

Vault

Australasian Art & Culture

AUS \$24.95 NZ \$29.95

ISSN 2208-3057

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FUTURE ISSUE 44 · NOVEMBER 2023 *to* JANUARY 2024

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A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Kay Watson, Head of Arts Technologies at Serpentine Galleries, on synthesising the arts landscape and technology ecosystem.

WRITTEN *by* GRACE SANDLES

You might think that a job like ‘Head of Arts Technologies’ couldn’t have existed a mere couple of years ago. But 2023 marks a decade of London’s Serpentine Galleries’ programme dedicated to researching and developing artistic interventions in the technology ecosystem. It’s the role that Kay Watson, a researcher, producer and curator, has held for nearly three years now. Her path there was anything but straightforward, though. “I was a musician, archivist and researcher prior to becoming a curator and producer with a focus on art and advanced technologies, video games and photography,” she tells me.

Serpentine Arts Technologies began when Watson’s predecessor Ben Vickers,

and Serpentine’s Artistic Director Hans Ulrich Obrist, opened up a dialogue “about the role of technology in the future of the art institution from a cultural, curatorial *and* operational perspective.” This early recognition that art offered significant value as a field for developing and implementing advanced technologies in society remains at the core of everything they do – which now spans five research and development labs (Legal, Blockchain, Labyrinths, Creative AI and Synthetic Ecologies), an annual strategic briefing called *Future Art Ecosystems*, live events, podcasts, digital commissions and ambitious artist-led projects that have included exhibitions, video games and artificial life.



GABRIEL MASSAN and COLLABORATORS, *Third World: The Bottom*, 2023
Installation view, Serpentine North Gallery, 2023.
Courtesy Serpentine Galleries
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Photo: Hugo Glendinning



In its ten years, the team has grown in size from two part-time to six full-time members of staff with a distributed and engaged network of colleagues, collaborators and partners. Over that time, explains Watson, “we have seen waves of hype in immersive technologies, video games, AI, blockchain and NFTs – as can be seen most recently with ChatGPT, the fastest growing app of all time. The impact these changes are having on public knowledge and mainstream narratives about technology, culture and society also impacts the way we engage with technologies as a department.”

“We have been working with artists who have been using the tools of video games for a decade,” notes Watson, “but it took a global pandemic to change the way that video games are perceived by the contemporary art world. *Future Art Ecosystems 2: Art x Metaverse* (2021) was a product of that moment and explored the role video game technologies have had and will have on the digital infrastructure of the future – and the importance of art and culture in how that evolves.” Supporting artists to make video games is an exciting and complex process. According to Watson, it requires collaborative teams

of experts, with organisations like hers developing new modes of production and distribution. And it’s not just video games, either. “Bridging the Web2 or legacy art world with Web3 technologies is an interesting challenge both from a conceptual and operational perspective, but blockchain and Web3 also present us with interesting questions around governance, ownership and participation. Creative experimentation will have a big role in how these technologies evolve and are eventually implemented.”

Most recently, Serpentine Arts Technologies presented *Third World: The Bottom Dimension* (2023), a video game available for free download worldwide, an interactive exhibition, and a Tezos-powered Web3 project conceptualised by Brazilian artist Gabriel Massan in collaboration with invited interdisciplinary artists Castiel Vitorino Brasileiro, Novissimo Edgar, Jota Mombaça, Ventura Profana and vocalist and music producer LYZZA. Blurring the lines between art, video game and collaborative world-building, the *Third World* exhibition “extends the ideas that have driven the creation and development of the mirroring video game. It offers audiences

an opportunity to play the game in a communal setting around site-specific set design, sculptures, sounds and films.” As Watson sees it, *Third World* seems to be the legacy of the pandemic and resulting “general shift towards hybridity even as we return to ‘normal’, and an ongoing blurriness between cultural forms whether a video game, contemporary art exhibition or music video.”

It’s clear that this is a titillating space to be working in, not despite but *because* of its challenges. “Web3 is a rapidly evolving set of technologies, protocols and expertise. The speed at which it is evolving is one of its key challenges but also demonstrates the nascent nature of the field and why the arts should get involved at this early stage, before the rules are written.” **V**

Third World: The Bottom Dimension is showing at Serpentine Galleries from June 23 until November 26, 2023.

[@serpentineuk](https://serpentinegalleries.org/arts-technologies)

Top to bottom
TRUST
Calum Bowden, research
and design; Joanna Pope,
research and design; Will
Freudenheim, design and
game development; Seamus
Edson, 3D design
Hivemind, 2022,
open-source game
Courtesy of Trust

GABRIEL MASSAN
*Third World: The Bottom
Dimension*, 2022,
video game still,
featuring Castiel Vitorino
Brasileiro, Novissimo Edgar
& LYZZA
Courtesy Gabriel Massan
© Gabriel Massan
and collaborators

“Web3 is a rapidly evolving set of technologies, protocols and expertise. The speed at which it is evolving is one of its key challenges but also demonstrates the nascent nature of the field and why the arts should get involved at this early stage, before the rules are written.”

