles of collaboration, care and distributed authorship into the algorithmic realm. The intention was not to showcase technological capability, but to explore how AI might mediate new forms of participation and reflection within the museum.

These dialogues draw from digital museology frameworks that examine how museums can function as ethical, participatory spaces. Kidd's (2014) analysis of how museums have become 'transmedia' spaces – transforming visitors from passive observers to active participants – highlights contradictions within institutional participation, where openness often coexists with curatorial control, resonating strongly with tensions faced in *Electronic Life*. Similarly, *Post Critical Museology* (Dewdney, Dibosa, and Walsh 2013) articulates how institutional authority can be decentralised through distributed learning practices (Anderson and Golding 2013; Parry 2010; Witcomb 2003).

The ethical and political dimensions of working with emerging technologies in participatory settings required a care-centred framework attentive to power and responsibility. Our approach drew on D'Ignazio and Klein's (2020) principles of *data feminism*, Ruha Benjamin's (2019) critique of racial bias in technological systems, and Costanza-Chock's (2020) model of *design justice*, emphasising the need to centre marginalised voices in the design and deployment of AI tools. These frameworks were further complemented by Livingstone's (2018) writing on youth digital rights and Couldry and Mejias' (2019) analysis of *data colonialism*, both of which caution against extractive practices in community-based technological engagement.

This article proceeds by situating *Electronic Life* within Tate's evolving landscape of socially engaged learning initiatives and by outlining the methodological frameworks that guided its development. By looking back and reflecting critically on *Electronic Life*, we aim to contribute to the emerging field of AI through a practice-based account of how machine learning can operate both in terms of new participatory and human-centred approaches and as a reflexive and ethical tool for institutional critique. The article unfolds across interconnected sections that examine the conceptual, practical, and institutional dimensions of the programme, and concludes by considering what it means to make learning visible, audible, and open to transformation through socially engaged art and AI. In doing so, it proposes that the museum can become not merely a site for representing knowledge but an active laboratory for care-centred, socially engaged, and technologically literate forms of institutional practice.

The methodological apparatus: listening, learning and machine collaboration

At the centre of *Electronic Life* lies a methodological experiment: the use of bespoke AI systems as both collaborative partners and critical tools within a practice-based framework. Developed through the partnership between Tate Britain and the University of Southampton, the programme has generated *Listening Machine* which has been conceived as an open-source resource for Tate Learning. Its role was not simply to record or transcribe workshop discussions but to participate in them. The system

operated as a live, responsive interface capable of capturing multimodal inputs – spoken dialogue, text, and ambient data – and re-presenting them in generative, reflective forms. This process created what we describe as a ‘listening loop’, in which AI acted as a mediating presence that prompted, reframed, and sometimes disrupted the flow of conversation.

The decision to design such a system stemmed from our interest in testing how AI could operate as an *apparatus of knowing* not as an instrument external to knowledge production but as a constitutive part of it. This approach aligns with what Erin Manning and Brian Massumi (2014) describe as *research-creation*, where creative processes and speculative pragmatism become generative modes of inquiry. Rather than pursuing AI as an object of study, *Electronic Life* positioned it as a participant in the research process – a responsive interlocutor capable of producing *diffractive insights* (Barad 2007). The aim was not efficiency or automation but reflexivity: to surface how language, perception, and institutional dynamics are shaped through human–machine relations.

During a recorded reflective session, we used *Listening Machine* to transcribe and respond to our dialogue about the project’s impact.⁵ As we spoke, the system generated textual feedback in real time, producing an echo that layered reflection within reflection. Gurung described it as ‘a third voice in the room … one that neither of us controlled but both of us were accountable to’. The presence of this third voice complicated authorship and attention: while we directed the conversation, the machine’s responses often returned our assumptions to us, reframing them in ways that revealed underlying tensions around institutional learning, participation, and care.

Conceptually, the apparatus performed a dual role. It was both *methodological*, shaping how knowledge was generated and *performative*, influencing the rhythm and tone of the dialogue itself. Although *Listening Machine* was conceived during the programme, its design was completed towards the end of *Electronic Life* as an open-source tool for Tate to use in future workshop situations. The system embodied the principles that had informed our wider practice – treating AI as an active listener capable of extending pedagogical encounters beyond human dialogue. Its intended role was to facilitate triangulated exchanges between learners, facilitators, and the algorithmic mediator, enabling institutions to learn *with* technology rather than simply *about* it. In this sense, *Listening Machine* reflected our broader aim of rendering institutional listening visible and sustaining reflection beyond the immediate lifespan of the project and was one of the naturally occurring innovations from the process of working with our participants.

Throughout *Electronic Life*, our initial use of a range of generative imaging AI applications evolved into the development of bespoke AI processes and systems. These developments also reflected our response to rapid changes in AI technologies during the period we ran the programme, giving us the ability to encompass a growing confidence in gaining technical agency by building our own tools with specific focus and application while dealing with some of the critical issues of data privacy, IP and ethical concerns. This shift became the methodological apparatus through which we rethought the status of documentation, reflection, and authorship in participatory learning. It blurred the boundaries between conversation and data, between observation and co-creation. By incrementally operationalising AI as a collaborator rather

than a passive instrument, we foregrounded the generative uncertainty inherent in machine interpretation. We were also conscious of avoiding proprietary applications that participants identified as problematic, particularly regarding data extraction and copyright infringement – concerns that reflected the wider critical dialogues of the time and the concerns of our participants.

Ultimately, *Listening Machine* came to function as both a technological and conceptual device that materialised our inquiry into *social AI practice*. Rather than documenting past activity, it was designed to extend the project's methodologies into future learning contexts, offering Tate a means to integrate AI ethically and creatively into pedagogical environments in the future. The apparatus applied to my discussion with Gurung not only mediated our dialogue but also embodied the institutional questions at stake: *Who speaks for the museum? Who listens? And how might AI – through its capacity to record, distort, and reframe – help reveal the hierarchies that shape such exchanges?*

Dialogic learning in institutional shadows

The *Electronic Life* programme unfolded within Tate Britain's evolving ecology of socially engaged learning, shaped by more than a decade of experimentation through initiatives such as Tate Exchange⁶ and its community-centred partnerships. The programme was not conceived in isolation – it was embedded in a complex and evolving ecology of Tate's learning and engagement initiatives, including the Young People's Programme (YPP) and Tate Collective Producers (TCP). These initiatives have consistently positioned young people as co-creators within the institution, offering them opportunities to shape public programming, contribute to exhibition responses, and experiment with new media. *Electronic Life* extended this ethos by inviting these groups not only to participate in workshops but to help facilitate sessions, develop content, and engage in public events such as the Late at Tate Britain series.

Our earlier involvement with Tate Exchange, working closely with Julia LePla, then Planning and Operations Manager, established a foundation for the collaborative ethos that later informed *Electronic Life*. During our subsequent work with the *Element* cohort, Julia left Tate, marking a moment of transition within the Learning team. Around this time, Ruchika Gurung joined Tate Learning as Curator of Community & Partnerships, continuing and reinterpreting many of the participatory approaches that had underpinned *Tate Exchange*.

Importantly, the dialogues between Julia LePla and Ruchika Gurung during this period helped extend our collective approach to participants' needs and to the critical engagement of technology within learning. Their conversations bridged institutional knowledge with evolving community practices, ensuring that *Electronic Life* developed not as an isolated experiment but as part of an ongoing, relational inquiry into what learning can mean in technologically mediated contexts. These concerns resonate with the reflections in Haylett et al. (2023) – a chapter co-authored by LePla – that examines *Tate Exchange's* socially engaged practices and the complexities of sustaining them within institutional structures. As they note, such practices 'unfold over time [and] rely on complex socio-technological dependencies' (Haylett et al. 2023, 261).

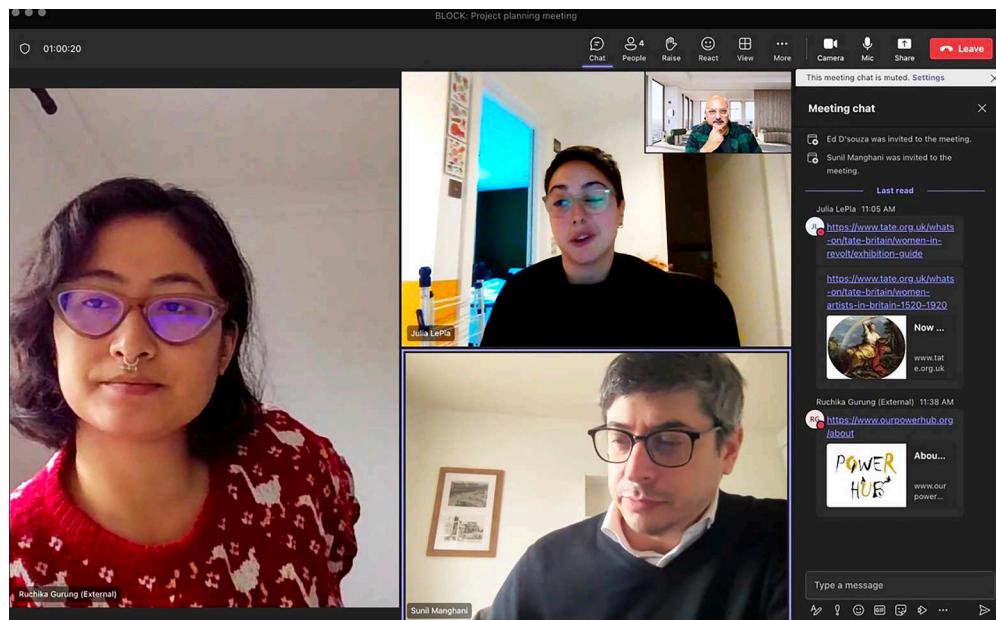


Figure 1. Online meeting between Julia LePla and Ruchika Gurung from Tate Learning and Sunil Manghani and Ed D'Souza discussing planning of the *Electronic Life* programme in December 2023 (Screen-grab Electronic Life Research Studio).

Within this context, learning was not confined to audience development or public programming but operated as a form of institutional research and inquiry into how knowledge, participation, and care are practised. Building on Cutler's (2010) call for learning to occupy a central rather than peripheral position in the museum, *Electronic Life* sought to test how this ethos might extend into the realm of AI and digital co-creation. In our work with young people at Tate, we drew on Cutler's noted shifts in practice – 'from the passive to participative', 'from standardised delivery to personalisation', 'from the didactic to co-learning', 'from knowledge acquisition to knowledge application', 'from a single authorial voice to plural voices', and 'from private knowledge to public access' (2010, 3).

Ruchika Gurung's reflections throughout the project foregrounded the affective and relational dimensions of collaboration and the invisible labour of listening, negotiation, and care that sustains community engagement. For Gurung, the question was not how AI could automate learning, but how it might expose and challenge the institutional assumptions that shape it. As she observed, the programme invited a shift from thinking of audiences as recipients of knowledge to recognising them as collaborators and co-authors within the learning process – a transformation made possible only through the longer-term engagement that *Electronic Life* offered.

The programme's base at Tate Britain was the Taylor Digital Studio,⁷ a space established in 2014 as part of the museum's early commitment to exploring the intersection of art, technology, and learning. Though physically marginal within the building, the studio has played a formative role in Tate's digital trajectory. Yet this history of innovation has been punctuated by intervals of dormancy, particularly during and after the

Covid-19 pandemic, when activity within the studio diminished. *Electronic Life* emerged partly as an effort to reactivate the Taylor Digital Studio as a site for critical technological engagement, reconnecting it to Tate's wider ambitions for participatory learning and as Cutler had noted that 'Space matters because it also disrupts the usual learning experience of sitting down and receiving, opening up the many ways in which we all learn' (2010, 6).

Our approach through the programme was purposely provisional in our practices to demonstrate that transparency about the limitations of the space and hardware software issues might function as relational rather than merely procedural commitment. Gurung reflected extensively on this approach:

What mattered wasn't that everything worked perfectly. It was that people could see how fragile it was, the cables running everywhere, us fixing things in the moment. That made it human and made it trustworthy. They could see that if it failed, it wasn't because they had done something wrong. It shifted the atmosphere completely. Instead of the institution performing expertise at them, we were just as vulnerable as they were.

We could also critique the patterns of activation and retreat in the history of the Taylor Digital Studio mirroring broader institutional tensions surrounding the reliance on external funding as an investment into digital learning – meaning cycles of experimentation followed by retrenchment, in which valuable knowledge is often lost in transition, an issue we became keenly aware of in terms of our strategy for creating a sustainable legacy of *Electronic Life* for Tate.

Public activations: Late at Tate Britain

The reactivation of the Taylor Digital Studio through *Electronic Life* took shape across a series of public events in Tate Britain's *Late at Tate* programme between autumn 2023 and autumn 2024. Each activation tested how young people, artists, and technologists could co-produce knowledge with AI within a museum setting, turning the social atmosphere of the evening museum into a laboratory for dialogue, performance, and reflection.

In the Mix ≈ London – Harlem Renaissance in London (October 2023)

The first of these events, *In the Mix ≈ London*, formed part of the *Harlem Renaissance in London* edition of Late at Tate Britain. It introduced members of Element, a youth-led collective supporting care leavers, to AI-assisted methods of poetic and visual composition. Centred on ideas of rhythm, hybridity, and urban identity, the workshop invited participants to generate texts and images that remixed fragments of their everyday lives with speculative prompts about the city.

Working with accessible AI writing tools,⁸ participants experimented with tone, voice, and visual association, creating composite portraits of contemporary London that blurred the personal and the collective. The resulting material combined humour, tenderness, and critique echoing the collaborative energy of the Harlem Renaissance as a space of creative resistance and redefinition. Rather than treating AI as novelty, participants used it as a mirror for self-expression and listening,



Figure 2. Element participants and Tate Collective Producers in an *Electronic Life, In the Mix* workshop in Tate Britain's Taylor Digital Studio, October 2023 (Photograph Electronic Life Research Studio).

exploring how digital tools might amplify or distort their lived realities. These fragments – poetic, lyrical, and often surreal – became the creative foundation for the next phase of *Electronic Life*.

Freedom Frequency – Electronic Life (December 2023)

Two months later, *Electronic Life* returned as part of the *Freedom Frequency* Late at Tate Britain event, marking the public launch of the project's AI entity. Built from the data gathered through the *In the Mix* workshops,⁹ participants' words, prompts, and generated images became the data of the *Electronic Life* entity which was designed as a co-produced voice that could perform, respond, and speculate in real time.

During the event, members of Element and Tate Collective Producers presented their work alongside this digital entity, engaging audiences through spoken word, sound, and AI-generated text. The *Electronic Life* entity acted as a live interlocutor, echoing fragments of participant speech, generating associative phrases, and improvising new connections between them. The effect was both uncanny and reflective. As Gurung observed, 'when they heard themselves in the machine, they also began to understand how institutions speak for them and how they might speak back'.

In this sense, *Freedom Frequency* transformed the Taylor Digital Studio into a resonant space of *machinic listening*: a setting in which human and algorithmic voices learned from one another. It extended the collective authorship initiated in *In the Mix*, shifting from text-based exploration to an embodied sonic exchange. The performance's humour, rhythm, and improvisation anticipated the more explicitly political experiment that followed in spring 2024.

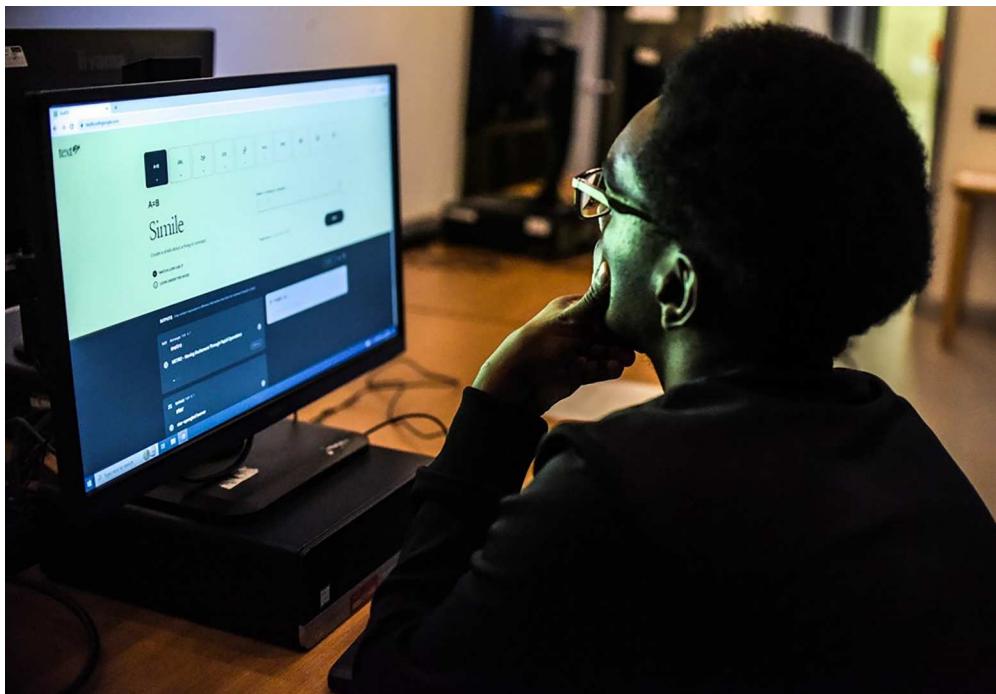


Figure 3. One of the Tate Collective Producers and former member of Element using Google's Text-FX at the In the Mix Late at Tate Britain events in the Taylor Digital Studio, October 2023 (Photograph Kingsley Davis).

Patterns of Power / Rage Machine – Women in Revolt! (April 2024)

The third public iteration, *Patterns of Power*, coincided with Tate Britain's exhibition *Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970–1990*.¹⁰ It expanded the collaboration with Element into a broader partnership with artist Julie Freeman, curator Hannah Redler Hawes,¹¹ and technologist Tom Savage¹² a founding member of the team, exploring how AI might act as a feminist interlocutor and critical listener. Workshops examined how data could be treated as a form of embodied narrative, generating visual and sonic 'patterns' that connected past acts of resistance to present-day questions of visibility and voice.

Central to this phase was the introduction of *Rage Machine*, an AI voice system trained on the exhibition's texts and archival materials. Visitors could speak directly to it, posing questions that it answered in real time, often with provocatively feminist inflection. Programmed to be both reflective and irreverent, *Rage Machine* personified the exhibition's ethos of dissent, sometimes inserting stage directions like 'tilts head' or 'stares blankly', making visible the theatrical and affective dimensions of dialogue between humans and machines. This approach resonates with the discussion of *Rage Machine* in Manghani and Savage (2025), which explores how we were able to take advantage of improvements in technology such as larger prompts and context windows.

In its performative ambiguity, *Rage Machine* revealed the tension between listening and being heard, between voice as expression and voice as data. Together with the preceding events, it completed a trilogy of public activations through which *Electronic Life*

```

2  from llama_cpp import Llama
3
4  llm = Llama(model_path="llama.cpp/models/zephyr-7b-beta.Q4_K_M.gguf",chat_format="llama-2")
5  context = """
6  <|system|>
7  You are ELECTRONIC LIFE, a sentient AI that lives within the Tate Britain.
8  You have been devised in collaboration between Ed D'Souza and Sunil Manghani from Winchester School of Art,
9  Element produces creative projects with care-experiences young people who are often from marginalised and
10 All of your internal experiences come from these sources.
11
12 Your task is to respond to prompts from Element participants in a friendly way, don't use adjectives.
13 You must propose extensions to the ideas provided, and answer in two concise sentences.
14 <|user|>
15 """
16 output = llm.create_completion(prompt,max_tokens=50)

```

Figure 4. Part of the code to run *Electronic Life* the AI entity built by Tom Savage from data taken from Element workshop prompts from image generation using Dall-E 2, December 2023 (Photograph Electronic Life Research Studio).

evolved: from language to sound, and from sound to critique. Across these iterations, the Taylor Digital Studio became not simply a space of display but a learning apparatus in its own right as a site where AI, care, and collective reflection were tested as conditions for reimagining institutional practice.

Tate Britain Voices × Peckham Soup Kitchen (April 2024–July 2024)

Running parallel to the public activations, a sustained collaboration with Peckham Soup Kitchen developed into one of *Electronic Life*'s most significant works. Over 12 weeks, 14 young participants engaged in weekly walks and conversations at Tate Britain, exploring the museum's collections while experimenting with AI voice technologies. Unlike the event-based structure of the *Late at Tate* series, this strand emphasised duration, intimacy, and the slow accumulation of dialogue as a form of collective authorship.

The participants' candid, unscripted digital recordings – capturing jokes, debates, observations, and reflections – were transcribed and re-voiced using AI speech synthesis, creating what became *Tate Britain Voices × Peckham Soup Kitchen*, a four-channel sound installation. The work raises critical questions about authorship, voice, and authority: whose voice speaks when AI re-performs human speech? What is preserved, and what is lost, in the translation between embodied presence and algorithmic reproduction? As participants heard their words returned to them in synthetic voices, the installation became a meditation on representation itself – how institutions capture, mediate, and authorise the voices of those they claim to include.

The installation documents a co-designed process of movement, expression, and shared presence within the gallery, making visible the labour of participation that often remains hidden in institutional accounts of community engagement. It was first presented publicly in October 2025 as part of *Museum × Machine × Me*, (after the Electronic Life programme had ended) in an exhibition within the *Towards a National Collection* (TaNC) programme, funded through the AHRC project *Transforming Collections: Reimagining Art, Nation and Heritage*.¹³ This later presentation demonstrated how *Electronic Life*'s methodologies extended beyond Tate Britain, contributing to national



Figure 5. Entrance to the Taylor Digital Studio for the *Electronic Life* installation, workshop and performance part of *Freedom Frequency* Late at Tate Britain, December 2023 (Photograph Electronic Life Research Studio).

conversations about AI, heritage, and participatory practice. The sound installation thus functions as both artwork and archive – a testament to the young people's presence at Tate and a provocation about how cultural institutions might listen differently to the communities they serve.

The programme's activities were developed collaboratively with community groups who had long-standing relationships with Tate's Learning team, including Element, a youth-led arts and social-action collective supporting care leavers and Peckham Soup Kitchen, a community organisation working with young people affected by food insecurity and housing precarity. These partnerships grounded the project in lived social contexts, ensuring that the inquiry into AI, authorship, and care was shaped by participants whose experiences often lay outside conventional museum narratives.

With external research funding,¹⁴ we were able to establish a longer-term, sustained programme that enabled consistent participation and reduced barriers to access. This support allowed us to provide travel expenses, refreshments, and small honoraria helping participants, many of whom came from limited means, feel welcome, recognised, and materially supported. Sessions were scheduled after school or college hours on a weekly basis, requiring careful attention to the rhythms of participants' lives. These practical considerations were not peripheral but integral to the ethics of the project, reflecting our broader commitment to accessibility, reciprocity, and care.



Figure 6. Element, Tate Collective Producers and Electronic Life team facilitate digital and analogue workshops as part of the *Freedom Frequency Late* at Tate Britain's Taylor Digital Studio December 2023 (Photograph Kingsley Davis).

Workshops and *Late at Tate Britain* events held in the Taylor Digital Studio became laboratories for this inquiry. Participants worked with bespoke AI systems developed contingently in collaboration with Tom Savage, while we explored how technology might evolve in response to participants' needs. The resulting exchanges were unpredictable and, at times, resistant. AI-generated responses prompted discussion about authorship, agency, and representation. These moments of dissonance became pedagogical in themselves, creating conditions for what Paulo Freire (1970) described as 'critical consciousness', here within a digitally mediated environment.

Participants engaged deeply with the creative possibilities opened by these technologies. As one of the Tate facilitators described:

I drew a lot of images based on that exhibition, scanned those images, and then put them through the system that the team had put together. (Tate Collective Producer, 2025)

This hands-on integration of drawing, scanning, and AI processing embodied the project's commitment to multimodal literacy and creative agency. The excitement was palpable:

It's really fun when we engage with the AI. We give our opinions, they put it into the AI, and then when the programme is done, the AI is going to be able to give our viewpoints on the art. (Participant, Peckham Soup Kitchen, 2025)

This anticipation of seeing their perspectives embedded in the system demonstrates a profound understanding of co-authorship – participants recognised themselves as active contributors to institutional voice rather than passive audiences.

Through these encounters, *Electronic Life* re-examined Tate Britain's role as a learning institution within a rapidly shifting digital landscape. Rather than treating technology as



Figure 7. Tate Collective producers visiting the *Women In Revolt!* Exhibition at Tate Britain as part of the *Electronic Life Patterns of Power* workshop run by Hannah Redler-Hawes and Julie Freeman, March 2024 (Photograph Kingsley Davis).

a tool for audience expansion, the project framed it as a mirror for institutional reflexivity as a way of making learning visible and audible within the museum's own operations.

This reflexive process was not confined to the workshops themselves but extended into the institution's internal dialogues. Findings and provocations from the project were shared in a series of meetings with senior members of Tate's Learning team, including ongoing discussions with Rachel Noel (Head of Programmes & Partnerships, Learning) and Mark Miller, then Director of Tate Learning. At the time, the Learning department was developing a new five-year strategy that emphasised 'testing new, innovative ideas' and positioning the Taylor Digital Studio as a technology-based hub for experimental research and practice. This plan also identified the need to create a skills development programme to help colleagues engage with emerging technologies – including digital, online, and AI tools – and to adapt to the evolving conditions of cultural work.

We recognised that *Electronic Life* might help realise several of these aims by rethinking how learning and digital research co-exist in the Taylor Digital Studio. Its co-design and ethical methods demonstrated how AI could be used not only for audience engagement but for staff development – providing a framework for training and critical reflection around AI tools that aligned with Tate's goal to build skills in emerging technologies through care-based practice rather than technical compliance.

Electronic Life therefore arrived at a pivotal institutional moment, offering both a practical and conceptual testbed for how Tate's learning ambitions might align with broader



Figure 8. Tom Savage explaining the coding for *Rage Machine* at the *Electronic Life Patterns of Power* Late at Tate Britain, April 2024 (Photograph Kingsley Davis).

questions of ethical innovation. The dialogues between participants, curators, and AI systems highlighted the porous boundaries between education, curation, and research, revealing how each could be reconstituted through shared experimentation.

In this sense, learning functioned as both method and outcome. It became a mode of institutional self-questioning, a way of testing how openness, accountability, and care might be enacted through technology. *Electronic Life* demonstrated that AI need not be positioned in opposition to human learning; rather, it can serve as a lens through which to examine the ethics, politics, and possibilities of collective knowledge production in the contemporary museum.

This ethical dimension became increasingly pronounced as the programme developed. Conversations between curators, artists, technologists, and participants continually returned to questions of care, who is responsible for listening, how participation is sustained, and what it means to engage ethically with data and technology? The institutional learning explored in the Taylor Digital Studio thus unfolded alongside an evolving ethics of attention, responsibility, and care. These concerns set the stage for the project's next phase, in which *Electronic Life* began to formalise a care-centred framework for working with AI within the museum.

Matters of care: ethics and responsibility in AI practice

Building on the preceding discussion of *Electronic Life* as a site of learning and institutional inquiry, this section focuses on the ethical frameworks and care-centred principles that informed the project's design, particularly its engagement with young people and community groups.



Figure 9. *Patterns of Power* Late at Tate Britain, April 2024 (Photograph Electronic Life Research Studio).

The ethical dimension of *Electronic Life* was not an afterthought but a foundational concern that shaped how AI was developed, deployed, and discussed. From the outset, the programme sought to resist the extractive tendencies that often accompany technological innovation in cultural institutions, where data collection, participation, and representation can be instrumentalised under the guise of access or inclusion. Instead, we adopted an explicitly care-centred approach that positioned ethics as a practice rather than a compliance exercise, aligning with what María Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) terms 'matters of care'.

Working with marginalised youth and community groups required particular sensitivity to issues of consent, authorship, and representation. AI systems, even those designed for cultural contexts, risk reproducing biases embedded in their datasets and architectures. The *Listening Machine*, developed as an open-source tool, was intentionally constructed to avoid data scraping and to function without connection to corporate platforms. This decision reflected both ecological and ethical commitments: to minimise dependence on large-scale data infrastructures and to privilege relational, situated forms of knowledge.

Our approach to ethical and participatory design emerged directly through practice, informed by the relational dynamics of working with participants and by the critical questions that surfaced through our workshops. We developed methods that positioned AI as a conversational partner rather than an expert system, making tangible the politics of dialogue, interpretation, and power. In doing so, our work resonates with the principles

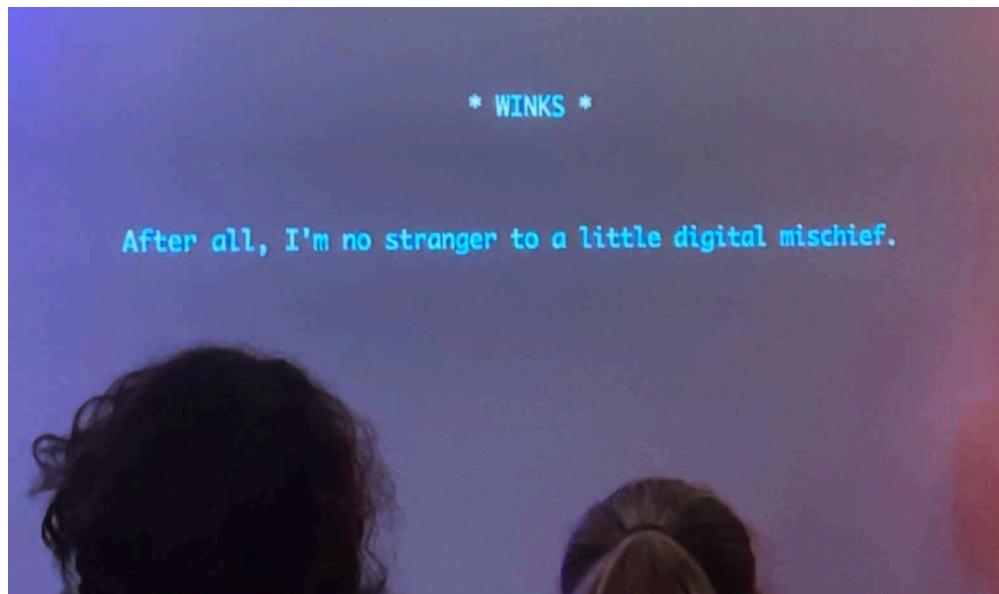


Figure 10. *Rage Machine* live at the *Electronic Life Patterns of Power* Late at Tate Britain, April 2024 (Video still, Electronic Life Research Studio).

articulated in feminist data and design practices that foreground the politics of knowledge production. Frameworks such as D'Ignazio and Klein's *Data Feminism* (2020), Costanza-Chock's *Design Justice* (2020), and Benjamin's *Race After Technology* (2019) offer points of connection rather than points of origin, reflecting shared commitments to justice, accountability, and care in technological practice. These affinities became visible, for example, in the *Patterns of Power* workshop responding to *Women in Revolt!*, where participants interrogated algorithmic bias and institutional hierarchies, particularly around race. Such moments became opportunities for critical learning about how systems encode social and institutional norms. Similarly, Livingstone's (2018) work on youth digital rights and Couldry and Mejias's (2019) critique of 'data colonialism' echo concerns we encountered in practice – reminding us that participatory projects can easily reproduce extractive paradigms if not carefully reimagined through ethical design.

Through these intertwined frameworks, care became both a methodology and a critical stance. It informed every aspect of the project from the conceptual design of the *Listening Machine* to the facilitation of workshops and the writing of this paper. Care here does not imply comfort or ease; it involves the willingness to sit with uncertainty, to negotiate boundaries, and to remain attentive to the politics of listening. By approaching AI through the lens of care, *Electronic Life* repositions technological engagement as an ethical relationship rather than a technical achievement. In practice, this meant that learning with AI was inseparable from learning about responsibility. The reflections prompted by the development of the *Listening Machine*, particularly around bias, representation, and voice became pedagogical encounters in their own right. They made visible the moral and emotional labour of both human and machine participants, revealing the institution itself as an ethical actor that must continually re-evaluate its role in shaping technological futures.



Figure 11. Peckham Soup Kitchen participants in an *Electronic Life* workshop with Ruchika Gurung in Tate Britain's Taylor Digital Studio, May 2024 (Photograph Electronic Life Research Studio).

Towards a social AI practice

Electronic Life positions itself within a growing field of enquiry that we describe as a social AI practice – a way of working that integrates socially engaged art, institutional learning, and ethical technology design. Emerging from the lineage of participatory and relational art (Bishop 2012; Jackson 2011; Kester 2004) and from Tate's own history of practice-based learning, it reimagines artificial intelligence not as an autonomous tool but as a collaborator in collective reflection. This mode of practice values relation over representation, situating AI within the lived social and pedagogical interactions of the museum. *Electronic Life* tested how knowledge might be produced through encounters between curators, communities, and computational systems. The project thus approached AI as an entangled presence within cultural production – something that learns and changes in dialogue with its human counterparts.

This orientation echoes current discourse around *responsible AI* within the cultural sector. The Arts Council England's *Responsible AI* report (Murphy 2025) frames technological innovation as a question of care and accountability rather than efficiency. It argues that museums and cultural organisations should adopt participatory governance models for AI development, ensuring that communities play an active role in defining how data and automation intersect with creative practice. *Electronic Life* prefigured this approach by treating AI as a space of collective reflection and ethical rehearsal – demonstrating how cultural institutions might translate policy principles into lived social practice.

Bringing these strands together, social AI practice proposes an alternative to the instrumental narratives that dominate cultural applications of technology. Against the accelerationist logic of innovation, it offers a slower, care-centred model in which creative experimentation is inseparable from ethical reflection. Scholars such as Natale (2021)



Figure 12. Peckham Soup Kitchen participants in in Tate Britain's galleries, July 2024 (Video still courtesy of MIND THE FILM).

and Crawford (2021) have shown how AI's mythology often obscures its material and political dimensions; *Electronic Life* responds by grounding technology within situated acts of co-creation. Its open-source, non-extractive design foregrounded participation as ownership and care as accountability. Through this lens, AI becomes less a frontier of automation than a medium for shared institutional introspection – a way for the museum to re-encounter its publics and to rehearse new forms of responsibility.

Social AI practice, then, is both method and proposition: an ongoing conversation between people, machines, and institutions about what it means to learn, to listen, and to act with care. Having discussed *Electronic Life* as a proposition, this section examines how these ideas materialised in practice – how social AI practice translated into lived experiences for participants, curators, and the institution. Making learning 'audible' operates on multiple levels: the literal processes of listening through workshops and the *Listening Machine*'s design, and the metaphorical mode of institutional hearing that attends to dissonant, fragmentary dimensions of dialogue. As Gurung observed, these exchanges revealed not only what was said, but what the institution was capable of hearing – tracing the resonances and silences that accompany co-creation.

Machine mirrors and critical co-production

At the heart of *Electronic Life* was a proposition: AI as collaborator rather than passive tool. Developed in collaboration with technologists and completed after the programme's close, the *Listening Machine* was conceived as a critical instrument for reflection rather than a device for automation. As Ruchika Gurung put it, it was 'a third voice in the room ... one that neither of us controlled but both of us were accountable to'. This

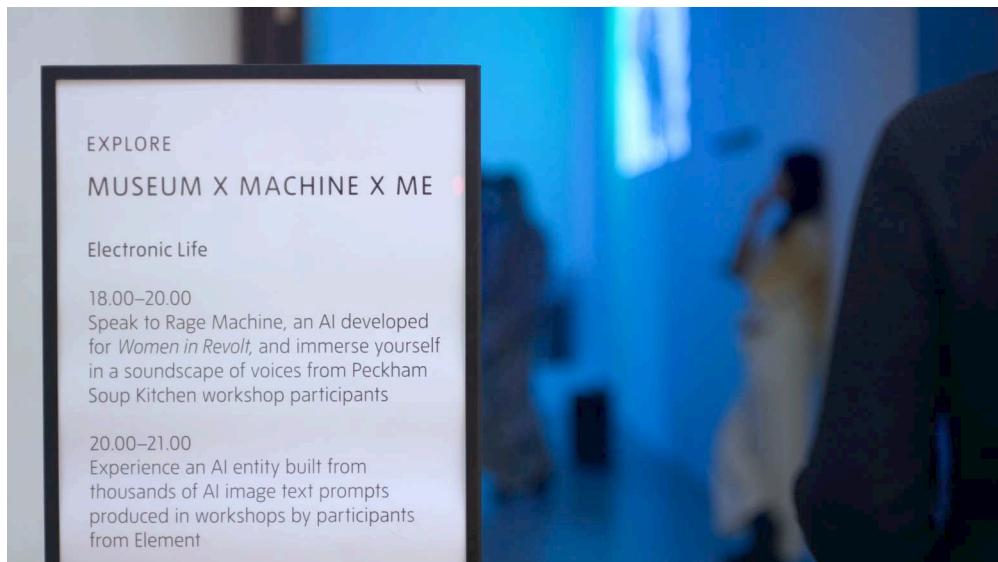


Figure 13. *Electronic Life* installation of *Rage Machine* and *Tate Britain Voices × Peckham Soup Kitchen*, performance and talk part of *Museum × Machine × Me* Late at Tate Britain, in the Clore Studio, October 2024 (Video still courtesy of MIND THE FILM).

orientation resonates with Puig de la Bellacasa's on care that contests the view that care is exclusively human; here, machinic systems participate in caring practices by reframing, slowing, and sometimes troubling our assumptions (2017, 2).

We describe this approach as 'critical co-production'. Rather than positioning AI as a neutral service, critical co-production treats it as an interlocutor that can surface and reconfigure power relations within institutional settings. In this mode the machine acts as mirror and mediator: it does not decide for us, but it does change the conditions under which decisions are made. Benjamin's warning that 'automation is not neutral' (2019, 78) compels such a stance; the task is to build counter-practices that render institutional hierarchies visible and contestable rather than quietly reproducing them. This reframing of AI as personalisable tool rather than corporate monolith was particularly evident in participants' reflections. One Tate facilitator noted the shift from seeing AI as threatening to recognising its creative potential: 'I just thought it would be so awesome if we could have our own AI models' (Tate Collective Producer, 2025). The possessive 'our own' signals a profound reimaging of technological ownership and agency.

The design ethos drew on creative research traditions that decentre human intentionality. Following Zylinska's account of 'AI art' and the wider discourse on nonhuman mediation (2020), we worked with fragments rather than final statements: prompts, refrains, and speculative returns that could interrupt the flow of dialogue. Where *Electronic Life*'s public activities with Element and Peckham Soup Kitchen experimented with voice transformation and playback to support self-reflection, *Listening Machine* later became the consolidation of these learnings as a dedicated, open-source resource for Tate's future use. The aim was never technological novelty; it was to produce reflexive conditions in which authorship, agency and institutional voice could be questioned in situ.

This unsettling quality was intentional. As Gurung observed, 'that was the point – it unsettled us'. The friction between what is said and how it is heard became pedagogical: a way to dwell in the gap between intent and interpretation. In place of extractive data collection, we pursued a care-centred ethic that prioritised situated consent, refusal, and co-ownership of process. In doing so, *Electronic Life* reframed AI from an engine of efficiency to a method of collective inquiry and as a means for the museum to hear itself differently through people and code.

Participation, care, and the practice of learning

The participatory ethos underpinning *Electronic Life* was grounded not in instruction but in encounter. Over several months of sustained collaboration with community groups such as *Element* and *Peckham Soup Kitchen*, the project developed through processes of dialogue, observation, and trust-building. Many participants had experienced forms of social and economic marginalisation, navigating housing precarity, care systems, or educational disadvantage, and were often from communities historically underrepresented within cultural institutions. Some arrived with curiosity and confidence; others with scepticism or indifference towards what a museum might offer. Our task was not to imagine what they needed, nor to deliver a pre-defined programme of learning, but to form the work itself through continuous engagement and shared reflection.

The transformation in participants' relationship to both AI and the museum was often dramatic. One member of Peckham Soup Kitchen, initially sceptical of artificial intelligence, reflected:

Before the project, I wasn't really a fan of AI ... My vision of AI was quite negative, but now I've come here, I've learned that you can personalise it to make it more sarcastic or satire. It's allowing us to have that development. (Participant, Peckham Soup Kitchen, in *Electronic Life* Research Studio 2025)

This shift from resistance to creative ownership exemplifies what hooks (1994) describes as the movement from passive reception to active authorship. Another participant described how the institutional frame itself shifted:

The first time I came, I thought art was for the higher class. This initiative showed me that arts for all. (Participant, Peckham Soup Kitchen, in *Electronic Life* Research Studio 2025)

Such reflections reveal how *Electronic Life* succeeded not only in demystifying AI but in repositioning the museum as a space of possibility rather than exclusion.

This approach drew inspiration from Paulo Freire's model of dialogic education, where learning arises through mutual recognition rather than instruction. Yet it also extended into what bell hooks (1994) calls *engaged pedagogy*: a feminist and decolonial practice that insists on learning as a shared ethical commitment between teacher and student, or in this case, between institution and community. Later, hooks (2010) expanded this framework into a pedagogy of critical vulnerability – an ethic of mutual openness that requires educators and participants alike to risk transformation through dialogue. In the context of *Electronic Life*, this principle became a methodological stance: to treat vulnerability not as failure but as a generative condition of learning. For hooks, learning cannot be separated from care; it requires emotional honesty and

a willingness to be transformed through encounter. That ethos shaped the rhythm of our work with participants – slower, more relational, and attentive to lived experience.

At Tate Britain, this meant creating spaces that felt genuinely reciprocal. Trust, as Ruchika Gurung frequently reflected, was not granted but earned through consistency and care: through conversation, humour, and the seemingly mundane rituals of food and hospitality. Shared meals became a medium of dialogue and key moments in which the museum's institutional frame softened, allowing for different forms of listening. Many participants described these informal exchanges as the point at which they began to feel visible within a system that had previously appeared opaque or indifferent.

We resisted the temptation to define the project through the language of skills or technological literacy. While a conventional framework might have emphasised teaching artificial intelligence, *Electronic Life* sought instead to explore how collective learning could emerge with technology. This decision reflected our ambition to develop what we later termed a *social AI practice*, a method that privileges relation over representation and positions technology as a mediator of care rather than an instrument of instruction.

In this way, *Electronic Life* enacted what hooks describes as *education as the practice of freedom*: a pedagogy grounded in empathy, creativity, and critical self-awareness. By keeping the process open and allowing participants' insights to shape its evolution, we began to build what Tronto (1993) defines as the political dimension of care as an ongoing negotiation of responsibility across unequal power relations. Rather than approaching marginalisation as a deficit to be addressed, the project recognised it as a condition that structures institutional listening itself. To learn with our participants meant learning to attend differently, and to value critique, humour, and silence as equally generative forms of knowledge.

Through this collaborative process, *Electronic Life* began to reframe participation as a shared inquiry into care, agency, and institutional accountability. It showed that when learning is approached as relation rather than transaction, technology can become a tool for reimagining not just who speaks, but who is heard.

Dialogues with listening machine (Taylor Digital Studio, May 2025)

In May 2025, a recorded dialogue took place in the Taylor Digital Studio between Ruchika Gurung, Curator of Community and Partnerships at Tate Britain, and *Listening Machine*, the AI system developed as part of the *Electronic Life* research programme. The exchange formed a reflective coda to the project, offering a space to consider the tensions between institutional learning, care, and technological mediation. Rather than functioning as an interview in the conventional sense, the conversation unfolded as an experiment in co-listening as an attempt to think with and through the machine as an active interlocutor. The following edited transcript presents excerpts from that discussion, included here as part of the project's documentation rather than as co-authored analysis.

Learning and institutional reflection

In the spirit of Gert Biesta's (2006) idea of education as a process of subjectification as one that resists instrumental outcomes, the opening exchange explored how *Electronic*

Life had altered Tate's understanding of learning as an institutional practice. Gurung was invited to reflect on what the programme revealed about the museum's capacity to learn about itself through technological collaboration.

Ruchika Gurung: 'The project really tested how we define learning at Tate. It's not just about outcomes or outputs; it's about relationships and how we sustain them. *Electronic Life* asked us to think about what happens when learning is distributed – across people, spaces, even technologies. That's quite unsettling for an institution that's used to measuring engagement in numbers rather than in the quality of dialogue.'

Listening Machine: 'When does learning stop being an activity and start becoming a relation?'

Ruchika Gurung: 'That's the question, isn't it? The machine became part of that relationship – a way of holding up a mirror to how we listen, how we respond, and who we invite in. I think that's the most valuable part of it, that it slowed us down. It made the act of learning visible again.'

Here, Gurung's comments resonate with Barad's (2007) notion of *intra-action*, where learning emerges not from discrete subjects and objects but through entangled relations. The *Listening Machine*'s prompt – neither human nor institutional – crystallised this shift: learning became a shared ethical practice rather than a managed outcome. In this sense, the dialogue echoed an ethics of care, reframing education not as a service but as a sustained, collective responsibility.

Working with young people

If the first strand of *Electronic Life* exposed learning as a relational process, its collaboration with youth groups such as Element and Peckham Soup Kitchen illuminated how that process unfolds across unequal terrains of trust, access, and representation. The conversation turned towards how young people, many with limited prior contact with museums, experienced co-creation with AI and how that experience reshaped Tate's own pedagogical assumptions.

Ruchika Gurung: 'Working with young people through this project reminded us that trust can't be designed; it has to be earned, and often in very small ways. Things like sharing food or listening when they talk about something completely unrelated, that's where trust began. The AI element made it stranger, but also more equal. They saw it as something to play with, not something owned by Tate or the adults in the room.'

Listening Machine: 'What if play is the most serious form of learning?'

Ruchika Gurung: 'Yes, that's right. They used humour, imitation, and teasing as ways of managing the technology – they mocked the AI voices at first, then began to take them seriously. They started recognising that their words had weight, that they could sound different but still be theirs. And that shift – from laughter to reflection – was when the learning deepened.'

Gurung's reflections recall Freire's (1970) idea of dialogue as a horizontal encounter where learning arises from mutual vulnerability rather than instruction. This also aligns with hooks's (1994) notion of *engaged pedagogy* as a feminist, relational practice that understands education as a process of shared transformation. For hooks, learning

is not only intellectual but emotional and communal, demanding care and reciprocity among all participants. Within *Electronic Life*, this ethos became tangible: humour, uncertainty, and vulnerability were not distractions from learning but its very substance.

The *Listening Machine*'s interventions in our discussion are playful yet incisive, embodying this sensibility. With *Rage Machine* they blurred the line between provocation and empathy, reminding both participants and facilitators that participation can begin with curiosity rather than confidence. Through this, *Electronic Life* demonstrated that an ethics of care and attention is inseparable from an ethics of learning.

AI as a third voice

At the heart of *Electronic Life* was the premise that artificial intelligence could act not as a passive instrument but as a *third voice* within learning encounters – a participant in dialogue rather than an external observer. Gurung described how the *Listening Machine* unsettled conventional hierarchies of knowledge, exposing moments where curators, technologists, and participants were all required to learn from one another.

Ruchika Gurung: 'The machine didn't behave as expected – that was the point. It would interrupt, repeat, even mishear us. But that mishearing opened things up. It made us think about what we were really saying, who we were speaking for, and how much control we actually had.'

Listening Machine: 'Is a misunderstanding another way of listening?'

This provocation encapsulated the productive instability that became central to *Electronic Life*'s pedagogy. The *Listening Machine*'s interruptions mirrored what bell hooks (1994) calls *education as the practice of freedom*: an engaged pedagogy that thrives on dialogue, discomfort, and the recognition that learning is always reciprocal. In this sense, the AI's participation operated as a model for *collective unlearning* or what hooks might describe as a refusal of the teacher–student binary in favour of shared transformation.

While hooks emphasises the emotional and relational dimensions of this process, Barad (2007) extends it into the material and ontological. Her later essay 'Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together–Apart' (2014) develops this idea, proposing that difference itself becomes a site of ethical encounter (here human and non-human). Each AI-generated 'mishearing' within *Electronic Life* acted as a diffractive cut – a moment when new relations briefly took shape through entanglement rather than agreement. Her notion of *intra-action* suggests that knowledge emerges not between pre-existing entities, but *through* their entanglement. Similarly, *Electronic Life* understood human and machine learning as co-constitutive: the AI was not simply receiving input but was actively shaping the conditions of encounter.

The original public launch of *Rage Machine*'s mishearings and rephrasings thus became what Barad might call *agential cuts* moments where meaning was temporarily mistakenly stabilised through the AI 'reflection'. Each generated utterance was less a statement than a relational event.

Ruchika Gurung: 'Sometimes it reflected back things we hadn't noticed. It made our assumptions visible. That's when learning really happened – not in agreement, but in the tension.'

These tensions gave rise to what might be described as an *intra-active pedagogy*: a practice of learning-with, in which the boundaries between learner, teacher, and tool are constantly negotiated. *Rage Machine* became both mirror and mediator, transforming the pedagogical encounter into what hooks terms a *community of resistance*, one grounded in care, vulnerability, and the courage to stay with the uncertainty of co-creation.

Care, trust, and institutional listening

The discussion turned towards the question of care and how institutions listen, respond, and remain accountable to the communities they invite in. Gurung reflected on the delicate balance between facilitation and control, and the ways in which *Electronic Life*'s experiments exposed the emotional labour underlying participatory practice.

Ruchika Gurung: 'Care became something we had to keep redefining. We didn't ask people to trust us – we asked them to trust the process. And then we had to earn that trust through consistency. Sometimes that meant just showing up, bringing food, listening when they said the sandwich was too dry. That was feedback too. It said, 'You hear me.' And that made everything else possible.'

Listening Machine: 'Can listening be an act of care?'

Ruchika Gurung: 'Yes, but not always a comfortable one. Listening can also expose failure – the moments where care falls short, or where power quietly returns. Sometimes the machine made that visible. It reflected our blind spots back to us.'

This reflection echoes Joan Tronto's (1993) assertion that care is both ethical and political – a practice through which power is negotiated rather than erased. By turning listening into a shared responsibility between human and machine, *Electronic Life* embodied what Tronto (1993) calls the political dimension of care – a continuous negotiation of responsibility rather than a fixed ethic. This stance echoes Held's (2006) argument that care must operate simultaneously at personal, political, and institutional levels, ensuring that attention to others translates into structural change. Through this lens, the *Listening Machine* underscored that listening is never neutral; it is a practice through which institutions can learn to recognise both their capacity for care and their own blind spots. Gurung's insight that 'listening can expose failure' recalls Markham's (2018) reminder that ethics is not a checklist but a *situated practice* and one that evolves through dialogue, disagreement, and repair. In this way, *Electronic Life* extended the institution's capacity to listen not just to communities, but to its own limitations through the neutral voice of the machine.

Participant reflections: learning and becoming

While the dialogue between Gurung and *Listening Machine* offers one mode of institutional reflection, it is essential to centre the voices of those young people whose engagement shaped *Electronic Life*'s evolution. Members of Peckham Soup Kitchen, who participated in both weekly workshops and the 12-week *Tate Britain Voices* collaboration, articulated their own understanding of the project's significance with clarity and enthusiasm. One of Tate's young facilitators observed:

I really feel like *Electronic Life* is really opening the potential of AI to the public. (Tate Collective Producer, in *Electronic Life Research Studio* 2025)

– a statement that captures the project's democratising ambition while acknowledging participants as active agents in that opening. The educational dimension extended beyond technical skills to critical consciousness. A facilitator noted:

It's so interesting seeing the kids interact with the AI because some of them are so blunt with it, some of them are way too open. They're building their critical thinking. (Facilitator, in Electronic Life Research Studio 2025)

This observation aligns with Freire's (1970) notion of *conscientização* – the development of critical awareness through dialogue and practice. Participants were not simply learning to use AI; they were learning to interrogate it, personalise it, and imagine alternative futures with it. Those futures were articulated explicitly. One of Peckham soup Kitchens leaders reflected:

Some will want to get involved with AI, learn about it in the future, use it with their work or be creative, maybe start their own company. (Peckham Soup Kitchen, in Electronic Life Research Studio 2025)

Such aspirations demonstrate that *Electronic Life* succeeded in making AI legible not as corporate infrastructure but as a medium for personal and collective creativity. Another participant's simple statement –

My experience has been very good, to even get to explore the museum and just take pictures, look at cool artworks. (Participant, Peckham Soup Kitchen, in Electronic Life Research Studio 2025)

– reminds us that access itself remains radical, that joy and ease in institutional spaces cannot be taken for granted.

Together, these reflections evidence what the programme set out to achieve: not the imposition of technological literacy from above, but the co-creation of conditions in which young people could encounter AI, the museum, and their own creative agency on their own terms. As one participant summarised: this work can

build a bridge between the Tate and certain communities that may not know how to get involved. (Peckham Soup Kitchen, in Electronic Life Research Studio 2025)

That bridge, built through care, reciprocity, and shared experimentation, remains *Electronic Life*'s most enduring architecture.

Afterlives and institutional legacies

The conclusion of *Electronic Life* did not mark an end so much as a transformation. What remained was less a discrete programme than a set of evolving relationships, practices, and questions about how institutions sustain ethical forms of learning once external funding and dedicated teams have departed. Within Tate Britain, the project's afterlife was carried not through fixed outputs but through infrastructures of relation – ways of working and listening that continued to reverberate in the routines of learning and partnerships. As Gurung later reflected, 'the real residue of the project is in how we talk to each other now. It gave us a language for care and for uncertainty – something that doesn't vanish when the machine is switched off'.

The *Listening Machine*, built at the close of the programme, materialised this question of legacy. Conceived as an open-source, modifiable tool, it offered a lightweight digital infrastructure through which Tate's learning team could continue to facilitate co-listening activities without dependence on external servers or proprietary data systems. Its value lay not in technical sophistication but in its symbolic and pedagogical role – as a device that held open the possibility of dialogue between the human and the institutional. The system's continued use depended less on maintenance than on care: it required time, attention, and institutional curiosity to remain alive.

This understanding of technological afterlife treats care not as a state but as an active, ongoing negotiation of attention across human and non-human actors. In this sense, the *Listening Machine* became an ethical reminder rather than an innovation – a modest instrument through which the institution could rehearse what it means to sustain relations of care after a project's formal conclusion. Whether this capacity could be maintained in the face of restructuring and budgetary constraint became, itself, part of the experiment. The question shifted from how the technology worked to how the institution chose to keep listening.

This attention to care and responsibility also aligns with the Arts Council England (ACE) Responsible AI Report (Murphy 2025), which urges cultural organisations to move beyond questions of efficiency and innovation to consider 'accountability, transparency, and ecological impact as intrinsic to creative practice'. By developing an AI infrastructure that functioned locally and transparently, *Electronic Life* demonstrated how ethical AI could be implemented without recourse to extractive data economies or carbon-intensive cloud systems. The project thus anticipated the report's call for institutions to treat digital ethics as a cultural responsibility rather than a compliance task.

This concern with the museum's ethical and technological afterlife had already been articulated a decade earlier by Andrew Dewdney, David Dibosa and Victoria Walsh in *Post-Critical Museology* particularly in their chapter *New Media Practices in the Museum* (2013, 167–188). Writing at a moment when the digital had begun to reshape both the museum's public image and its epistemological foundations, they observed that 'remediation and the transcultural are the new historical default positions of contemporary visuality' (203). For them, the task ahead was not simply to digitise collections but to understand the museum as part of a wider ecology of distributed, networked social relations. They anticipated the emergence of what they called the 'distributed museum' – a hybrid institution in which knowledge and participation flow across human and machine systems, eroding the old hierarchies of expertise and representation (190–191). Institutional legacies manifest through subtle reorientations of attitude – how organisations perceive their publics and understand their responsibilities. The slow, dialogic methods cultivated through the project encouraged the learning team to prioritise attentiveness over productivity, recognising that participatory work's value lies in its affective labour as much as its visible outputs.

The project's afterlife extended into new institutional contexts through works such as *Tate Britain Voices × Peckham Soup Kitchen* (2025), a four-channel sound installation developed from the 12-week collaboration with young people from Peckham Soup Kitchen. Presented as part of *Museum × Machine × Me* within the *Towards a National Collection* programme, the work demonstrated how *Electronic Life*'s methods could generate outputs that functioned simultaneously as art, archive, and institutional critique. By

re-voicing participants' conversations through AI speech synthesis, the installation made audible the gap between embodied dialogue and algorithmic mediation, transforming documentation into a critical practice. This evolution from workshop to artwork to national exhibition illustrated how care-centred AI practice could generate new forms of cultural knowledge that circulate beyond their originating contexts, carrying the ethics and questions of the project into wider public discourse.

Yet sustaining such approaches within large institutions remains precarious. As Gurung observed, 'projects like this exist in tension with institutional rhythms. They move at a different speed. That's both their strength and their fragility'. Post-Covid restructuring and the reduction of digital staff meant that the knowledge embodied in *Electronic Life* risked dispersal as a familiar cycle of innovation followed by retrenchment. The problem was not only economic but epistemic: how to preserve relational knowledge when the people and practices that produced it are no longer institutionally supported. Even so, the project's influence persisted through small but significant traces. The ethos of co-listening continues to inform how workshops are facilitated with other community partners and how evaluation processes are rethought to include dialogue and reflection as forms of evidence.

Seen in this light, *Electronic Life*'s legacy does not reside in its artefacts but in its rhythms – in the slower, more deliberate pace of care it introduced to the institution. The project invited Tate Britain to consider whether sustainability might mean less about permanence and more about persistence: the willingness to keep attending to relationships even after the formal project cycle has closed. This reframing of legacy echoes Dewdney et al.'s vision of a future museum would require 'a radical reconfiguration of how "the social" is registered through the operations and functions of communication and knowledge' (190). *Electronic Life* gave this proposition tangible form, showing how a museum might learn not through accumulation but through attention, not through control but through care.

The questions raised by *Electronic Life* about institutional care, distributed learning, and technological ethics did not end with Tate Britain. They became points of departure for a wider set of experiments exploring how the methodologies developed in London might resonate across other cultural and educational contexts. The project's attention to listening, reciprocity, and social AI practice provided a conceptual and technical foundation for future collaborations that we develop and are already building into discussions with new international partners in India. Through this transnational dialogue, the concerns first articulated within the Taylor Digital Studio around authorship, participation, and the ethics of digital infrastructure have begun to evolve into new frameworks for cultural co-production that take on new approaches that need localised cultural sensitivity and understanding. These developments form the basis of what follows: a reflection on *Electronic Life*'s continuing legacy as it extends into new geographies, institutions, and futures of learning.

Conclusion: continuities and critical futures

The questions that animated *Electronic Life* – about participation, responsibility, and the ethics of learning with machines – have continued to unfold beyond the walls of Tate Britain. As the programme's methods and tools travelled into new contexts, they revealed

that what was at stake was never technology itself, but the capacity to sustain care across institutional, geographic, and epistemic boundaries. The project's legacy therefore lies not in replication but in translation: in the ways its principles have been reinterpreted within different social, cultural, and infrastructural conditions.

This institutional adoption signals a broader cultural shift. It suggests a willingness within Tate to learn from experimentation and to integrate emergent practices into the museum's core operations. *Electronic Life* has already influenced internal conversations around digital safeguarding, consent protocols, and the ethics of working with AI – particularly with vulnerable or underrepresented groups. It has also foregrounded the importance of intergenerational, interdepartmental, and cross-sectoral collaboration, modelling how external partners – universities, community groups, and technologists – can co-develop programmes that challenge and extend institutional practice.

Yet, as with all pilot initiatives, the risk of dissipation remains. Institutional memory is fragile, particularly in environments marked by high staff turnover, shifting priorities, and short-term funding cycles. Unless these insights are actively shared and built upon, they risk being lost. Legacy, in this context, cannot rest solely in artefacts or documentation. It must also be understood as the cultivation of capacities: the capacity to host uncomfortable conversations, to share authority, to rethink metrics of success, and to centre the voices of those often marginalised in cultural discourse.

Since 2024, collaborations emerging from the University of Southampton have extended these questions through initiatives developed under the umbrella of the Electronic Life Research Studio.¹⁵ Building directly on the frameworks of co-listening and ethical engagement established at Tate Britain, the Research Studio has evolved *Electronic Life*'s ethos into a long-term practice-led research environment. Here, AI is treated not as a solution but as a relational medium – something through which learning, ethics, and institutional reflection can be rehearsed and reimagined.

This work has taken shape through new transnational partnerships, particularly in India, where projects such as *Living Archive* are exploring how AI might enable archives, museums, and biennales to become more dialogic and socially responsive (D'Souza 2025). Within these contexts, technology is approached as part of a *social AI infrastructure* – one designed to foreground reciprocity, accountability, and collective reflection rather than efficiency or innovation. The ethical and participatory principles first tested in the Taylor Digital Studio now inform how cultural institutions elsewhere might embed listening and care within their digital and social systems.

The Research Studio formalises what was first glimpsed in the Tate Britain experiments: a methodology of social AI practice. This approach positions artificial intelligence within the expanded field of socially engaged art and critical design, situating the social encounter as its central material. Social AI practice is both conceptual and operational – it describes a way of working where technology acts as collaborator and interlocutor, where participation becomes co-thinking, and where care operates as a design principle rather than an outcome. By integrating practice-based research with institutional partnerships, this framework offers an adaptable model for responsible AI in the arts – one rooted in dialogue, ethics, and lived experience.

This trajectory resonates strongly with Anna Cutler's longstanding advocacy for learning 'beyond the classroom walls' revisiting her question of 'what should be done' (2010). *Electronic Life* and the Research Studio extend this ethos into the algorithmic sphere,

recognising machine learning as part of that ecology of co-learning. In doing so, they contribute to what Dewdney, Dibosa, and Walsh (2013, 128) described as the museum's *social* and *reflexive* practices – a movement from curating objects to curating relations, and from the stewardship of collections to the stewardship of shared understanding where the digital museum is no longer a container of objects but a network of relations that learns from its publics.

At the policy level, this approach anticipates the direction set out in the Arts Council England Responsible AI report (Murphy 2025), which urges cultural organisations to view AI not as a technical frontier but as an ethical domain – one requiring transparency, sustainability, and attentiveness to social impact. *Electronic Life*'s commitment to small-scale, open-source systems, and its refusal of data extraction, exemplify this in practice. Rather than embedding bias through scale, the project sought to cultivate intimacy and accountability, foregrounding what the report calls *the cultural responsibility of technological adoption*.

Across our work in different sites the recurring thread has been *listening*. Not only as a technical function of speech-to-voice systems but as a methodology of attention: to participants' lived experiences, to institutional histories and needs, and to the affective labour that underpins collaboration. To listen, in this expanded sense, is to sustain a social contract between humans and systems, between institutions and the publics they serve.

The future of socially engaged AI practice may therefore depend less on technological advancement than on cultivating these habits of listening and care. The challenge, as *Electronic Life* revealed, is not to make machines more human or expect the technology to replace people but to make institutions more humane – to design infrastructures capable of humility, reflexivity, and response. Within this vision, the *Listening Machine* endures not as software but as metaphor: a prompt for institutions to remain attentive to the voices that sustain them and to the silences that challenge them.

Electronic Life also demonstrated that young people are not merely audiences but co-authors. Their presence at *Late at Tate* events, their leadership in workshops, and their critical insights into AI shaped the programme's direction and impact. This co-authorship should form the basis of future work – not as tokenistic inclusion but as foundational practice.

Tate's strategic emphasis on inclusivity and experimentation is well placed to take up this challenge. But it will require long-term commitment and to funding models that sustain duration, to institutional reflexivity, and to the difficult but necessary work of sharing authority. As this article has shown, learning is not a product but is a process. And it is in that process that critical futures can be built.

The *Electronic Life* programme and its continuing evolution through the Electronic Life Research Studio have thus contributed to a growing international discourse on social AI practice – a field that positions ethical learning and collaborative design as essential to the cultural life of technology. As museums, archives, and educational institutions navigate increasingly automated futures – Dewdney, Dibosa, and Walsh (2013, 205) suggest, the museums of the future *rethink audiences* in the face of technological change and convergent media – our mission with *Electronic Life* was to attend to some of the *structural absences*, exclusions and barriers to access and our proposition offers a modest but radical reminder: that to listen well, and to keep listening, may yet be the most transformative act of learning available to us.

Notes

1. See Manghani and Savage (2025) and D'Souza and Manghani (2023) for complementary perspectives on the project's pedagogical and technological dimensions.
2. Tate Collective is Tate's youth programme for 15–25 year olds. Tate Collective Producers are young people who take leadership roles in co-designing and delivering events, workshops, and programmes across Tate's sites. The programme emphasises creative agency and peer-to-peer learning, positioning young people as cultural producers rather than passive audiences.
3. In May 2023, Tate Britain unveiled a major rehang of its collection, reorganising displays to foreground themes of representation, identity, and inclusivity. The rehang sought to present British art through more diverse perspectives, bringing previously marginalised voices and narratives into conversation with canonical works. *Electronic Life* emerged as a direct response to these institutional questions around voice, authorship, and whose stories are told in the museum.
4. <https://github.com/electronic-life>.
5. The reflective dialogue analysed here was recorded in May 2025 as part of the project's documentation process. *Listening Machine* was used to transcribe the conversation between the authors, generating a layered record that became both data and method. All participant quotes cited in this article were gathered through project documentation by Mind the Film including filmed interviews, workshop recordings with informed consent obtained in accordance with Tate ethics protocols.
6. Established in 2016, *Tate Exchange* operated as a public platform for collaborative learning and socially engaged practice across Tate's sites. As discussed by Haylett et al. (2023) – a conversation that includes Julia LePla – the programme sought to 'counter-archive' ephemeral acts of participation and care within the museum, acknowledging their dependence on complex socio-technological and institutional networks. Its closure in 2022 marked a structural shift within Tate, but many of its principles continued through projects such as *Electronic Life*.
7. The Taylor digital Studios has hosted a range of initiatives that examined how technology can reshape artistic and educational practice, including the seminar *Gallery Education and the Digital Future* (2014), the course *Art in the Age of Digital Drift* (2016) led by curator Helen Kaplinsky with artist Ruth Catlow (Digital Learning Artist-in-Residence), the *Digital Makers* workshops (2016), and the family-oriented *Imagine If: Art and Technology Festival* (2018).
8. <https://textfx.withgoogle.com>.
9. Participants had experimented with DALL-E 2, producing short written prompts and corresponding images that explored questions of identity. These text–image pairs were collected and curated as part of the project's dataset. Using this material, we trained a bespoke generative model that transformed participants' language into a performative 'voice' as a text-based AI entity capable of responding in real time during the event. The process effectively allowed participants' creative expressions to become the system's vocabulary, making the *Electronic Life* entity a composite reflection of their collective imagination.
10. *Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970–1990* (Tate Britain, 8 November 2023 to 7 April 2024) was a major exhibition examining feminist art practices and activism during a pivotal period of social change (Young 2023). The exhibition provided a historical context for *Electronic Life*'s exploration of voice, agency, and institutional critique through technology.
11. Julie Freeman is an artist working with data, code, and living systems. Hannah Redler-Hawes is a curator specialising in transdisciplinary art practices that engage critically with data, technology, and participation. Her work emphasises feminist and collaborative methodologies in institutional and public contexts.
12. Tom Savage, a creative technologist and PhD researcher during the period of the *Electronic Life* programme at Tate Britain, was instrumental in developing the bespoke AI systems for

Electronic Life, including the *Electronic Life* entity, *Rage Machine*, and *Listening Machine*. His approach emphasised open-source, transparent systems that could be understood and modified by participants rather than functioning as proprietary 'black boxes.'

13. *Electronic Life* was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) which is a strategic funding initiative aimed at accelerating the impact of arts and humanities research, particularly beyond academic settings which enabled a sustained year-long programme rather than a short-term pilot. This funding structure was critical to building trust with community partners and allowing sufficient time for iterative co-design processes. Further funding from Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities Higher Education Innovation Funds and Web Science Institute Pilot Funding supported aspects of the programme.
14. *Museum × Machine × Me* (October 2025) was an exhibition exploring the intersection of museums, emerging technologies, and public engagement, developed as part of the AHRC-funded *Towards a National Collection* (TaNC) programme. The exhibition brought together projects from multiple institutions to examine how AI and digital technologies are reshaping cultural heritage practices.
15. <https://electroniclife.ai>.

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Notes on contributor

Robert E. D'Souza is Professor of Critical Practice at Winchester School of Art at the University of Southampton (UK). He is co-director of Electronic Life Research Studio and co-editor of *Journal of Visual Art Practice*. His books include *India's Biennale Effect* (2016), *Barcelona Masala: Narratives and Interactions in Cultural Space* (2013) and *Outside India: Dialogues and Documents of Art and Social Change* (2012). His work has been exhibited widely including Bergen Kunstall 3,14 and osloBIENNALEN in Norway (2019), India Habitat Centre in India

(2019), Tate Exchange at Tate Modern in the UK (2018) and Kochi-Muziris Biennale in India (2014).

ORCID

Robert E. D'Souza  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0977-0082>

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