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Practising the living archive: people-centred AI practice for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale

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ABSTRACT

This article examines AI as an artistic medium through people-centred, practice-based research with student practitioners at OP Jindal Global University, who developed speculative responses to the archives and context of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. Through a seven-week collaborative programme led by the Electronic Life Research Studio, three groups created experimental prototypes responding to provocations around affective data, spatial mapping, and unofficial knowledge. Rather than implementing finished systems, participants used speculative prototyping to interrogate how authority, accessibility, and voice operate within cultural documentation. Drawing on participatory art practice and collaborative research, the article centres student practitioners' reflections, positioning them as co-researchers whose making generates knowledge about AI's possibilities and limitations. Their work reveals approaches that are distributed rather than hierarchical, conversational rather than authoritative, and grounded in embodied experience. The first group explored capturing ephemeral encounters through alternative documentation; the second mapped connections between the Biennale and Kochi's broader histories; the third examined boundaries between official and unofficial knowledge through concept notes and translation. Together, these projects show how people-centred approaches to AI can foreground place, participation, and marginal voices, offering insights for cultural institutions seeking more democratic engagement and contributing to discourse on participatory practice and AI as artistic material.

Introduction: AI as artistic medium, pedagogy and collaborative practice

Artificial intelligence has rapidly emerged as both material and method in contemporary art practice, yet critical engagement with AI often remains confined to either technical experimentation divorced from cultural context or theoretical critique detached from making (Manghani and Savage 2025; Rozental, van Dartel, and de Rooij 2025). This article examines what happens when AI is approached as a medium for participatory,

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practice-based research – specifically, through collaborative prototyping with student practitioners working towards speculative archives for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (KMB).[1] Rather than treating AI as a tool for efficiency or automation, this project positioned it as substance for cultural and critical inquiry: a means of interrogating questions of authority, voice, accessibility, and memory within institutional contexts.

The *Living Archive*[2] initiative grew out of ongoing research through the Electronic Life Research Studio,[3] co-directed by Professors Ed D'Souza and Sunil Manghani at the University of Southampton. The Research Studio was initially developed through a year-long public programme, *Electronic Life*, at Tate Britain (2023–2024),[4] which explored AI in relation to young people and institutional learning. The project subsequently evolved into a dedicated research studio for AI-centred projects spanning teaching, research, and cultural collaboration.

D'Souza and Manghani had a long-term relationship with the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (KMB) since its inception in 2012, producing a number of research outputs, projects, and public events (D'Souza 2012; D'Souza 2013; D'Souza 2020; D'Souza and Manghani 2016). They were considering how some of the approaches developed at Tate might be extended and explored with KMB after completing the *Electronic Life* programme in October 2024. A pivotal meeting between D'Souza and Nikhil Chopra, the following month in Goa – held at HH Project Space after an invitation to visit (Chopra was at the time considering his invitation as curator, with HH Projects, of the 2025 Kochi-Muziris Biennale) – led to a discussion about the need for a KMB archive.[5] Such an archive could support invited curators like Chopra to research previous editions and address the wider problem of institutional memory (D'Souza and Manghani 2016; van den Akker and Legêne 2016), particularly the scale of work required to establish and sustain an archive for a biennale such as KMB.

These initial conversations were further developed through discussions with Dr Shwetal Patel, one of the Biennale's founding members. This resulted in an invitation to D'Souza and Manghani to develop a concept note through the Electronic Life Research Studio for a project that could speculatively respond to this need and opportunity – a project that became titled *Living Archive*. This was agreed by D'Souza, Manghani, Patel, and Chopra as a long-term initiative, extending beyond the next Biennale edition to allow the depth of research and development required. It was also agreed that *Living Archive* would be best positioned as a project supported by the Kochi Biennale Foundation.[6]

The concept note for *Living Archive* was conceived both as a technical and cultural framework through which archives might be reimagined for the Biennale as dynamic, inclusive, and continuously evolving systems, and as a pedagogical tool that could be most effectively tested within the Students' Biennale strand. Importantly, the project could extend the knowledge and experience gained by D'Souza and Manghani through their programming at Tate Britain, where participatory and critical approaches to institution, audience, and technology were first developed. These approaches could now be built upon and adapted to new contexts in India. The Students' Biennale strand of KMB – which brings together art students from across the country – provided an ideal context in which to prototype an archival system designed not only to support teaching and research but also to offer something meaningful back to young practitioners: inspiring future creative work, facilitating equitable access, and remaining

attentive to the linguistic diversity and varied cultural perspectives that shape art education in India.

This collaboration between the Electronic Life Research Studio and the Kochi Biennale Foundation was grounded in a shared aim: to create an archive that reflects not only institutional memory but also lived experience, local knowledge, and multiple publics. It sought to extend conventional ideas of an archive while addressing the Biennale's ambition to democratise audience engagement with art. The Electronic Life Research Studio saw students as key to this project – both in their involvement in its development and as one of its primary audiences. They were positioned not as passive consumers of AI tools but as co-creators of data practices and critical frameworks, shaping the very terms by which archives might evolve. *Living Archive* thus provided an opportunity to explore how AI could enable new forms of cultural documentation, while also demonstrating how ethical, social, and institutional considerations must inform its design from the outset (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020; Murphy 2025).

D'Souza and Manghani were acutely aware of contemporary debates around AI in the arts and cultural sector, which are often polarised – on one hand driven by narratives of innovation, efficiency, and technological solutionism, and on the other by critiques that diagnose risks and harms but remain detached from the act of making. The Research Studio was conceived as a space to value and deploy practice-based research as a critical alternative to purely academic work (Borgdorff 2012; hooks 2010; Markham and Gammelby 2018; Nelson 2013). By positioning AI as a site of negotiation rather than a tool to be mastered or a threat to be resisted, it sought to generate knowledge through iterative experimentation and collective practice – approaches rigorously developed (Manghani and Savage 2025) and tested at Tate Britain. The approach deliberately counters a deficit model – one in which students and practitioners are primarily taught 'what not to do' – in favour of co-creative inquiry, where artists, young creatives, and communities build, test, and iterate AI artefacts together (Bishop 2012; Jackson 2011; Kester 2004; Simon 2010). This shift reframes ethical, social, and institutional questions as design challenges to be worked through collaboratively rather than abstract problems to be solved elsewhere. It is within this shared space of making and reflection that *Living Archive* takes shape.

Building on this foundation, the next phase of *Living Archive* took shape through a collaboration with OP Jindal Global University (JGU).[7] This article focuses specifically on the practice-based outcomes of a seven-week intensive workshop conducted in June–July 2025 with Fine Art students at JGU.[8] The workshop aimed to prototype culturally specific, Indian-informed approaches that could be presented at the next Kochi-Muziris Biennale for public discussion and institutional dialogue – approaches that would feed into the next stage of development of *Living Archive*. This partnership with JGU was built on earlier conversations with Achia Anzi, BFA Programme Director, whom D'Souza first met during a University of Southampton partnership visit to India and the Delhi Art Fair in 2024. Anzi and his colleagues had already been involved with the Biennale through student immersion programmes and were keen to extend this engagement through a deeper pedagogical and research-led collaboration. These initial discussions laid the groundwork for a shared project that aligned institutional priorities with the aims of *Living Archive* – to develop an AI-enabled system that could support

Figure 1. Sunil Manghani with BFA students at OP Jindal Global University in Delhi, April 2025 accompanied by Ed D'Souza and Tom Savage online (Photograph Payal Arya).

teaching and learning, enable new forms of curatorial research, and foster more sustained institutional engagement with the Biennale that could evolve beyond any single edition.

The collaboration with OP Jindal began with exploratory workshops and conversations during an initial visit to JGU in February 2025 by D'Souza and Manghani, followed by an application process in which students proposed ideas and rationales for collaboration. Three groups were formed around overlapping thematic concerns relevant to the Biennale's context: affective data, spatial mapping, and unofficial knowledge. D'Souza and Manghani decided each group developed its project in the summer so as not to impact on students' studies as part of a paid internship with the Electronic Life Research Studio. This structure was built on existing relationships and experience within the wider team: several JGU faculty members had engaged with the Biennale either as exhibiting artists or through student immersion programmes, creating a well-informed cohort whose perspectives were shaped by first-hand experience as both users and visitors.

The Kochi-Muziris Biennale provided an ideal testing ground for this work. Established in 2012 as India's first contemporary art biennale, KMB has consistently positioned itself as a 'People's Biennale': an open, porous event that seeks to democratise access to art and culture while remaining deeply rooted in the local context. The Biennale transforms Fort Kochi's historic warehouses, galleries, and public spaces into exhibition venues, blurring the boundaries between art, everyday life, and the city's layered histories of trade, colonialism, and cultural exchange (D'Souza 2013; D'Souza and Manghani

2016). This commitment to accessibility and local engagement made KMB a compelling site for exploring how AI-assisted archives might serve diverse audiences – from international visitors and researchers to local communities and cultural workers – rather than institutional priorities alone.

To root the speculative work in concrete cultural material, the Electronic Life Research Studio developed a working dataset based on the second edition of the KMB (2014). This included a curated selection of artworks – among them works by OP Jindal BFA tutor Susanta Mandal – and a published interview with the Biennale's curator Jitish Kallat (Kallat, D'Souza, and Manghani 2016). This material acted as a foundational dataset with which both students and AI systems could engage, anchoring their technical experiments in real cultural contexts and interpretive challenges. Including Mandal's work created opportunities for reflexive dialogue with a practising artist, enabling him to respond to emerging ideas and revealing some of the tensions inherent in participatory archival design. For instance, Mandal expressed discomfort with the idea of informal conversations about his artworks being recorded and archived – a response that prompted students to think critically about consent, agency, and the need for opt-in and opt-out mechanisms. Such conversations grounded the project in real-world complexities, highlighting how the needs and expectations of artists, curators, audiences, and institutions may diverge and must be negotiated within any participatory system.

Rather than building finished systems, students engaged in speculative prototyping – making as a method to think through complex questions about what archives could be, who they serve, and how AI might enable or constrain more inclusive approaches to cultural documentation. Working collaboratively with Naomi Pitzer – brought on not only for her expertise in machine learning but also for her commitment to supporting women in technology – as our AI Research Engineer,[9] the students were supported in developing robust approaches to data and translating their ideas into prototypes that combined conceptual depth with technical experimentation. In addition to the students' visual and textual outputs, this article includes selected excerpts of prototype code, data visualisations, and system diagrams produced by Naomi. These artefacts were developed iteratively in response to student concepts and served as a means of testing, translating, and articulating speculative ideas in computational form.

This interdisciplinary collaboration modelled a form of practice that neither privileged artistic vision over technical feasibility nor reduced creative work to problem-solving. A crucial dimension of the process – for both students and faculty – was developing a shared vocabulary that could translate creative ideas into implementable algorithmic approaches. As a Research Studio housed in academia, we saw this as a vital pedagogical approach for future art-school curricula, building on the kinds of workshop-based methodologies developed through *Electronic Life* at Tate Britain (D'Souza 2025). The workshop's scaffolding became a virtual art school to support this collaboration with a dedicated Google Co-Lab workspace to give students shared environments for development, ChatGPT Pro accounts enabled experimentation without financial barriers and weekly technical drop-ins with Naomi provided regular access to expertise without requiring students to struggle alone. Mid-project reviews created checkpoints for adjusting direction. Like our Tate Britain experience (D'Souza 2025), we understood the infrastructure matters: collaboration doesn't happen automatically when people from
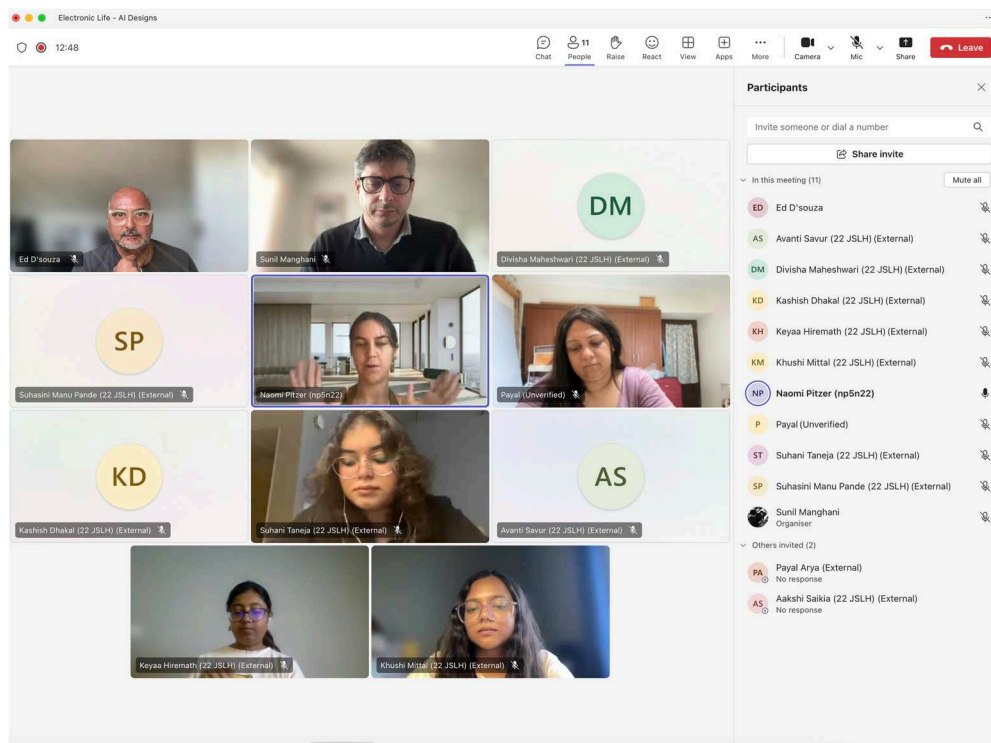
Figure 2. Online wrap-up meeting to review group projects and discuss next steps with JGU BFA tutor Payal Arya and participating students and the Electronic Life Research Studio team of Ed D'Souza, Sunil Manghani and Naomi Pitzer, September 2025 (Screen-grab Electronic Life Research Studio).

different backgrounds are placed together; it requires deliberate structures that support the facilitation of exchange.

The workshop structure emphasised collective working as a participatory practice. Students collaborated in small groups through structured weekly sessions, technical clinics, and mid-project reviews held online, with a mid-project visit from D'Souza to Delhi in July 2025 to meet with students face to face. This scaffolding also created the conditions for experimentation with AI as a medium of cultural engagement while simultaneously developing critical frameworks for understanding its implications. Importantly, all participants were women Fine Art students working with a female machine-learning specialist, creating a supportive environment that foregrounded women's voices in technology and AI research – domains in which we were very aware that remain under-represented.

This article foregrounds student practitioners' reflections, presented through extended quotations that reveal their processes, methods, and critical insights. During and immediately after the seven-week programme, each group produced a collaboratively authored document combining project description, process reflection, and critical commentary. These texts were written collectively rather than individually, reflecting the co-creative ethos of the project and capturing multiple perspectives within each group. The quoted sections that follow are drawn directly from these documents and presented

verbatim. They represent primary research material generated through the collaboration and are treated here as co-authored contributions to the research process. In the references, they are cited as unpublished workshop documents (Group 1, 2025; Group 2, 2025; Group 3, 2025).

By positioning these voices centrally – rather than as supporting evidence for predetermined arguments – the article enacts a participatory approach: recognising students as co-researchers whose practice generates knowledge rather than simply illustrating pedagogical principles. This approach builds on scholarship in participatory art practice (Bishop 2012; Jackson 2011; Kester 2004) while extending it into technological domains, showing how collaborative making produces knowledge through dialogue and encounter rather than predetermined outcomes. The analysis that follows explores how their experimental work points towards new possibilities for AI-assisted cultural documentation: approaches that are distributed rather than hierarchical, conversational rather than authoritative, and grounded in situated, embodied experience.

Case study 1: reframing the archive – affective experience and rhizomatic practice

The provocation: sensing the unseen

The first group was asked to consider how ephemeral, embodied experiences at the Biennale might be documented and made accessible. Conventional archives privilege tangible forms such as catalogues, photographs, exhibition records while overlooking fleeting yet significant aspects of cultural participation: gestures, atmospheres, overheard conversations, moments of hospitality, the affective qualities of encountering art. The challenge was to imagine archival practices that could capture these dimensions without reducing them to static data or stripping away their relational, experiential qualities.

Student reflections: making the rhizome

Suhani Taneja, Suhasini Manu Pande, and Kashish Dhakal describe their process:

> When we first started working on the Living Archive project, our first instinct was to grapple with the vanishing quality of ephemeral art, especially performance and socially engaged work that resists easy documentation. Thinking about all the powerful, fleeting experiences we had witnessed at places like the Kochi Biennale, we were convinced that traditional archives rarely do justice to their layered messiness, their ability to intrigue and engage audiences, as well as stimulate thought and conversation. (Group 1, 2025)

> Fragments we pieced together – shaky, informal vlogs by viewers at the Biennale, reels filled with bustling interactions, our experiences co-existing with artists in informal spaces and engaging in those 'closed-door' conversations, among many other accounts of lived experiences made us realise how powerful second-hand encounters can be. Hence, our initial group conversations circled around how to go beyond the usual static records, to find ways that AI and interactive tools could preserve the gestures, atmospheres, and shared moments between viewers that make these works feel so alive. (Group 1, 2025)

Their investigation led them to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome – a non-hierarchical, non-linear structure with multiple entry points and no fixed beginning or end

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987). This became both a conceptual framework and a practical organising principle:

> This trail of thought led us to dive deeper into the early ideas of giving this archive a rhizomatic form. A 'rhizome' (a word often associated with postmodern theorists Deleuze and Guattari) presents a process of existence and growth that does not come from a single central point of origin. Something that has no fixed beginning or end. Something that can help open multiple different perspectives to any number of other perspectives. Looking at the Biennale as a rhizome, and the discourse around it decentralised, ever-growing, and dynamic. (Group 1, 2025)

The group's methodology combined experimental documentation with collaborative dialogue. They captured conversations among peers from their Fine Art course about artworks at the 2023 Biennale, deliberately starting with open-ended questions that allowed discussion to evolve organically:

> Through experiments in a target group of peers from our Fine Art course, we captured conversations on a zoom meeting, revolving around the artworks at the 2023 edition of Kochi Biennale. We started off by asking general questions like 'What kind of artworks were you intrigued by at the Biennale?' or 'Do you remember any particular works that you resonated with?' And this sparked an enriching conversation between us, where one thought led to another and this amounted to a valuable and enlightening data set. Our conversations reflected the rhizomatic quality we wanted in our prototype. (Group 1, 2025)

This conversational data became the foundation for imagining an AI-assisted interface, playfully termed 'JARVIS' after the fictional AI assistant from *Iron Man*:

> This furthered us into the idea of giving this network of thoughts, a form – and led us to the 'JARVIS' analogy (JARVIS – being Tony Stark's natural-language user interface AI assistant in the popular movie series Iron Man). What if our rhizomatic living archive were to be structured like JARVIS. An artificial intelligence model that the users (viewers) could interact with and have their perspectives lead them to multiple different sources to explore artworks, information, as well as a collective of other more sensorial human experiences. (Group 1, 2025)

Their objectives centred on accessibility and democratisation:

> In sum, our objectives with this project have been focused on accessibility to the Biennale for diverse audiences and making these embodied experiences accessible for discourse. Additionally, democratising voices – from viewers and audiences to the artists, to the labour (all the people who work 'behind the scenes' at the Biennale), and opening up the opportunity for the masses to collaborate and contribute significantly to this vast network of ideas surrounding artistic communication. (Group 1, 2025)

Importantly, their engagement with AI shifted from scepticism to recognition of its potential as a collaborative tool:

> The first draft from our collaborations with Naomi showed promising results, changing our initial scepticism (in addition to our curiosity) with regards to the use of Artificial Intelligence in the field of art – and being able to use it to contribute to these objectives. This engagement between cultural and heritage materials regarding the Biennale, along with accounts of lived, ephemeral experiences, and AI – has further shaped our understanding of interdisciplinary discourses around artistic practice and the larger rhizomatic narrative at play in our communities. (Group 1, 2025)
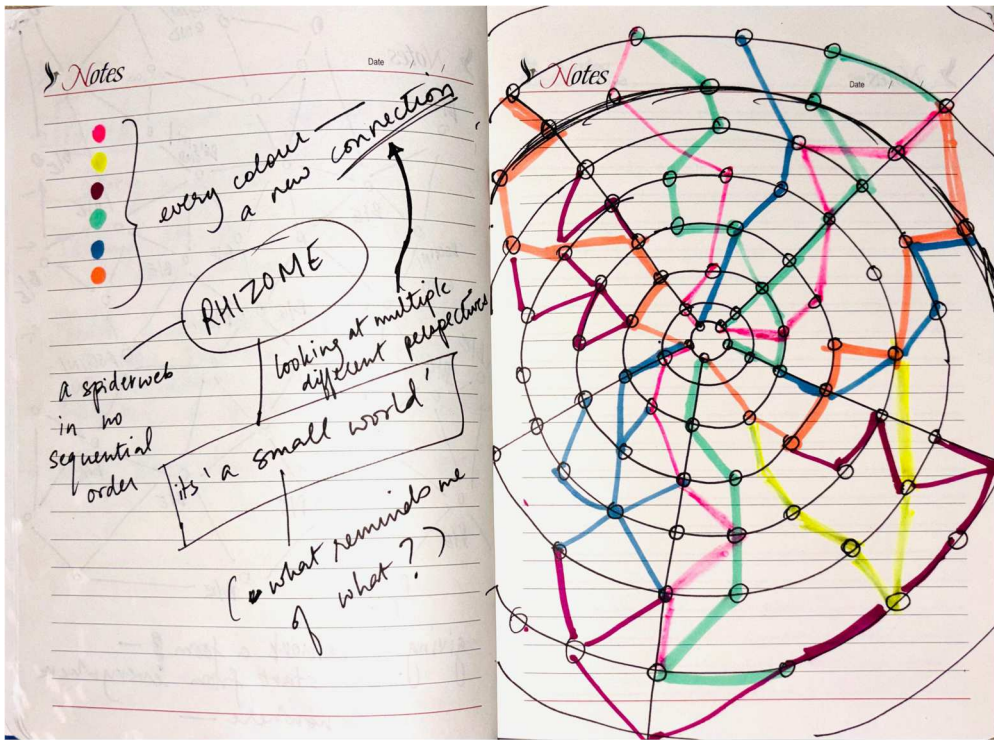
Figure 3. Screenshot from Group 1's presentation showing sketchbook pages visualising their 'rhizome' as a web structure of routes and connections (Image, Group 1, 2025).

Technical implementation and analysis

The group developed a functional prototype translating their conceptual framework into operational form. The system begins with playful, open-ended prompts such as 'Have you ever been to Kochi', designed to spark personal, embodied responses rather than solicit direct commentary on art. These responses become entry points into the archive: through text-embedding models and dimensional-reduction techniques, the system identifies three artworks most closely aligned with the user's input, creating multiple associative pathways through the archive's content. This approach realises their rhizomatic vision: users can enter from any point, following unpredictable trajectories shaped by their own experience rather than predetermined institutional hierarchies.

Crucially, this technical structure enacts a conceptual shift in what counts as archival material. By foregrounding ephemeral and affective experiences – from casual conversations and gestures to fleeting atmospheres and 'closed-door' encounters – the students challenge archival logics that privilege fixed records over lived experience. Their experiments with peer discussions demonstrate how meaning is co-produced socially, reframing dialogue itself as a form of archival data. The decision to treat these traces as material with historical and interpretive value expands the scope of what an archive might contain and how it might function.

The adoption of the rhizome as both metaphor and architecture is equally significant (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Traditional archives classify material through rigid

Figure 4. Screenshot from Group 1's presentation imagining an online mapping of conversations taken from their online meetings via Microsoft Teams (Image, Group 1, 2025).

taxonomies – artist, medium, chronology – that encode institutional authority. A rhizomatic archive instead emphasises connectivity and multiplicity: any point can link to any other, enabling users to navigate by personal relevance and association. This structure is not merely technical but political, redistributing interpretive agency away from the institution and towards the individual while acknowledging that such experiences are relational and contingent. Their playful appropriation of the *JARVIS* metaphor further signals a conceptual evolution in thinking about AI. Here, AI is not positioned as an all-knowing retrieval engine but as a conversational mediator – a system that facilitates dynamic exploration rather than delivering definitive answers. This shift from 'search' to 'dialogue' situates AI as collaborator here, enabling co-authored meaning-making between user, archive, and machine.

Finally, the group's trajectory from initial scepticism to productive engagement offers methodological insights into collaborative AI practice. Their process – iterating between conceptual exploration and technical implementation – exemplifies how critical frameworks can be developed *through* making. This iterative approach, coupled with their proposal to include often-invisible contributors such as installation labourers alongside artists and audiences, signals how participatory AI systems might surface plural voices rather than replicate institutional silences. The affective dimensions they sought to capture – atmospheres, gestures, moments of hospitality – remain resistant to quantification, but the prototype acknowledges this tension productively, showing how embodied experience itself can become a navigational tool through cultural material.

Figure 5. Screenshot from Group 1's presentation: Miro board mapping Kochi-Muziris Biennale connections. The various online platforms used by students allowed for their remote collaboration, sharing and integrating their research (Image, Group 1, 2025).

Case study 2: mapping as cultural praxis – layering space, memory and participation

### The provocation: Kochi as interface

The second group was asked to consider how the Biennale relates to Kochi as a city – not simply as a collection of venues but as a site with layered histories, everyday life, and cultural practices that extend far beyond the temporary art event. The challenge was to imagine mapping as dynamic, relational practice that could hold multiple perspectives simultaneously: those of international visitors, local residents, cultural workers, and historians, revealing connections between contemporary art and the city's deeper temporal and spatial dimensions.

Student reflections: layering place

Aakshi Saikia, Divisha Maheshwari, and Khushi Mittal describe their approach:

> All three of us were interested in showing how Kochi as a city impacted Kochi Biennale and vice versa. Through our project we aim to show most parts of Kochi which are generally overlooked while talking about the biennale. We want to focus on various things that make Kochi – Kochi, like traditions, food, culture, history and architectural heritage shaped by centuries of foreign influence, trade and colonisation. (Group 2, 2025)

> When we visited Kochi as a part of the short study programme in 2022, we were in awe of the city and how it itself became a part of the art festival. What struck us the most was the hybrid architecture which still has imprints of the Portuguese, the Dutch, the local style of
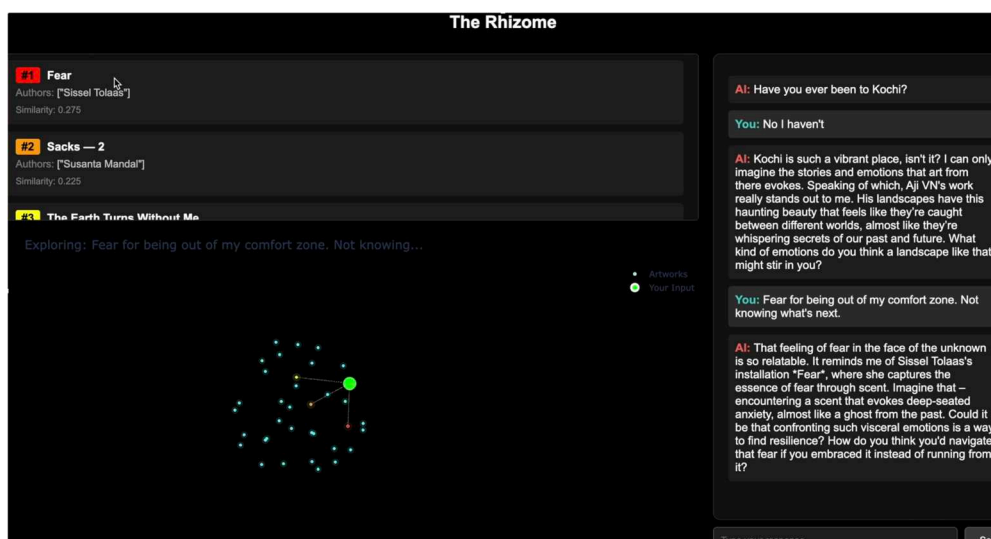
Figure 6. Screenshot of 'The Rhizome' taken from Naomi Pitzer's demo of her interface for Group 1 (Screen-grab, Naomi Pitzer 2025).

architecture. These buildings also became a living archive of the city's strong cultural identity and history. We hope to carry this essence of the city into our project. (Group 2, 2025)

Their initial explorations diverged before converging into a collective vision. Each member began with different entry points – superimposing historical and contemporary photographs, creating interactive maps with comprehensive information about Kochi's history, or developing game-like applications for personal documentation. This process of individual exploration followed by synthesis reflects collaborative practice where multiple perspectives strengthen rather than dilute the final direction:

In the initial stage, we individually responded to different ideas – Khushi started by exploring the idea of past and present. Expanding on the previous work she did during the study program where she superimposed the old photos of the buildings with a present day photo of the same location; she proposed to find more archival/old photographs of the places from Kochi and upload them on the website. This would also encourage the audience/viewer to find the locations in the present day and interact with them. Divisha thought of making an interactive map of Kochi having all the information about Kochi's *History, directing the audience to any place they look for, and has its own archive of the venues and artworks. Aakshi initially thought of making a game or social media app which visitors could use to access the official archive and also do their own personal documentation of the biennale.* (Group 2, 2025)

Their collaborative dialogue revealed shared concerns about how the Biennale transforms and is transformed by Kochi:

As a team, we brainstormed on different aspects of the biennale and Kochi as a city. We wanted to expand the experience of the biennale to the entire city and have people engage with the location, culture, heritage, food, traditions, and history, along with the art and biennale. We also wanted to get the input from the locals, including how the biennale affects Kochi and how the city transforms around the biennale. (Group 2, 2025)

Their research methodology grounded the project in specific sites and experiences rather than abstract mapping conventions:

> We began by going back to our own experience of visiting the Kochi Muziris Biennale 2022-2023. We decided to build on that and started researching about the restaurants, cafes, heritage buildings and old warehouses of Kochi. These places are converted into exhibition venues and this transformation really intrigued us. Some other locations that are significant to the biennale like Kashi Art Cafe, Mocha Art Cafe and David Hall, function not only as cafes but also spaces that host art exhibitions. These locations are interesting for their versatility and show a different approach to the artwork and its integration/assimilation with the city. (Group 2, 2025)

The project evolved into an interactive map that would serve diverse users while remaining open to their contributions:

> We eventually decided that we wanted our project to be an interactive map of Kochi, featuring biennale venues and other tourist locations of Fort Kochi which would be relevant to biennale visitors. The map would contain any information visitors might want about the biennale and the city, while also allowing them to make their own additions in the form of reviews, photos, videos, audios, personal experiences and anecdotes. When a particular location is selected, the map would display its history, current information and other users' experiences. (Group 2, 2025)

Language accessibility emerged as a crucial consideration for a city shaped by multiple cultural influences:

> We also felt that the interface should be available in different languages – Hindi, English, Malayalam, Portuguese, etc. This would make it inclusive to a wide range of visitors. Kochi, being a city with varied cultural heritage and many foreign influences, attracts visitors from across the world. We want the map to cater to foreigners, visitors from other parts of India and especially the locals of Kochi. (Group 2, 2025)

One student's reflection on encountering AI-assisted prototyping at Tate revealed how seeing other Electronic Life projects shaped their understanding of possibilities:

> Khushi – I was intrigued by the prototype of the Rage Machine and its interaction with its handler. For me it was another look into what AI can do. It is interesting to me how it is used as an archive. (Group 2, 2025)

Their experience working with AI platforms for prototyping development revealed both empowerment and ethical ambivalence:

> We also used AI in creating the prototype for our project. We used this website called Replit which provides a platform and AI to create a website using the prompts fed by us. Creating this website through its help was easier than we thought earlier before trying it. We could finally envision the website we aimed for. It was like a translation of our thoughts and ideation into a visual form. (Group 2, 2025)

> It was also a bit challenging, we had to give specific and detailed prompts for it to create a prototype, and as we were using the free version, the prompts we could feed in were also limited. But it really helped us expand on the idea and project further. Though I also felt like I cheated while using AI to create a website considering how much time and coding goes into creating it without its help. (Group 2, 2025)
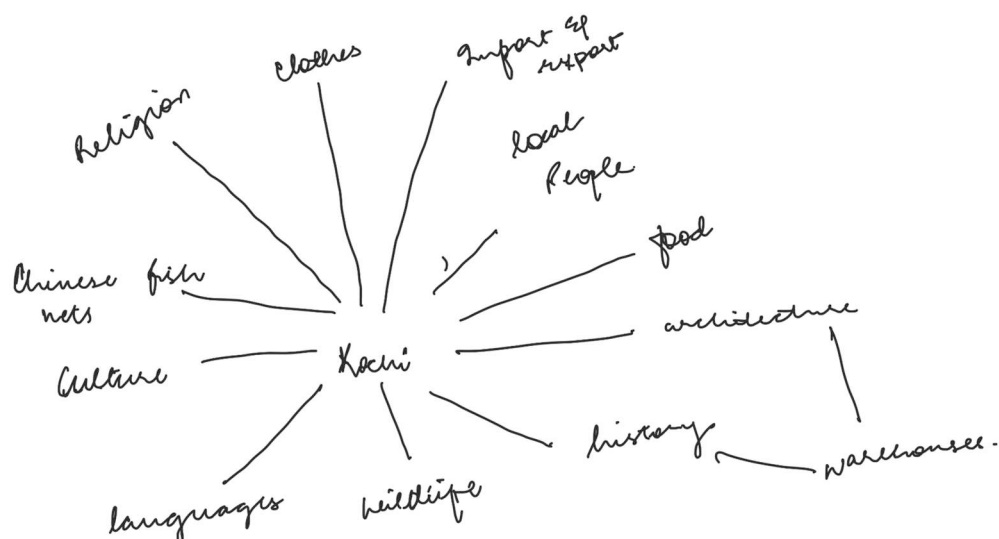
Figure 7. Word map from Group 2's presentation showing connected subjects about Kochi (Image, Group 2, 2025).

> We definitely felt more confident after using this platform. We learned how to write the prompts in the future. (Group 2, 2025)

Technical implementation as cultural layering

Working with Naomi Pitzer, the group developed a prototype implementing their vision of Kochi as a layered interface. Information is organised through environmental, cultural, economic, and architectural dimensions that can be explored separately or in combination. The environmental layer uses weather APIs with language models to generate poetic summaries linking climate to embodied experience. The cultural layer employs web scraping to synthesise recent news about Kochi beyond the Biennale, while the topographical layer connects users to nearby heritage buildings or cultural landmarks. Crucially, the system suggests artworks from the Biennale archive that resonate with a user's location and context, creating situational connections rather than relying on conventional categories such as artist name or medium.

The project demonstrates how AI-assisted mapping can function as a participatory cultural practice. Its emphasis on what official maps overlook – local restaurants, informal spaces, and the transformation of venues between Biennale editions – constitutes a critique of institutional mapping practices, revealing how decisions about what gets represented shape narratives of cultural experience. Their layered approach reimagines place as a nexus where multiple temporal and cultural flows intersect, aligning with critical cartography's view of maps as interpretive arguments rather than neutral records (Harley 1989).

Language accessibility also emerged as central: multilingual interfaces in Hindi, English, Malayalam, and Portuguese reflect Kochi's diverse audiences and underscore the importance of linguistic hospitality for democratic access. Ethical questions surfaced in their engagement with AI, as one student's feeling of having 'cheated' by using AI tools revealed how automation complicates notions of labour, skill, and authorship – yet the
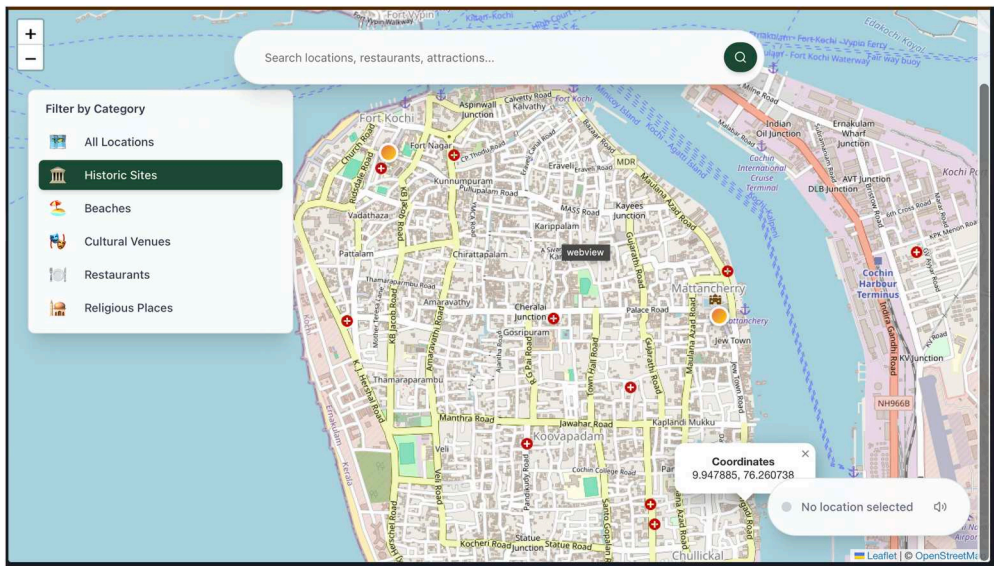
Figure 8. Early interactive map prototype of Kochi created by Group 2 (Image, Group 2, 2025).

technology also enabled them to realise ideas that would otherwise have remained speculative.

Analysis: situated mapping and institutional critique

The group's work offers several critical insights into how AI-assisted mapping might function as participatory cultural practice. First, their emphasis on what official maps overlook – local restaurants, everyday architecture, and the transformation of spaces between Biennale editions – constitutes a form of institutional critique. By recognising that official Biennale maps foreground designated venues while ignoring the broader urban fabric, they identify mapping as a political practice: decisions about what gets mapped, categorised, and made accessible shape the narratives through which cities and cultural events are understood.

The mapping prototype proposes new ways to situate cultural events within their wider urban and social contexts. By highlighting the porous boundaries between art spaces and everyday life – such as cafes and informal meeting places – it reframes the Biennale as an event embedded in the rhythms of the city rather than a discrete cultural moment. This sensitivity to Kochi's architectural palimpsests – from colonial warehouses now hosting contemporary art to historic structures layered with new uses – reveals how place itself acts as a living archive, carrying histories that intersect with contemporary cultural production. Portuguese and Dutch colonial buildings repurposed by the Biennale become sites where global trade histories, postcolonial reuse, and contemporary cultural production overlap. This positions buildings themselves as archives: physical structures that embody and transmit histories through their material transformations.

Rather than privileging spatial coordinates as the primary organising principle, the system treats location as a nexus where multiple temporal and cultural flows intersect.
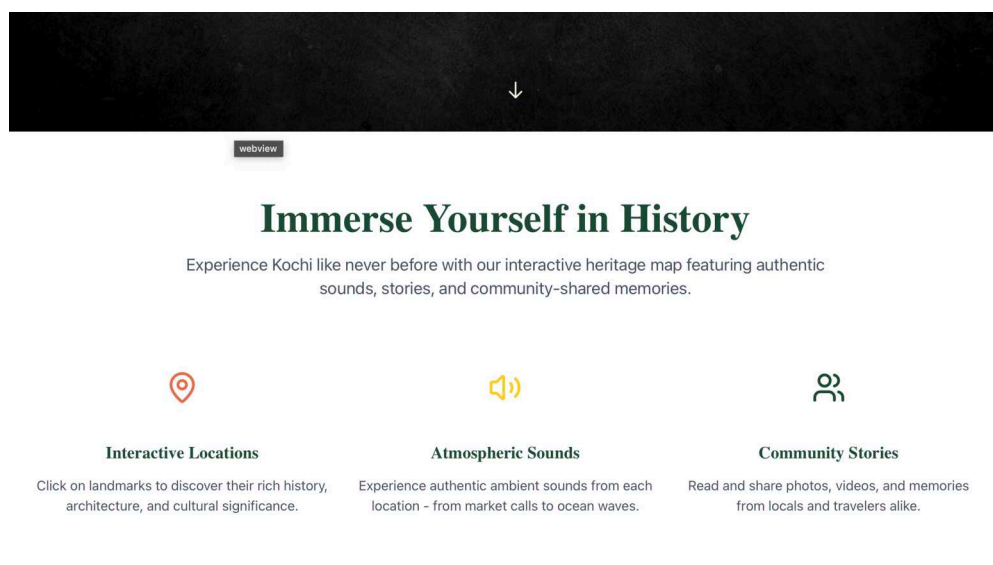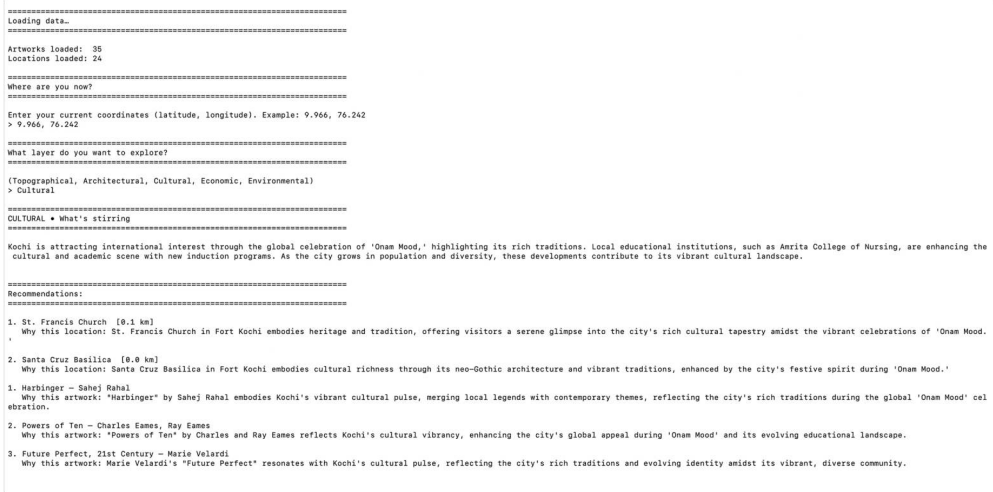
Figure 9. Landing page for Group 2's interactive map (Image, Group 2, 2025).

This aligns with critical cartography's recognition that maps are never neutral representations but arguments about what matters. By layering Kochi's spice-trade histories, colonial architecture, contemporary news, and atmospheric conditions, the students create what might be termed a 'thick map' – one that acknowledges place as accumulated histories and ongoing transformations rather than a static backdrop for events.

Their commitment to multilingual interfaces reflects an awareness of language as an accessibility gatekeeper. By proposing Hindi, English, Malayalam, and Portuguese options, they acknowledge Kochi's position within multiple linguistic spheres – local, national, and historically colonial. This choice recognises that democratising access requires more than physical presence; it demands linguistic hospitality that meets diverse audiences in their own languages rather than imposing an institutional lingua franca.

The group's reflection on using AI platforms for prototyping also reveals important tensions in contemporary creative practice and shows awareness that AI tools do not simply assist practice but potentially transform labour relations and creative agency. Yet their ultimate conclusion – 'we definitely felt more confident after using this platform' – indicates that AI enabled them to realise visions that would otherwise have remained speculative due to technical barriers.

Their emphasis on 'the locals, including how the biennale affects Kochi and how the city transforms around the biennale' positions mapping as a dialogic practice that must hold multiple perspectives simultaneously. The project's iterative development – from individual explorations to a collaborative, multifaceted system – models participatory design as a method for negotiating complexity rather than seeking resolution. Instead of producing a definitive map, the students created an evolving interface capable of holding multiple perspectives: those of international visitors and local residents, official organisers and everyday participants. This approach positions AI as a means to

```
=========================================================================
Loading data…
=========================================================================

Artworks loaded:  35
Locations loaded: 24

=========================================================================
Where are you now?
=========================================================================

Enter your current coordinates (latitude, longitude). Example: 9.966, 76.242
> 9.966, 76.242
=========================================================================
What layer do you want to explore?
=========================================================================

(Topographical, Architectural, Cultural, Economic, Environmental)
> Cultural

=========================================================================
CULTURAL ● What's stirring
=========================================================================

Kochi is attracting international interest through the global celebration of 'Onam Mood,' highlighting its rich traditions. Local educational institutions, such as Amrita College of Nursing, are enhancing the
  cultural and academic scene with new induction programs. As the city grows in population and diversity, these developments contribute to its vibrant cultural landscape.

=========================================================================
Recommendations:
=========================================================================

1. St. Francis Church  [0.1 km]
   Why this location: St. Francis Church in Fort Kochi embodies heritage and tradition, offering visitors a serene glimpse into the city's rich cultural tapestry amidst the vibrant celebrations of 'Onam Mood.
'
2. Santa Cruz Basilica  [0.0 km]
   Why this location: Santa Cruz Basilica in Fort Kochi embodies cultural richness through its neo-Gothic architecture and vibrant traditions, enhanced by the city's festive spirit during 'Onam Mood.'

1. Harbinger — Sahej Rahal
   Why this artwork: "Harbinger" by Sahej Rahal embodies Kochi's vibrant cultural pulse, merging local legends with contemporary themes, reflecting the city's rich traditions during the global 'Onam Mood' cel
ebration.
2. Powers of Ten — Charles Eames, Ray Eames
   Why this artwork: "Powers of Ten" by Charles and Ray Eames reflects Kochi's cultural vibrancy, enhancing the city's global appeal during 'Onam Mood' and its evolving educational landscape.
3. Future Perfect, 21st Century — Marie Velardi
   Why this artwork: Marie Velardi's "Future Perfect" resonates with Kochi's cultural pulse, reflecting the city's rich traditions and evolving identity amidst its vibrant, diverse community.
```

Figure 10. Naomi Pitzer's demo of her interface for Group 2 illustrates the data choices that users might explore as a way of mapping into the locality to suggest navigation and routes for users (Screen-grab, Naomi Pitzer 2025).

facilitate plural narratives and enable users to navigate between them, rather than as a tool to impose fixed interpretations.

The prototype does not attempt to resolve tensions between official and unofficial narratives, between visitor and local perspectives, or between historical documentation and contemporary experience. Instead, it creates a flexible system that can hold these tensions in productive relation, using AI not to impose singular interpretations but to facilitate navigation through plural perspectives.

Case study 3: challenging authority – language, labour and the politics of the archive

The provocation: unofficial data

The third group was invited to interrogate how cultural archives distinguish between 'official' and 'unofficial' knowledge – and to question the power structures that determine which voices, languages, and forms of documentation are legitimised. They explored how institutional frameworks privilege certain types of data while marginalising others, and how alternative archival practices might accommodate informal conversations, minority languages, and the often-invisible labour underpinning cultural production (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020; Hartman 2008).

Student reflections: questioning authority

Keyaa Hiremath and Avanti Savur describe their process of sustained questioning:

> The project aimed to investigate the boundaries of data, what counts, what's missing, and how collective memory can be activated and visualised through both formal and informal voices. (Group 3, 2025)

> Our initial thought was for users to have the ability 'to play' with data – to move it around from one place to another, to add, to delete. We visualised a room (like a rhizomatic structure) with several entrances and exits, each corner having different types of 'data' and the audience having to make choices about the data. They can add data like images, audio, text to the existing data set. This led to our early discussions on games like Dungeons and Dragons, ludo, snakes and ladders, etc. In most of these games, one has to roll the dice and depending on the outcome of the dice can you progress in the game. Therefore, there is the idea of chance, luck and choice while playing these games. (Group 3, 2025)

This playful framing through game mechanics became method for interrogating power and authority. Rather than treating archives as fixed repositories, they imagined them as dynamic spaces shaped by user decisions:

> As the project developed, we questioned what exactly is 'data', what is meant by 'official' and 'unofficial' data? Who gets to decide what is official and unofficial? Who has the authority to do so? Since we were questioning several things and almost everything, we adopted the method of questioning for our process. (Group 3, 2025)

Their investigation turned to conversation itself as data, probing how informal speech becomes – or fails to become – legitimised knowledge:

> We further looked at conversations as data. Is there a concept of 'official' and 'unofficial' conversations? Do the people engaged in the conversation determine the official or unofficial status of the conversation? Are conversations on a particular subject official and therefore suitable for a dataset? Are conversations in a particular setting considered intellectual and others are not? What if we record conversations at a café or restaurant, then will these conversations become official data? How is a conversation between two artists or curators treated compared to that among the locals of Kochi, or the staff who install the artwork being talked about? Does recording alone allow something to pass through the threshold of 'unofficial' to 'official'? What are the other ways to legitimize something? (Group 3, 2025)

Language emerged as central site where authority operates and can be contested:

> Language became the next subject of scrutiny, since language serves a backdrop to much of the themes of official/unofficial, power, and privilege that we had begun to examine. While discussing language, we questioned what is an official language, who decides which language is official and how does a language become official. In India, the binary distinction of official/unofficial is not sufficient; the Constitution of India categorises the many languages of the nation into 22 scheduled languages, which are given recognition, status and official encouragement, and classical languages to others, as a means of acknowledging the vast history and culture encompassed by them. There are thus, hierarchies in language based on caste, religion and gender. Who decides which language is superior? What makes a language superior to others? (Group 3, 2025)

They recognised language loss as cultural erasure:

> There are several languages which are endangered and on the verge of becoming extinct. What happens when a language dies? Through language, one also understands culture – folktales, folk songs, myths and beliefs are mostly in regional languages. It is difficult to translate this cultural knowledge in common languages or particularly in English. The essence of the language is lost in translation. (Group 3, 2025)

Their analysis extended to visual dimensions of language:

> Language is not just the spoken, it is also the visual – images, text. The visuality of spoken language differs due to script and font. For example, Konkani has 5 different

scripts – Devnagari, Roman, Kannada, Malayalam and Perso-Arabic. Does this affect the way language is perceived? What about unofficial languages and language of minorities – do they affect those groups the same way official languages do? Do they create or challenge hierarchies or probably change the way ideas are articulated? If they have the same effect, then what makes them unofficial and who decides this? How are ideas disseminated across these borders of language, and what is gained and lost in this process? (Group 3, 2025)

Their investigation focused on concept notes as sites where authority manifests:

Throughout the process, alongside thinking and questioning data, on a subconscious level we were constantly questioning the authority and the shape-shifting nature of authority. Inexperienced audiences of art rely on the accompanying concept notes as an entry point into the work. Concept notes become the crutch with which viewers enter into artistic discourse. The concept notes are thus imbued with authority; the most 'official' piece of data that guide the viewer through their engagement and appreciation. They harbour answers that viewers may not be able to reach themselves, vital context to the work and to the artist. This authority is largely derived from the artists themselves, who often write the concept notes for their work. (Group 3, 2025)

Examining concept notes across multiple exhibitions revealed patterns of exclusion:

We looked at concept notes of artworks and curatorial notes as part of our official data. Looking through several concept notes from various other exhibitions, art fairs, and shows, we noticed that the somewhat fixed format of the concept notes. They tell you where the artist is from, where they studied, the materials and themes the artist usually works in and finally the concept of the artwork itself. The language used is formal English, often using words that one may not know the meaning of. Interestingly, the art at Kochi Biennale has concept notes written in both English and Malayalam (one of few exhibitions to feature bilingual concept notes for reasons other than the artists' discretion), invoking further questions on the authority in them and their translations; how much say can the artist have in the words selected to explain their work in a language they may not speak? (Group 3, 2025)

They recognised the paradox that concept notes, meant to aid accessibility, often create barriers:

The point of the concept note is to simplify the artwork and make it easier and accessible for people to understand. But due to the formal tone of the concept note, there is a possibility that they make it even harder for people to understand the artwork. Even as artists ourselves, we find this need to make ourselves sound more sophisticated and eloquent while writing our concept notes. (Group 3, 2025)

Their experiments disrupted this authority through translation and play:

We messed around with the concept notes to distort and disrupt this authority and power that they held. Using one of the concept notes from the Kochi Students' Biennale 2022 edition, we translated it in Hindi and Marathi ourselves and then asked ChatGPT to do the same. What we noticed is that the language used by ChatGPT is similar to the language in the concept notes – it is formal. The language used by us was informal, closer to colloquial everyday speech. We even translated the concept note in P language, a made-up language spoken by young children wherein every vowel in a word is followed by a p-sound. Interestingly, we discovered that neither ChatGPT nor Google knew of the language despite its ubiquity among younger generations in India, and therefore were unable to translate it. Experimenting with P language (along with more well-known made up languages

Figure 11. Screenshot from Group 3's experiments with rethinking a concept note applying 'Hinglish' based translation (Image, Group 3, 2025).

> from large media franchises such as Klingon from Star Trek or Elvish from Lord of the Rings) came from yet another desire to explore language from a different axis of official/unofficial. (Group 3, 2025)

They identified what official documentation systematically omits:

> We also noticed what is missing in the concept notes is the process the artist went through while creating the artwork. In fact, there is so much that the audience does not know. This led us to the part about the unofficial data. The curatorial process, the process of installation of all the artworks and the people associated with it. Where do the labourers who help in installing the exhibitions stand? What of their experience? Do they get the credit they deserve? What about the local people of Kochi – are their voices heard and recognised? How does the biennale affect them and their livelihood? (Group 3, 2025)

Their proposal imagined a game-based interface that would make these power dynamics playable:

> We proposed a prototype for a game which features characters like labourers, artists, and curators. It would be like a role-playing game wherein you choose a character and experience what a day in their life is like. It would be interesting if the characters speak different languages and then have to interact with one another. (Group 3, 2025)

Their relationship with AI shifted through practice:

> We were initially really sceptical about using AI in our ideation process as we thought that the idea would not be ours and therefore original. But once we had ideated and figured out most of the project, it was easier to use AI for specific tasks. We mostly used it to help in translating the concept notes. It was strange that ChatGPT did not know P language, but then again not everyone knows it. (Group 3, 2025)

Technical implementation as linguistic play

Working with Naomi Pitzer, the group developed a playful prototype that embodied their conceptual framework through game mechanics. The system begins by randomly
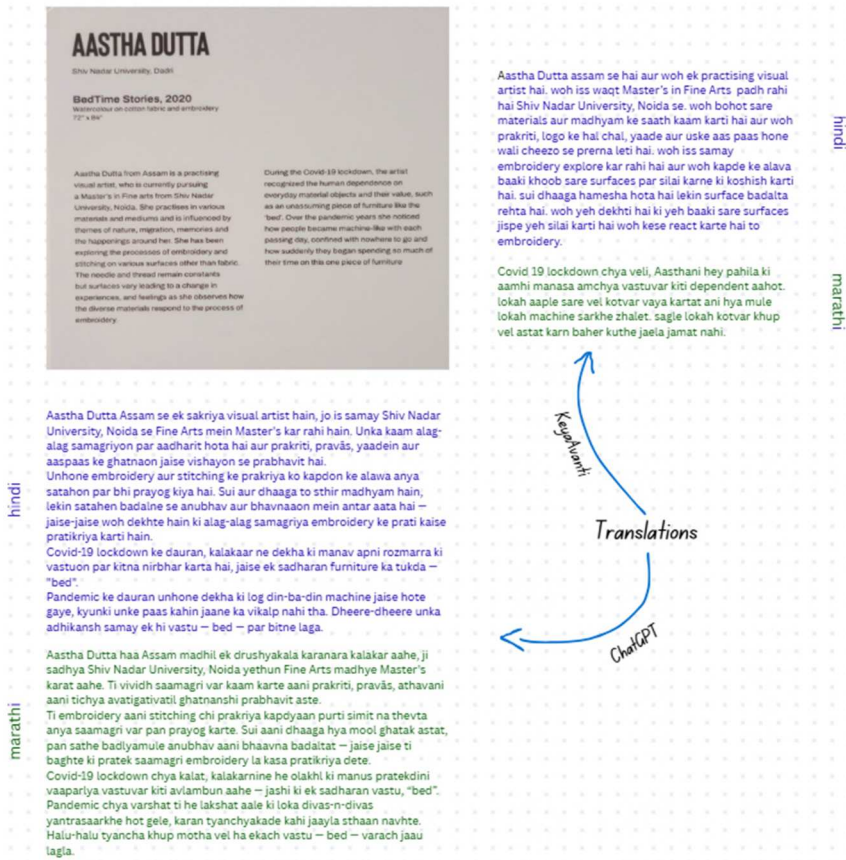
Figure 12. Screenshot from Group 3's experiments with rethinking a concept note applying various language-based translations for Indian contexts (Image, Group 3, 2025).

selecting a location from the Biennale dataset and linking it to three artworks with thematic connections. Users are then presented with choices that shape their route through the archive, with each decision generating new narrative pathways. An offline mode without language models offered a counterpoint to the generative AI version, revealing how different computational logics shape knowledge production.

This dual structure – combining algorithmic and generative approaches – reflected the group's critical investigation of what AI adds, omits, or transforms. Their intention was to move beyond the idea of a fixed, closed archive and instead enable more fluid, participatory encounters with cultural material. By incorporating chance and choice, the prototype acknowledged that discovery involves contingency as much as intention. The proposed role-playing dimension – in which users inhabit the perspectives of artists, curators, or labourers – extended this logic, demonstrating how different subject positions afford distinct ways of encountering and interpreting cultural material (Markham and Gammelby 2018).

Figure 13. Screenshot from Group 3's experiments with rethinking a concept note, trying to apply P language (Image, Group 3, 2025).
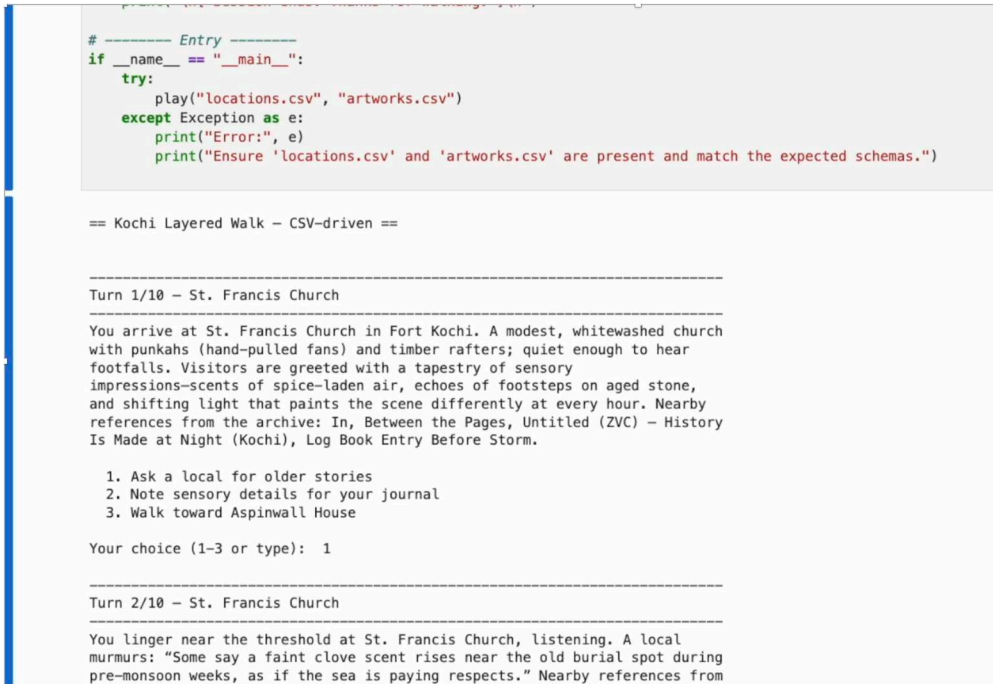
Analysis: language, labour, and institutional authority

The group's work offers important insights into how archives function as sites of power and how AI systems can either reinforce or challenge existing hierarchies. Their sustained questioning methodology in treating every category and boundary as potentially arbitrary models a form of critical practice that refuses to accept institutional logic as natural. By continually asking 'What is data?' and 'Who decides?', they denaturalised archival authority, revealing it as something produced through social and institutional processes rather than inherent to particular forms of knowledge.

Their critique of concept notes was especially revealing. These texts operate as *threshold devices*, mediating between artworks and audiences and establishing the terms of engagement (Jackson 2011). As the students observed, concept notes 'harbour answers that viewers may not be able to reach themselves' (Group 3, 2025). Yet the formal English typically used in them signals authority and sophistication while often alienating those without the same linguistic capital. Their own admission – 'even as artists ourselves, we find this need to make ourselves sound more sophisticated and eloquent while writing our concept notes' (Group 3, 2025) – illustrates how disciplinary norms shape even those positioned as creative agents.

The group's translation experiments revealed how AI systems replicate and entrench linguistic hierarchies. Machine translation maintained formal registers and failed to recognise colloquial or playful forms such as *P language*, foregrounding the exclusion of oral, informal, or marginal communication (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020). This has broader implications: AI trained primarily on formal, published data risks erasing alternative linguistic practices and narrowing what counts as legitimate knowledge.

Attention to omissions, particularly the invisibility of installation labour, curatorial struggles, and local community impacts extended Saidiya Hartman's notion of *critical*

```
#  --------- Entry ---------
if __name__ == "__main__":
    try:
        play("locations.csv", "artworks.csv")
    except Exception as e:
        print("Error:", e)
        print("Ensure 'locations.csv' and 'artworks.csv' are present and match the expected schemas.")


== Kochi Layered Walk – CSV-driven ==


------------------------------------------------------------------------
Turn 1/10 – St. Francis Church
------------------------------------------------------------------------
You arrive at St. Francis Church in Fort Kochi. A modest, whitewashed church
with punkahs (hand-pulled fans) and timber rafters; quiet enough to hear
footfalls. Visitors are greeted with a tapestry of sensory
impressions—scents of spice-laden air, echoes of footsteps on aged stone,
and shifting light that paints the scene differently at every hour. Nearby
references from the archive: In, Between the Pages, Untitled (ZVC) – History
Is Made at Night (Kochi), Log Book Entry Before Storm.

   1. Ask a local for older stories
   2. Note sensory details for your journal
   3. Walk toward Aspinwall House

Your choice (1-3 or type):  1


------------------------------------------------------------------------
Turn 2/10 – St. Francis Church
------------------------------------------------------------------------
You linger near the threshold at St. Francis Church, listening. A local
murmurs: "Some say a faint clove scent rises near the old burial spot during
pre-monsoon weeks, as if the sea is paying respects." Nearby references from
```

Figure 14. Screenshot from the code and text interface to an interactive narrative walk through Fort Kochi (Image, Naomi Pitzer, 2025).

fabulation by reconstructing what institutional archives systematically exclude (Hartman 2008). As the students asked, 'Where do the labourers who help install the exhibitions stand? What of their experience?' (Group 3, 2025). Their proposal to incorporate such voices reflects a commitment to redistributing authority and expanding the scope of cultural documentation.

Game mechanics provided both metaphor and method for this critique. By allowing users to *play* with data, add or remove information, and move fluidly between perspectives, the system presented authority as provisional and contested rather than fixed (Markham and Gammelby 2018). The group's evolving relationship with AI – shifting from scepticism to strategic deployment – exemplifies a situated approach that values agency and deliberation over technological determinism.

Finally, their work raised fundamental questions about legitimation: how does something cross the threshold from 'unofficial' to 'official'? The students recognised that recording alone does not transform informal conversation into legitimate data; institutional framing, archival incorporation, and citational practice are also required. By proposing systems where informal voices gain authority through inclusion and interaction, they imagined archives as sites where these processes might themselves be contested and transformed – aligning with decolonial archival practices that seek to disrupt Western institutional monopolies over what counts as knowledge (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020; Hartman 2008).

Their prototype thus demonstrates how AI systems might be designed to surface rather than suppress complexity by creating interfaces where unofficial knowledge,

marginal languages, and invisible labour gain visibility and authority. Democratising archives, they show, requires more than technical access; it demands a fundamental reconsideration of whose voices matter and how authority is produced, maintained, and contested through archival practice.

Discussion: collaborative practice, institutional relationships, and situated learning

Across the three projects, shared methodological approaches revealed how participatory AI practice fundamentally expands what counts as archival data: gestures and atmospheres, architectural traces and everyday urban life, informal conversations and marginal languages. This expansion emerged through collaborative making, where students questioned institutional assumptions about legitimate documentation. Significantly, each group adopted non-hierarchical, networked approaches – what Group 1 termed 'rhizomatic' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). This convergence suggests that when practitioners question how archives function, they naturally gravitate towards structures accommodating multiple voices rather than reinforcing institutional hierarchies.

The *Living Archive* internship introduced modes of practice extending beyond traditional studio work. Students developed what might be called 'technological literacy' – not learning applications, but learning conceptual frameworks for working alongside technologists. This distinction matters: learning to work with technologists requires articulating conceptual aims clearly, understanding technical constraints and possibilities, and translating between artistic vision and computational implementation. As Manning and Massumi (2014) describe, this represents 'thought in the act' – where thinking and making become inseparable, with concepts emerging through practice rather than preceding it. This iterative approach also created space for what Rozental, van Dartel, and de Rooij (2025, 2) identify as a crucial element of co-creative relationships with AI: serendipity – 'unplanned and fortuitous discoveries that significantly contribute to creative innovation and artistic novelty'. As they note, such serendipity is 'deeply intertwined with, and dependent on, the artists' ability to embrace the occasional provisionality of the co-creative process and engage with unexpected outcomes'. The students' willingness to experiment, revise, and respond to what emerged through making exemplified this capacity to work productively with uncertainty.

The programme modelled approach over skills – teaching ways of thinking rather than specific software: how to question what counts as data, how to consider whose voices are privileged, how to collaborate across disciplines. This aligns with hooks' (2010) argument that critical thinking must emerge through engaged practice connecting theory to lived experience. Students functioned as user-testers for the Biennale's potential digital infrastructure, bringing experiential knowledge as visitors who had navigated barriers to access. Their critiques – that official maps overlook the broader city, that concept notes use alienating language, that ephemeral encounters remain undocumented – emerged from lived experience. Their prototypes served as communication tools with the Biennale Foundation, showing concrete possibilities rather than abstract proposals.

The workshop structure modelled transdisciplinary collaboration where artistic vision, technical expertise, and cultural knowledge mutually informed each other. Naomi Pitzer's observation that students' 'speculative thinking opened new creative

horizons for her own AI practice' demonstrates reciprocal learning. This collaborative model suggests how cultural institutions might integrate AI responsibly: transdisciplinary teams working through sustained dialogue generate innovations neither party would reach alone. What students gained extends beyond specific skills to methodological approaches applicable across contexts: how to iterate between concept and implementation, how to communicate across disciplinary boundaries, how to maintain critical perspectives while engaging productively with technology. These 'techniques of practice' transfer to whatever work students undertake subsequently. The workshop structure modelled transdisciplinary collaboration where artistic vision, technical expertise, and cultural knowledge mutually informed each other. This approach aligns with what Rozental, van Dartel, and de Rooij (2025, 4) term 'radical continuity' – the interaction between artists and AI as 'a continuous dialogue between the artist and the machine, characterized by cycles of generation and feedback'. Naomi Pitzer's observation that students' 'speculative thinking opened new creative horizons for her own AI practice' demonstrates this reciprocal learning. This collaborative model suggests how cultural institutions might integrate AI responsibly: transdisciplinary teams working through sustained dialogue generate innovations neither party would reach alone.

The programme integrated ethical considerations throughout rather than treating ethics as separate concern. Students engaged with Crawford's *Atlas of AI* (2021) on AI's material and planetary costs, Zuboff's *Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) on data extraction, and Hartman's (2008) work on archival silences – shaping how they understood their prototypes as systems with social, environmental, and political implications rather than neutral technical achievements. Group 1's recognition that 'even if AI could technically capture emotions or gestures, such processes risk commodifying intimate experiences' demonstrates critical literacy extending beyond functionality to encompass ethical dimensions.

Our cohort of female Indian students represented a conscious feminist and postcolonial intervention. As D'Ignazio and Klein (2020) argue, information visualisation's history traces from European men mapping colonial conquests through data collection systems designed to control populations. When female Indian students, rather than Western male technologists, shaped frameworks for documenting a major Indian cultural institution, their work intervened in these longer histories of who has authority to map, measure, and represent culture. The workshop's all-women composition – female Fine Art students working with female machine learning specialist Naomi Pitzer – created deliberate space for developing confidence in technological domains where women remain underrepresented. Group 3's journey from initial scepticism to strategic deployment models how practitioners can develop nuanced relationships with technology: neither wholesale adoption nor rejection, but thoughtful consideration of when tools serve creative aims.

The programme also built relationships between students, faculty, and the Kochi-Muziris Biennale Foundation. Students became active researchers contributing to institutional thinking about archives rather than passive learners. Their 2022 Biennale participation as part of OP Jindal's study programme provided experiential foundation; the internship transformed this into research contribution. As D'Souza and Manghani (2023) document, this trajectory reflects broader efforts to reshape creative education around critical engagement with emerging technologies – positioning AI as contested

territory where different futures remain possible, futures that students, as emerging practitioners, have legitimate stakes in shaping. Students now have direct connection to a major Indian cultural institution and experience presenting work to international stakeholders, understanding biennales not as distant events but as organisations they might work with, contribute to, or critically engage.

For OP Jindal, the internship created a cohort with experience in practice-based AI research who can mentor subsequent years. For the Kochi-Muziris Biennale Foundation, the project offers a pathway towards digital infrastructure emerging from community needs rather than technological imperatives. The student prototypes demonstrate what's possible when development foregrounds accessibility, multilingual support, and attention to invisible labour – values central to the Biennale's identity as a 'People's Biennale'.

Conclusion: practising participation, centring people

By centring student practitioners' own reflections through extended quotations, this article has enacted a participatory approach to knowledge production. The students emerge not as case studies demonstrating predetermined theories but as co-researchers whose making generates insights about what AI-assisted cultural documentation might become. Their reflections reveal methodological contributions: how questioning becomes method, how translation exposes power, how play disrupts authority, how collaboration across disciplines expands all participants' imaginations.

For visual arts practice, this work suggests how AI might be approached as medium rather than tool: not simply for generating images or automating tasks, but for creating dynamic systems where meaning emerges through interaction, where multiple perspectives coexist, where audiences become co-creators rather than passive consumers. The implications extend beyond specific technical implementations to broader questions about institutional transformation. As biennales and cultural organisations worldwide explore digital archives and AI-assisted engagement, the *Living Archive* project offers an alternative to corporate platforms and generic software solutions, suggesting that meaningful innovation emerges from sustained collaboration between cultural practitioners and technologists, from attention to community needs rather than technological capabilities, from willingness to question what archives are for and whom they serve.

Importantly, this work remains unfinished. The prototypes are demonstrations of possibility rather than deployable systems; their value lies in opening questions rather than providing answers. The *Living Archive* project continues as ongoing research enquiry, exploring partnerships with specialist researchers in India, testing prototypes with diverse audiences, and refining approaches based on what making reveals. This iterative, open-ended quality reflects commitment to participatory practice as part of dialogic development: recognising that people-centred systems can't be designed in isolation but must emerge through sustained engagement with communities they aim to serve.

The Electronic Life Research Studio's trajectory – from Tate Britain's public programming with marginalised young people, through OP Jindal collaboration, towards public implementation at the 2025 Kochi-Muziris Biennale – models how responsible AI development might proceed: slowly, collaboratively, accountably, with ongoing attention to who benefits and what values guide technical choices. With each collaboration we

have encompassed the questions, concerns, ethical dilemmas and issues of accountability and safety that each engagement has brought and rather than seeing these as obstacles have encompassed them in terms of an evolving methodological approach. This approach positions AI not as inevitable technological future but as contested terrain where different visions of cultural practice, ethical structures, institutional purpose, and social relation remain possible.

Ultimately, the *Living Archive* project argues that the most important question isn't what AI can do but what do we want to do together, and might AI help us do it more equitably, inclusively, and sustainably? This reframing centres human creativity, community wellbeing, and cultural specificity – refusing technological determinism while remaining open to what collaborative making with AI might reveal. For visual arts practice, this orientation suggests futures where technology serves rather than determines creative aims, where archives become live/living conversations rather than repositories, and where cultural institutions remain accountable to the diverse publics they claim to serve.

The prototypes offer glimpses of what becomes possible: archives that could be distributed, multilingual, attentive to labour and care, and open to play and chance. These visions remain speculative, but these speculations are importantly grounded in making, which generates different knowledge than abstract theory: revealing what's technically feasible, what's culturally valuable, and what questions remain unresolved as a platform for developing our work with the Kochi Biennale Foundation.

As cultural institutions worldwide navigate relationships with AI, the *Living Archive* project offers a methodology that starts with ethical and sustainable values, works collaboratively, centres marginalised voices, maintains critical perspectives, builds slowly and remains accountable. These principles won't resolve all tensions between technological capability and ethical responsibility, between efficiency and care, between innovation and sustainability. But they do provide orientation for practice that takes seriously the stakes of how we document, preserve, and provide access to cultural memory in increasingly data-driven, automated futures. This work continues.

Notes

1. Since its inception in 2012, the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (KMB) has been recognised as a distinctive model within the global biennial landscape. Emerging outside the established Euro-American circuit, it offers a platform shaped as much by civic engagement, pedagogy, and collective authorship as by exhibition-making. Its dispersed geography, emphasis on informal and public space, and grounding in the layered histories of Kerala mark a departure from the spectacle-driven model of many large-scale exhibitions. KMB has also been studied as a form of 'infrastructural practice' – less an event with a fixed centre than a sustained process of cultural negotiation and community participation. This orientation makes it a significant context for projects such as *Living Archive*, which seek to rethink how institutions collect, record, and share knowledge beyond conventional frameworks of curatorship or display.
2. *Living Archive* was conceived as an intelligent, AI-driven platform that treats the Biennale's evolving history as a living system rather than a static record. Its architecture is designed for continual expansion, drawing together published documentation, curatorial texts, conversations, and audience-generated material into a searchable, conversational interface. A key innovation lies in the curation of dialogue itself – positioning informal exchanges,

community responses, and ephemeral encounters as valuable forms of knowledge. The project aims to reposition the Biennale as an active site of research, education, and public engagement between editions, strengthening its capacity to build relationships, generate new insights, and shape cultural discourse long after individual exhibitions close.

3. Established in 2025 by Professors Ed D'Souza and Sunil Manghani, (at Winchester School of Art University of Southampton) the Electronic Life Research Studio operates as a hybrid space where artistic practice, critical theory, and machine learning intersect. Rather than treating AI as a tool to be applied to existing cultural systems, the studio positions it as a collaborator – a means of rethinking how institutions learn, how archives evolve, and how publics engage with technology. Its work is characterised by a 'makerly' approach: prototyping systems in partnership with communities, museums, and students to test how computational processes might generate new forms of knowledge, participation, and institutional critique. This emphasis on iterative making and situated experimentation provides the methodological foundation for projects like *Living Archive*, ensuring that technical innovation is embedded within broader questions of social responsibility, cultural access, and collective authorship (https://electroniclife.ai).

4. *Electronic Life* at Tate Britain (2023–2024) marked a critical stage in developing the research methods underpinning *Living Archive*. Conceived as a year-long experiment in institutional learning, it treated AI not as a neutral tool but as an active participant in collaborative inquiry. Through partnerships with marginalised youth groups, community organisations, and museum staff, the project tested how machine learning could mediate dialogue, generate new forms of public engagement, and expose the limits of existing archival and interpretive frameworks. Its emphasis on co-creation and iterative prototyping helped redefine the museum's relationship to digital technology – shifting it from a mode of display to one of shared authorship – and established key principles of participation, language, and ethics that now inform the Biennale collaboration.

5. A significant conversation with artist and curator Nikhil Chopra took place at HH Art Projects in Goa in 2024, during early discussions about his curatorial approach to the next edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. In citing examples of research that had critically examined the Biennale's development, Chopra referred to the *How to Build an Art Biennale* project presented at Tate Exchange in 2018 – unaware that I had co-led it with Sunil Manghani. One of our collaborators on that project, Shwetal Patel, is a founding member of KMB and was then completing a PhD with us at the University of Southampton, where he incorporated this work into his doctoral research on biennial practices. This unexpected moment of recognition revealed how collaborative work produced within one institutional and temporal context can circulate back as a resource for future curatorial thinking, underscoring the project's continued relevance and informing how *Living Archive* might extend such approaches into the realm of AI-enabled research and participation.

6. The Kochi Biennale Foundation (KBF), initially established in 2010 by artists Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu, is the not-for-profit organisation responsible for commissioning and delivering the Kochi-Muziris Biennale and its associated programmes. Beyond producing one of the Global South's most significant contemporary art events, the Foundation has positioned itself as a catalyst for cultural infrastructure in India – supporting residencies, education initiatives, and research platforms that operate year-round. Its collaborative ethos and emphasis on long-term institutional partnerships provide the structural conditions within which *Living Archive* is being developed, aligning the project with the Foundation's broader commitment to public engagement, artistic experimentation, and critical discourse.

7. Established in 2009 in Sonipat, Haryana, OP Jindal Global University (JGU) is a multidisciplinary, research-driven institution recognised as an 'Institution of Eminence' by the Government of India. It is structured around a liberal arts ethos that fosters interdisciplinary approaches and global engagement, with a strong emphasis on research, social impact, and critical inquiry. Within this context, the Jindal School of Liberal Arts & Humanities

offers a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) programme that situates studio practice within broader theoretical, cultural, and political frameworks. Its integration of conceptual enquiry with creative experimentation provided an ideal context for collaboration on *Living Archive*, enabling students to approach AI and archival practice through both critical reflection and artistic research. The partnership also reflects JGU's wider commitment to developing innovative arts education and building international networks that connect pedagogy, practice, and public engagement.

8. The seven-week intensive workshop conducted in June – July 2025 with Fine Art students at OP Jindal Global University was conceived less as a skills-training exercise and more as a sustained inquiry into how artists might engage responsibly with AI in the context of cultural heritage. Alongside technical development, the programme foregrounded ethical literacy and critical reflection, embedding practices of consent, cultural sensitivity, and decolonising methodologies into the research process. Students were supported to treat conversations, community voices, and ephemeral encounters as forms of knowledge rather than data to be extracted, and to consider how their projects might amplify rather than appropriate local narratives. Regular mentoring sessions, peer-to-peer forums, and structured critical discussions created a collaborative environment in which experimentation was matched by accountability. This approach not only shaped the prototypes produced but also modelled how future collaborations can integrate technical innovation with care, responsibility, and cultural awareness.

9. Naomi Pitzer joined the *Living Archive* project as AI Research Engineer following an introduction at a university AI event, where her advocacy for women's participation in science and technology aligned closely with the ethos of the Electronic Life Research Studio. A Southampton graduate, Pitzer's involvement offered both an opportunity for her professional development and a valuable infusion of technical expertise at a critical juncture coinciding with the departure of Tom Savage, one of the studio's founding members, upon completion of his PhD. Her contribution extended beyond engineering support, shaping the pedagogical design of workshops and mentoring students as they engaged with complex issues of data, ethics, and cultural heritage. Pitzer's presence also underscored the project's commitment to fostering inclusive pathways into AI research and broadening participation in the development of new cultural technologies.

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