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ACTION

Action
This edition's cover image features the puppets of *THE HERDS* as they reach the Arctic Circle on the final leg of their extraordinary migration across the globe. The cover photograph was captured by **Vegard Aasen**, who is driven by a passion to explore the extraordinary interactions between humans and nature. Named Norwegian Photographer of the Year in 2020, he is committed to using his work to raise awareness and promote action towards environmental conservation.

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Starting in 1783, the RSA published *Transactions of the Society*, which became *The Journal of the Society of Arts* in 1852 ('Royal' was added to the title in 1908). The publication assumed its current name, *RSA Journal*, in 1987.

COMMENT

Sir Loyd Grossman

Action by design

Next year will mark 90 years of the Royal Designers for Industry (RDIs). Created by the RSA in 1936, the RDIs were established to recognise outstanding designers and promote the contribution of design to manufacturing and industry.

A roll call of past and present RDIs – from Barnes Wallis (aircraft) to Jony Ive (product), Vivienne Westwood (fashion) to Lauren Child (illustration), Norman Foster (architecture) to Es Devlin (theatre) – shows their remarkable range and calibre. Whether it's through simple and clear typography on motorway signage or the invention of an innovative vacuum cleaner, the RDIs enhance our experience of daily life. Their work is uplifting, inspirational and beautiful, while being absolutely pragmatic.

The Faculty of Royal Designers for Industry attracts the brightest and the best, who all become RSA Life Fellows. In November, five new RDIs and two honorary (non-UK) RDIs were welcomed to the faculty at a ceremony at RSA House. They are leaders across diverse fields, encompassing memorial sculptures, data journalism, 'pollinator' art, graphic design, digital technology, sustainable construction, furniture and public spaces.

The RSA House event also saw a changing of the guard – as Jo Gibbons became Master of the faculty, taking over from Charlie Paton. It was symbolic of RDI diversity that Jo, a landscape architect, succeeded Charlie, a design engineer.

You can find out more about the latest RDIs in an extended feature in this issue of the *Journal*, which has 'Action' as its overall theme. All seven discuss their work and their motivation. Our lead article is also written by an RDI – Nick Foster, former Head of Design at Google X – who discusses how we envisage the future and why future-thinking matters.

"This issue celebrates how design shapes our world and how action – whether through innovation, advocacy or art – can drive meaningful change"

Our Action theme continues in the 'In Conversation' interview with Greg Jackson, CEO of Octopus Energy. Greg tells broadcaster Lucy Siegle about using technology to accelerate the energy transition, responding to the net-zero backlash, and his advice to young people wanting to take action to combat climate change.

Examples of young people taking action are a major part of this *Journal* issue. Clover Hogan – an activist who has petitioned for change within boardrooms, at COP negotiations and from the TED stage – argues for more honesty in the climate debate. Fellow Billie Carn relays the story of two young Londoners who have given local people a voice by creating a digital storytelling platform, while young Fellow Dev Sharma spells out his campaign for food justice.

And don't miss Amir Nizar Zuabi's feature on *THE HERDS* – an arts project that sent giant puppets trekking 20,000km across the globe to highlight the frailty of the world and our human connection to it.

This issue celebrates how design shapes our world and how action – whether through innovation, advocacy or art – can drive meaningful change.

I hope it provides inspiration for your own endeavours as we move into a new year of action, debate and change in 2026. ■

Sir Loyd Grossman is Chair of the RSA Trustee Board and President of the Faculty of Royal Designers for Industry.

YOUNG FELLOWS

RSA NEXTGEN

Dev Sharma, a founding member of youth activist group Bite Back 2030, chews on this edition's questionnaire

DEV SHARMA

Where did you grow up?
I grew up in Leicester, where food was culture. Festivals filled the streets with the smell of spices and family kitchens passed down recipes like they were heirlooms. But the everyday food landscape around me told a different story.
For much of my childhood there was no supermarket nearby, and the local shops were those typical of a 'food desert' – packed with cheap, processed food and junk food ads everywhere. I later learned that young people growing up in food deserts can die up to 10 years earlier than those who grow up with better options. That fact made me angry and it shaped how I see fairness.

Food is not only about culture – it's about health, dignity and the options that every family deserves.

What did you want to be as a child and what are you now?
As a child, I thought being a fireman was the coolest job ever. Now, I'm a food activist and former Youth MP. As a founding youth campaigner with activist group Bite Back, I helped push the case for an online junk food ad ban all the way into the Queen's Speech, a policy that will provide 127,000 extra years of healthy life to children.

What is one thing the world needs to know about you?
I don't hate cake. I don't want to ban junk food. My fight is with a system that bombards young people with ads and stacks the odds against healthy options.

What are you most passionate about and why?
Food justice. The way our food system is set up right now, it's corporate choices – not young people themselves – that are making the decisions about young people's health. I want to flip that power dynamic by stopping the bombardment of junk food ads, fix price and placement so healthy staples win in shops, and make standards mandatory so that school food sets kids up for life.

What are you reading right now?
Stuart Gillespie's *Food Fight*. It's an amazing book that reveals how the food system we once relied on for nutrition is now the very thing making us sick.

What's your idea of misery?
It hurts knowing that more than one in three 11-year-olds leave primary school at risk of diet-related illness, yet the system continues to let junk food dominate.

If you had one wish to change the world, what would it be?
I wish that every child could grow up free from the grip of junk food marketing, with access to food that's healthy, affordable and culturally meaningful.

Why did you decide to become a Fellow of the RSA?
I wanted to be part of a community that believes ideas can change systems. For me, that means reimagining the food system so it works for young people. The RSA gives me a space to share, learn and connect. ■

Scan the QR code to nominate a Young Fellow of the future

Scan the QR code to learn more – and to help Bite Back!

Photo: Courtesy of Dev Sharma

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RSA FELLOWSHIP

NEW FELLOWS

Cathy Yitong Li

Cathy Yitong Li leads global climate and energy policy and advocacy at BirdLife International – the world's largest nature partnership. She also serves as IUCN Climate Crisis Commission Deputy Chair. Cathy's focus is on international climate and environmental policy, multistakeholder collaboration and civil society advocacy; she has been involved in the climate field since her teenage years. As well as advising governments and business executives, Cathy holds advisory and governance roles across eight UN bodies and various international coalitions. Previously, she worked at the UN Climate Change High-Level Champions team, Deloitte and JPMorgan.

Jenny Buccos

Jenny Buccos is the Founder and CEO of EXPLR, a micro-certification platform delivering no- and low-cost career-connected learning for young people aged 13–19. She brings together young people, industry and government to advance early pathways before college. Jenny is also co-director for the National STEM Festival, now in its third year in the US – with UK, Germany, Armenia and Mexico editions planned. She is developing an industry-backed global skills passport to equip Gen Z with the skills employers need. In 2025, she received the Special Service Award from the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES) for expanding STEM opportunities for Indigenous students.

Asif Khan

Asif Khan is the Director of the Scottish Poetry Library (SPL) – known as 'the nation's bookshelf for poetry'. The SPL's mission is to help grow audiences for poetry and to showcase Scottish talent. Asif has worked in international and national cultural policy roles – including as an associate of Arts Council England and with the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, with oversight of the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade commemorative programme. He sits on Scotland's advisory committee for the British Council, and is a director on the boards of Culture Perth & Kinross and the Robert Burns Ellisland Trust.

Sonja Wolf

Sonja Wolf is currently a Research Professor with the School of Government and Economics at the Panamerican University in Mexico City. As a social scientist who studies questions of migration, security and Latin American politics, Sonja has been working in Mexican academia and civil society for almost two decades and is the author of *Mano Dura: The Politics of Gang Control in El Salvador*. In addition to non-fiction writing, Sonja is interested in creative storytelling to shape public narratives and policies on social and human rights issues. Her films include the feature documentary *The Vertical Border* and the fiction short film *Collateral*. Sonja holds a PhD in international politics and has trained with the National Film and Television School.

Steve Jensen

Steve Jensen leads the SuperREUSE Platform at the Royal College of Art, specialising in reuse and sustainability while mentoring postgraduate students. He is a designer and academic working at the intersection of art, design and architecture. His studios, Juggernaut Design and Anarchitect, have earned critical acclaim for innovation and craftsmanship. Through Steve Jensen Design Ltd, he is developing projects in London, China, Cambodia and the surrounding regions that address social injustice through architectural intervention. Steve's work has received multiple honours, including Retail Design of the Year, the ICA Arts and Innovation Award, the Hong Kong Contemporary Design Award, and a Gold Medal in the UN Design Awards.

Future tense

We're obsessed with thinking about what's to come – but not very good at doing it. Identifying four ways of thinking could help change that

Words and Images: Nick Foster, RDI

When I was born, there was no World Wide Web, Wi-Fi or GPS, and there was an ugly wall separating East and West Berlin. Airline passengers could freely smoke cigarettes on flights, gay marriage wasn't legally recognised anywhere on Earth and the global population was less than half its current level. I'm not even 50 years old, yet there's been an immense amount of change in the political, environmental, technological and cultural landscape during my relatively short life.

This sheer volume of change has led to a palpable feeling of uncertainty and queasiness about the future, which seems like it's building towards something. I appreciate that it's a fairly crude way of sampling sentiment, but Google searches for 'what will the future be like' have almost tripled since 2020.

As a child, I developed an almost uncontrollable curiosity about the future, and a relentless urge to try and squeeze it, just to see what oozed out. Fortunately, I discovered design as an outlet for that curiosity, which grew into a fulfilling career. Over the past 25 years I've worked on a huge variety of projects, from cell phones and domestic robots to water purification, healthcare devices and nuclear fusion. Along the way, I've collaborated with all types of people – designers and engineers, scientists, strategists, investors, ethicists, executives – and what has become clear is that our appetite for making sense of the future is enormous, yet our ability to do so with appropriate rigour seems to fall worryingly short.

That's not to say we don't talk about the future enough – quite the opposite.

Predictions and fictions

Our lives are absolutely swamped with conjecture, projections, ideas, prophecies and hypotheses about the future, but just as with an all-you-can-eat buffet, quantity doesn't often correlate to quality. A lot of future-oriented work is mistimed, misinformed, imbalanced, wilfully shallow, poorly aimed and sloppily executed – and that's predominantly due to where it was created, why it was created, and by whom. The list of future ideas is all but endless, and we all seem to enjoy discussing the merits and pitfalls of these individual examples. It seems we're very comfortable discussing and debating the 'what' of the future, but we don't spend enough time exploring 'how' we think about the future, which feels important, especially now.

I think we're all starting to realise that many of the issues we're facing today are the result of the actions of previous generations. While we may feel as though the present-day world belongs to us, the reality is that we're all inhabitants of a giant time capsule that was accidentally planted by our predecessors, and it's now our job to address the implications of their decisions. Many of today's challenges were not created by our generation, but by grainy people from blurry photographs, the majority of whom are long dead, and whose ability to think seriously about the future (or inclination to do so) was every bit as frail as our own.

Holding patterns

Over my career I've had perhaps thousands of conversations about the future with people from all backgrounds and all walks of life, and over time this saturation has revealed a few underlying patterns to me. It seems that every thought about the future appears to fit into one of four distinct domains – Could, Should, Might and Don't – each of which has its own strengths, weaknesses, benefits and drawbacks.

In reality, just as with any kind of thematic categorisation, these ways of thinking all overlap and collide, and their boundaries are more blurry than crisp. These shouldn't be considered in isolation from one another, but by viewing them as the four corners of a map, perhaps we can better understand the shape of the territory.

As I've shared these ideas, I've noticed a temptation among some people to convert this taxonomy into some sort of creative matrix or workshop tool, which is not my intention. We don't need any more of that kind of thing, and I have no desire to contribute to that particular pile of intellectual clutter. I've identified these four channels simply as a means to encourage reflection and as a call to action. By their introduction, I hope we can all become more aware of them as they crop up in our lives, or whenever we catch ourselves falling into their seductive traps.

Could

What I call 'Could Futurism' is a remarkably popular way of thinking about the future as a place of limitless opportunity and progress. ▶

Max and Sally

Following Lidia Hart

Below and following pages: All images are taken from Foster's 2020 photography project exploring everyday moments from possible near futures

The unwritten nature of the future inevitably creates a vacant space stretching out in front of us which begs to be filled. Thanks to the lingering influence of modernism over the past century, we have largely obliged by populating that space with emerging technologies and inventions. As a result, the world of Could Futurism is where you'll find humanoid robots, flying cars, magical devices and towering glass cities. It's also the kind of futurism you'll see delivered from conference stages, on popular TV shows and from a great many of our leaders. Encouraging hope and optimism about the future is important, but, unfortunately, while Could Futurism prides itself on its imagination, this way of thinking is crushingly repetitive.

If you ask Google Images for pictures of 'the future', you'll see a disappointingly familiar parade of the same tired old tropes, repeated over and over again. This way of thinking is also dominated by the language, aesthetics and ideas of science fiction cinema, which forms the backbone of how a great many people consider the future. Many people (indeed many of the world's most powerful people) lean lazily on the ideas, devices and concepts found within science fiction cinema to describe the world ahead. These act as convenient and enticing placeholders, but actively prevent people from doing rigorous, independent thinking for themselves.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of this kind of thinking is that it treats the future as somewhere *else*, happening to *other* people. The visions brought about by Could Futurism often feel grand, escapist, simplistic and dreamlike, encouraging wide-eyed wonder rather than pragmatic discussion. They treat the future as something 'over there' in the distance, a vague ambitious 'other' place, filled with heroic characters leading unattainable lives. In truth, of course, the future is simply an evolution of the present, and we'll all need to pass through the weekend to reach it.

"... the most problematic aspect of this type of thinking is that it treats the future as somewhere *else*, happening to *other* people"

Should

Should Futurism represents a way of thinking about the future with some level of certainty, and is typically characterised by projections, forecasts and predictions. For centuries this desire to 'know' the future has been a deeply human impulse, and we've used a huge array of techniques to try to identify points of light glimmering out there in the distance. When people find out what I do for a living, their first instinct is typically to ask for a prediction of some kind, which is telling.

Within contemporary industry we typically demand significantly more reassurance than star charts or goat entrails to guide our decisions. There's a desire to generate something rational to point at and pick over, something that feels more robust and reliable than ancient prophecies or tarot card readings. We've collectively responded to this need with the creation of a profoundly persuasive tool: data.

Once we can measure and record something we can start to uncover patterns, and once we can uncover patterns the temptation to project them forward becomes irresistible. This way of viewing the world as a system to be decoded lies at the centre of many people's approach to the future, and we've become remarkably good at it. In business circles, this kind of work is rarely referred to as 'futurism', but instead by the more pragmatic title 'corporate strategy'. In situations where stakes are high and decisions need to be made, this kind of numeric orientation toward the future can be very useful, and can feel remarkably reassuring, yet this level of certainty in our numbers and algorithms frequently conceals the inherent volatility of the world in which we live.

The uncomfortable truth facing Should Futurism is that when a line on a chart changes from solid to dotted, it ceases to be data. That dotted line might look rational, pragmatic and logical, but it's actually a piece of numeric fiction, a story made of numbers rather than words. Anyone who has ever made an investment, placed a bet or planned a picnic in October knows there are no 'facts' in the future. Beyond the simplest, most reliable systems, the majority of the networks we are now attempting to map (and certainly any of those involving humans) are inherently volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. Any statement of certainty about the future – and any claims of predictive ability – should therefore always be treated with a high degree of scepticism.

Might

Might Futurism involves thinking about the future in a plural way, rather than as a single point sitting confidently in the distance. This is something we all do instinctively every day, running through multiple scenarios and assigning a probability to each. In games such as chess, this type of thinking becomes more formalised, and the mathematical assessment of these strategies led to the game theory and scenario-planning approaches which emerged during the cold war.

This way of considering the future is powerful, and if you were to hire a 'strategic foresight' team today, this is the type of work they would typically do. They would gather massive amounts of data, competitive analysis, societal trends and contextual signals to construct many different potential scenarios for the future. In doing this work, the goal is rarely to select the 'perfect' answer, rather to focus on understanding the range of possibilities ahead.

The first issue facing this way of thinking is that we never have all the information we need to completely plan out every potential scenario. Indeed in some cases (such as during the cold war), our competitors might actually be deploying false data to mislead and distort our scenarios. ▶

Cricket Crunch

Blunt Force Data

The second (and more troubling) issue with Might Futurism is our inability to imagine the future with sufficient breadth. Studies show that when people are placed within an MRI machine and asked to imagine the future, the same regions of their brain light up as when they are asked to remember the past. In other words, our imagination about the future is utterly defined by what we have already experienced, and we find it extraordinarily difficult to create entirely new scenarios. This is why magic tricks work. When a magician pulls an object out of a previously empty box, it feels astonishing not because it's magic, but because it breaks our own internal laws of experience.

Might Futurism is a valuable way to stretch our thinking and prepare us for the issues and challenges which might lie ahead. But even when we are able to imagine very different future scenarios, we have a tendency to push them out into the 'impossible' territory, or way off into the distance. Just ask Nokia, Kodak or Blockbuster.

Don't

The final way of thinking about the future is what I call 'Don't Futurism'. This involves looking to the future and identifying all the things we want to avoid or stop. Fear is a powerful force, and can be a very effective means to steer people away from undesirable or unintended outcomes. From the Big Bad Wolves in our fairy tales, the frightful domains of Hell and Purgatory in our religions, and the countless dystopian stories featured in science

"As the tempo and magnitude of change continues to increase... the ability to think rigorously about the future is a skill we must all cultivate"

fiction, humans have always sought to re-steer the present by confronting the futures they fear the most.

Don't Futurism often forms the root of oppositional politics and protests, seeking to offer critique and, occasionally, feisty resistance. It also exists in art, and in disciplines such as Speculative and Critical Design, which aim to provoke deeper consideration about the full scope of impact of new ideas, and to instil a broader sense of accountability in those introducing change. This way of imagining the future can be immensely useful, as it can help raise awareness of the consequences of our decisions and encourage increased responsibility, but it's not without its own flaws.

To dwell too long in the realm of 'Don't' is to risk seeing the world through a purely oppositional lens. It can unhelpfully divide populations, corporations, technologies, policies and ideas into simplistic pugnacious factions of 'goodies' and 'baddies'. In an age marked by the climate crisis, antagonistic global politics and deepening inequalities, this mode of thinking has grown increasingly dominant. The psychological toll of this shift is evident, particularly among young people, many of whom now exhibit what psychologists refer to as Ambient Adolescent Apocalypticism: a pervasive, low-level sense of impending doom.

Don't Futurism offers an important perspective, but if deployed poorly (or in isolation) can lead to crippling feelings of hopelessness, fear and despair.

Rethinking tomorrow

Whenever we talk about the future – whether professionally or during casual conversation – we inevitably find ourselves slipping into one of these four ways of thinking. We each have our favourites and we all feel more comfortable describing the future from one of these corners, which results in ideas which are frequently imbalanced, unresolved and fragile.

As the tempo and magnitude of change continues to increase across almost all the forces that shape our lives, the ability to think rigorously about the future is a skill we must all cultivate. Many people are involved with creating ideas, images, projections and stories about the future and they need to significantly improve their work – but this won't happen without pressure. That pressure will come from us all becoming significantly better consumers of the future.

But how? Every day we're either told (or sold) some sort of idea about the future, and we all need to get more comfortable demanding more detail, more clarification and significantly more balance. When you see some exciting Could Futurism happening in front of you, stop and think how it might look on a wet Thursday in suburban Leeds. If someone declares with great certainty what's coming next, politely interrupt and ask, 'what makes you so sure?' If someone is talking about the world in five years' time, ask: 'what might we see next summer?' When you're confronted with another hopeless version of the future, don't just shake your head and tut – ask what we could do to prevent it, or better yet, propose some ideas yourself.

We all need to hold our futurists to account and expect significantly more from them. If not, we will continue to drift through the months and years ahead, shambling onwards and being perpetually surprised by where we find ourselves. This could become the critical failing of our generation, and it's unlikely that subsequent generations will look kindly on this oversight. ■

Recommended reading

Nick's book *Could Should Might Don't: How We Think About the Future* is available now, published by Canongate.

Nick Foster, RDI is a futures designer based in Oakland, California, who has spent his career exploring the future for globally renowned technology companies including Apple, Google, Nokia, Sony and Dyson.

Domingo's nightstand

The fence outside Miriam's place

Heated debates

Once cheered, now booed, the fight to save our climate is at a crossroads that demands not just optimism but honesty

Words:
Clover Hogan

Illustrations:
Charlotte Ager

Not long ago, I found myself on stage addressing business leaders at a sustainability awards ceremony. Leaders from global, consumer-facing multinationals who, according to the organisers, had "outsized responsibility they didn't know what to do with". Rooms like this are familiar to me. As a climate activist, I've petitioned for change within boardrooms, at COP negotiations and from the TED stage. But this time was different. As I started to relay the climate facts I'd committed to memory, someone in the audience started to boo.

I stopped, startled, trying to locate the voice. But it was joined by another, then another. This wasn't a solidarity boo – it was a get-off-the-stage boo. I felt like I was in a real-life nightmare, pinned beneath a spotlight as I was stared down by a mob of angry people in cocktail attire.

I fixed my eyes on the back of the room and soldiered on.

"What this shows us is that many companies are more concerned with being seen to do the right thing than actually—"

More booing erupted, this time followed by someone in the front row shouting, "THAT'S NOT FAIR!"

Something in me snapped. I located the culprit, then addressed her directly:

"You want to talk about fairness? How about the fact that millions of people are dying because of the inaction of people in rooms like this one? So that a handful of billionaires can make even more money? Is it fair that my generation will inherit a dying planet?"

I don't remember what I said next. Only that the moderator attempted to rescue the interview by throwing me a softball, before I excused myself from the stage. I made it down the stairs before I broke into heaving sobs.

Turning tides

While I'd faced confrontation before, my decade of activism had until then felt buoyed by an unstoppable wave. A flurry of commitments followed in the wake of the Paris Agreement, which set out the 1.5°C threshold at COP 21. Climate action was suddenly cool: corporations were afraid of missing the boat and governments scrambled to appease angry citizens – who vocalised their dissent through movements like Extinction Rebellion and the youth strikes for climate.

Even fossil fuel companies, the original architects of climate change denial and delay, were parroting the words splashed across our placards. The election of right-wing figures such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro was dismissed as a temporary setback.

Yet, being booed on stage marked what I had been sensing as a real shift in the tide. These leaders weren't even bothering to pretend that they cared; they were unabashed by the fact that their responsibility was to serve their shareholders, and their shareholders alone.

We're now midway through the "decisive decade" for climate, as Joe Biden put it during a 2021 address, and the world has changed – in some ways, unrecognisably so – but not in the direction we had hoped. The once-distant predictions of scientists are now part of our daily lives: wildfires visible from space; biblical flooding in Texas, Bavaria and New South Wales; record-breaking drought across the Horn of Africa.

Each disaster is broadcast in real time to our smartphones, but climate and the environment have slipped down voters' priorities, usurped by issues such as the cost of living, national security and, most recently, immigration. Trump 2.0 has led the largest roll-back of environmental protections in US history. And tech giants, shaping every corner of our lives, have quietly shelved their climate ambitions in favour of AI – ravenous in its appetite for energy and water.

Shifting sands

How did we veer so steeply off course? Maybe, in part, because this 'momentum' was built on shaky ground – punctuated by hollow buzzwords. Carbon capture has proven a costly distraction that prolongs reliance on fossil fuels. Offsetting has turned ecological destruction into a balance-sheet exercise. ESG is a glorified marketing tool. And vague net-zero commitments have allowed big polluters to kick the can down the road. These 'solutions', and the people who championed them, failed to recognise something critical: this is not a crisis of technology, but of power.

Behind the glossy pledges, a handful of actors have been amassing ever more economic, political and cultural influence. Following current trends, Oxfam research published in January 2025 forecasts that there will be five trillionaires within a decade; meanwhile, the number of people living in poverty has barely budged since 1990 – with 3.6 billion people (an estimated 44% of humanity) living below the World Bank's $6.85 poverty line. Corporations have lobbied relentlessly to block regulation and funded elections to secure pliant politicians. Media conglomerates, owned by the same elites, have twisted public discourse and created scapegoats (trans people one month, small boats the next) to deflect attention from themselves.

And, since I'm parsing blame, many of us working within the climate movement have failed to call out this power grab, or the defence of 'economic growth' ▶

behind which it masquerades. Those who challenge the status quo are quickly branded radical and naive (or even 'communist', as I was when Elon Musk turned me into a meme).

The deep-seated disillusionment we see across the political spectrum today is born out of betrayal. Citizens were promised a greener, fairer world, but instead face rising bills, declining nature and widening inequality. Each broken promise corrodes trust. And what fills the gap when governments, corporations and international agreements fail to deliver? A dangerous vacuum: one now exploited by populist figures such as Trump and Nigel Farage, who thrive on division.

If the past decade has taught us anything, it is that tinkering at the margins will not suffice. Real solutions must confront power head-on, asking: who holds it, who benefits, and who is left to suffer? That means discarding some dangerous myths. First, that those who profit most from the current system will be the ones to fix it; they have every reason not to. Second, the myth of individualism, spoon-fed daily through consumer culture and social media: the notion that we are selfish by nature, destined to compete rather than cooperate. And finally, the myth that your neighbour is your rival, or that you have less in common with someone seeking safety by boat than you do someone arriving by yacht.

"In moments of crisis, whether a pandemic or climate disaster, you quickly learn how much you need your neighbours"

Scan the QR code to learn more about the Force of Nature community

Scan the QR code to view the *RSA Journal Presents* series

Scan the QR code to read more about the RSA's Sustainability Network

Making waves

In moments of crisis, whether a pandemic or climate disaster, you quickly learn how much you need your neighbours. The real work ahead must be collective: building movements, reshaping institutions, redistributing power. Individual action only becomes transformative when it's joined up. We don't need 100 perfect activists, but millions of imperfect ones, working together. That also means learning to cooperate across differences. Building a tent big enough to hold us all.

Around the world, pockets of resistance are growing. In Switzerland, a group of women over the age of 64 sued their government for failing to protect them from deadly heatwaves – and won, establishing a precedent for climate justice grounded in human rights. Citizens' assemblies, from France to Ireland, have shown that ordinary people, given information and deliberative space, can produce decisions far bolder than those of parliaments ensnared in partisan gridlock.

Green populism is emerging in mainstream politics. Figures like Zack Polanski in the UK and Zohran Mamdani in New York are building platforms that channel anger into constructive energy; directed not at migrants or minorities, but at those in the business of turning us against one another.

This latest wave of change is not vested in one leader or one institution, but is plural, participatory and accountable. It may be nascent, but it points to the possibility of a politics rooted in trust and shared ownership. A politics where democracy isn't as flimsy as going to the polls once every four years or being asked to choose between a climate change denier and seasoned procrastinator, but an everyday practice. One that is rooted in collective stewardship of nature and our neighbourhoods. Where our social contracts bridge divides across communities – across cultures, religions and identities. Where we look out for one another in moments of crisis.

It's not too late to change course – but to do so, we must be honest with one another. Honest about how we got here, and where we go next. Honest about who will save us: not the billionaires, but the billions of us demanding change. Because while speaking the truth may be uncomfortable, if we do it together, our voices will rise into a tide too powerful to be silenced.

Or even booed. ■

Recommended reading:

"I haven't been able to put down *Minority Rule* by Ash Sarkar. In it, she examines how culture wars and identity politics distract from class struggle, exposes some of the left's blind spots, and offers a rallying call for people-powered movements to work in solidarity with one another." Clover Hogan

Clover Hogan is a climate activist and the founder of the youth non-profit Force of Nature. She serves on the Mayor of London's Climate and Sustainability Commission, and is currently at work on her debut book, *The End of Pretending*.

Charlotte Ager is an illustrator based in London. Her clients include *The New York Times*, Penguin Random House and Vogue.com.

IN CONVERSATION

“Our current energy system wasn’t built for renewables – it was built for fossil fuels”

Words: Lucy Siegle **Photos: Jooney Woodward**

For Greg Jackson, Founder and CEO of Octopus, the energy transition feels so close he can almost reach out and touch it. The iconoclast entrepreneur, whose brand has a £7bn renewables portfolio and serves more than 10 million customers, invited the RSA into Octopus HQ in central London this past November for an interview with sustainability writer and broadcaster Lucy Siegle. Their conversation spanned the power of electrification, UK energy chaos, rare earths whataboutery, why populists have a point on bills, and how to deal with oil executives planning for Armageddon.

Lucy Siegle: Greg, your early years were spent in North and West Yorkshire in the 1970s. Help me plot a route between that upbringing and how you became this disruptive force in energy.

Greg Jackson: There’s one main thread: being brought up by a single mum. When my parents divorced, Mum had three kids – eight (me), seven and one. She worked in a bar in the evenings and studied for a sociology degree. But she also campaigned for causes she believed in. We were always doing things, never sitting around watching TV.

She gave us responsibility early. She explained she was given a bit of money each week by the government to look after us, and that she was handing it to us directly. From that we had to buy clothes and do our laundry. I used to darn my clothes so I had money to spend on little bits of electronics. It gave us an early sense of decision-making and accountability – foundations for choosing entrepreneurship over a typical career.

Siegle: You left school at 16 to programme computer games but later returned and read economics at Cambridge. Are you glad you did economics?

Jackson: Yes, because I learned that the core of economics isn’t about money – it’s about trade-offs. Out of all the things people want, there just ain’t enough stuff. So you need mechanisms to make choices. In business it’s a trade-off between what you can be certain about and where you take risks, like investing in R&D. That thinking’s incredibly useful. ▶

Siegle: How did you come to start Octopus Energy?

Jackson: With two fellow Cambridge students; we'd started a business in 2003 building software for big companies. We noticed that as companies grow, they slow down. We realised that at some point you have to revolutionise your technology and your organisation. Utilities seemed ripe for that. Globally, it was a $3trn sector running on software that was 50 years old.

In the 2010s, energy companies were also offering poor value and service. As a customer, I was frustrated. We thought: we can change this. But when we pitched to utilities, they weren't interested. They couldn't see that tech changes the world. So we decided to become our own first client – create our own energy company and build the technology ourselves. Once we proved it worked, we could use it to transform other big organisations.

The final driver was climate change. You could see the energy system was going to transform as the world tackled it. Utilities would have to adapt, and we wanted to be part of that.

Siegle: Octopus Renewables became part of the group in 2021, at which point Octopus becomes one of the largest European investors in renewables. Why did you make this move into generation?

Jackson: One of the reasons I'm in business is that, rather than hoping for change, you can just get on and make it happen. The magic of renewables is using more electricity when it's windy or sunny, and less when it's not.

We couldn't optimise, because we couldn't get the data we needed on when the wind farms and solar would be generating in order to forecast when the best times were for our customers to charge. So to get what we needed we started our own renewables business.

Siegle: What do you make of the anti-net zero agenda, tied to populism and claims that renewables are driving up prices?

Jackson: I understand why it's happening. UK energy costs are among the highest in the world, and people are struggling with living costs. It's natural that populists exploit that. The diagnosis isn't entirely wrong.

People like me share graphs showing solar and wind are the cheapest sources of energy. Others show graphs that countries with more renewables have higher prices. They're both right – we're in a transition. Renewables are cheaper, but you have to use them properly. That requires market reform.

Siegle: What kind of reform does the market need?

Jackson: Our current energy system wasn't built for renewables – it was built for fossil fuels. Our markets are dominated by traditional incumbents, so when cheap renewables arrive, consumers don't benefit. For example, we've built loads of wind farms where there's no grid, or there's not enough grid. When it's windy, they can't generate, so we have to pay them a fortune not to generate [a scenario known as 'curtailment']. Then we pay gas plants a fortune to generate somewhere else.

Siegle: Do you think electrification is the big game-changer?

Jackson: Electrification is huge. One thing driving high energy prices now is the global cost of gas after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As a mega-trend, electrification is the most important shift we can make and the West is falling behind.

Twenty years ago, China's economy was 10% electric; now it's 34% and accelerating. We were at 20% then and we're still at 20%. Once you electrify, costs fall dramatically. Electric cars are cheaper to run and maintain, and far cleaner. Clean energy keeps getting cheaper as the technology improves.

"One of the reasons I'm in business is that, rather than hoping for change, you can just get on and make it happen"

In some countries, including the UK, we've cleaned up our electricity – moving from coal to renewables backed by gas – but electricity is only 20–25% of the economy. The real progress comes from shifting more sectors onto electricity, then decarbonising the source. The more electricity you use, the easier it is to make it clean.

So now the focus needs to be on getting electricity prices down so people buy EVs and heat homes with heat pumps, and so industries electrify. Building renewables is great – we do it! – but getting energy cheap enough to drive that shift is even more important.

Siegle: Do you wish people would just get on and use heat pumps, for example?

Jackson: Yes. They are about four times more efficient than a gas boiler. You put one unit of energy in and get three or four units of heat out. If you remember your GCSE physics, that sounds like breaking the laws of physics. But you're not creating heat, you're shifting it from one place to another. It's incredible. Compare that to gas which is nowhere near as efficient.

Siegle: Perhaps installers should greet householders with: 'Good morning. Are you ready to break the laws of physics?'

Jackson: Let's do it. We should have that on our vans! The only catch is price. Electricity in the UK is about four times the price of gas. In France, it's only twice. So in France, a heat pump halves your energy bills automatically. In the UK, we've built a system that favours gas over electricity [in energy reform circles, this is known as 'The Spark Gap']. We've got to change that.

Siegle: Where are we now in the energy transition?

Jackson: Margaret Thatcher said the worst place to be is the middle of the road because you get hit from both sides. That's where we are – halfway through.

The good news is the technologies for cheaper, cleaner lives are improving fast. In many regions it's already cheaper to get 24/7 electricity from solar, wind and batteries than from fossil fuels. Electric cars convert 80% of energy to motion; petrol cars manage 20–25%. The future tech is the clean tech.

We've invested hugely, and now we could reap the rewards – but markets still don't give renewables a fair shot. It's like the famous boulder scene in Indiana Jones: we're seconds from blocking the door, but there's still time to snatch victory.

Seventy-four per cent of the world's renewables are being built in China. Once they saturate their market, they'll flood the world with cheap, clean technology. The cat's out of the bag – it will happen.

Siegle: When? Are you seeing it already?

Jackson: It's just a question of how long we delay. The countries that move fast will lead the future; the ones that don't will be left behind.

I flew from China to the US recently, and for the first time it felt like going back in time – China's cities are quiet, electric, efficient. In New York, you've got huge diesel-churning SUVs. The change is already visible. ▶

Siegle: What's the UK's role?

Jackson: The UK made bold moves early – we were probably the first to back offshore wind at scale. I'm proud of our innovation in smart renewables, like battery optimisation. Octopus processes a million rows of data every three seconds – 10 times more than Visa globally for payments.

The UK punches above its weight in innovation: ARM chips (in practically every device), the jet engine, Turing, the web. But we risk walking away just as clean energy becomes commercially valuable, as we did with the jet engine.

We've got to reform markets and policy to show that clean energy brings costs down. If we do that, we'll have world-class intellectual property to export.

Siegle: Have all the key technological challenges been solved – is it now just about implementation?

Jackson: Tech is never 'solved'. Nokia was once the biggest phone company, then came the iPhone and changed the world. But now when you look back – when the iPhone was launched, its mobile wireless signal was 'Edge'. Today, if you get the letter E on your phone (signifying the Edge wireless signal) you just give up and write a letter! We're now on iPhone 18. Every year it gets better and better. Electrification and renewables are getting cheaper and cheaper. The stats are crazy! Batteries today are 10 times cheaper than they were 12 years ago. Ten times cheaper! The world's biggest battery company, CATL, recently announced batteries that are going to end up being $10 or $20 – 50 times cheaper than they were 15 years ago.

Energy markets and energy policy don't reflect this. Last year, UK energy policy was based on the assumption that battery prices would be $350. We're basing policy on outdated assumptions. So what we really need to do is radically reform our markets and our policy.

Siegle: What about the environmental and human costs of cheap renewables?

Jackson: Honestly, this is minimal compared with fossil fuels. I've looked at lots of supply-chain claims and on almost any metric, clean energy is better.

A wind turbine's lifetime emissions are about 95% lower than fossil equivalents. People talk about water use, too, but renewables use about 1% to 2% of coal's and gas's water intensity. Nothing's perfect, but renewables are an order of magnitude cleaner.

Humans will always create some waste; that's life. The goal is to live great lives while minimising damage and we absolutely can.

Scan the QR code to watch the expanded interview and others in our 'In conversation' series

Siegle: But what about the true human and ecological cost of rare earths like cobalt?

Jackson: Cobalt's a special case because around 70% comes from the Congo, and yes, there are serious human rights issues. But that can be fixed. Companies and governments should be working with the DRC to clean up the supply chain.

Also, cobalt's being phased out. Many new EV batteries don't use it at all. It's worth noting that cobalt is also used in oil refining, but you don't see those stories on social media. The outrage only appears when people want to attack clean energy.

Half the world's lithium, for example, comes from Australia under very high standards. We need to stop false comparisons pushed by industries that are far worse.

Siegle: Since July 2025 you've been a non-executive board member in the UK Cabinet Office. You obviously can't advocate for energy in that role, but what will you do to promote innovation and efficiency in government?

Jackson: One of the things Octopus created was Kraken [a smart energy platform which was spun out from Octopus in September 2025]. When other companies adopt it, they become more efficient and agile. One large utility cut its innovation cycle from 15 months to three weeks.

Wouldn't it be great to see that in government? The UK now has 25% more civil servants than before Brexit, but I don't think anyone feels services are 25% better. That's not about individuals – it's about structure. We can use technology and organisational innovation to make public services dramatically more efficient. That's what I hope to contribute.

Siegle: Some might say that this has echoes of another well-known tech-disruptor's foray into government efficiency?

Jackson: Well, I am definitely focusing on the day job. Investors and staff depend on that. I'm purely advisory with government and that advice is really interesting. What you saw with the US Administration's DOGE was irresponsible disruption – shutting things down and leaving chaos. What we need is responsible disruption: sitting down, defining the service we want to provide, and then finding the most efficient way to get there with technology.

Siegle: How important is it that we maintain momentum on the climate and nature crisis at this moment?

Jackson: I sat next to a senior exec from a major oil company recently. Asked about climate change, he said, "We're planning on 2.75 degrees: six metres of sea-level rise." The idea of being comfortable with that is terrifying.

Asked what he was doing about that, he said, "well we need the energy, so we'll mitigate, by building sea walls or whatever." I asked if we'd finance that with a tax on fossil fuels. His response? "Well, not if you want the oil." This illustrates how we're being asked to shoulder huge costs so one sector can carry on business as usual. That's wrong.

Later, he said, "You can't build renewables in Africa." I replied that Africa has some of the best renewable resources in the world. Besides, for decades, the oil industry didn't care that 600 million Africans had no energy. Now suddenly they care? The point is, unless we call this out, we let them define the path forward. That cannot happen.

"... why are Western economies not growing? It's because they operate for the power of the incumbents"

Siegle: You talk a lot about 'incumbents', slowing down the energy transition. This year the Nobel Prize in Economics went to Joel Mokyr, Philippe Aghion and Peter Howitt for showing how incumbents drag on growth. Is this idea finally mainstreaming?

Jackson: I hope it is mainstreaming because the mechanisms by which incumbents hold stuff back are well hidden. The decades of lobbying capability they have are not visible. So we don't see the ways in which they're doing it. It's great to shine a light on it. Certainly my experience has been, if you are an incumbent, it's a lot cheaper and easier to put a bit of money into lobbying and media and PR campaigns than it is into doing the hard work of reforming. I read a great article recently that said nearly all of the growth in mature economies comes from new companies. We've got to remember that. So it always feels like this is esoteric, but the reality is why are Western economies not growing? It's because they operate for the power of the incumbents.

Siegle: What advice would you give young people right now on how to stay true to their values and make real world change?

Jackson: I think what you do with your career matters far more than people will often talk about. The really big difference you make is effecting big change through, for example, bringing people electric vehicles rather than petrol ones. I think that the very big stuff is going to come by moving away from fossil fuels to power our society, but giving people the same quality of life or better as a result of that.

Siegle: Greg, thank you so much. On behalf of the RSA, an organisation that is very disruptive at heart and remains so, thank you for giving us so much of your time. That was absolutely fascinating.

Jackson: Well, honestly that was one of the most enjoyable interviews I've had in the 10 years we've been in this business. Thank you. ■

Greg Jackson is CEO and Founder of Octopus Energy.

Lucy Siegle is a journalist, writer and presenter. Currently, she presents BBC1's *The One Show*.

Jooney Woodward is an award-winning photographer with clients ranging from *Architectural Digest*, American and British *Vogue*, Burberry, *Christie's Magazine* and the *Financial Times*.

FROM ASK TO ACTION

How two young Londoners transformed the simple act of asking questions into a movement for authentic community connection – and created a formula for turning digital engagement into real-world impact

Words: Billie Carn, FRSA

When Ahmed Faid borrowed his eldest sister's camera during a university break in 2011, he little realised this simple act of rebellion would become a blueprint for reimagining social action.

Growing up in the King's Cross neighbourhood of London during an era of rising knife crime and widespread youth disconnection, Faid had often observed a profound gap between his community's reality and its representation by the mainstream media. "I would turn on the news and there was never anything saying what us young people were feeling," he recalls. "Then came the riots – and one of the reasons was because young people were fed up."

Faid cites those riots (sparked by the August 2011 police shooting of Mark Duggan in Tottenham) as a turning point. He notes that young people in London were already facing additional mounting frustrations that year, with a sharp increase in university tuition fees and a general sense of social and economic tension. "I was concerned about how young people were being represented by the press," he says. "I wanted to pick up a camera to document the stories and voices of young people who wanted answers and change."

So, borrowed camera in hand, he walked onto the streets of London and began asking questions.

Left:
Founders Ahmed Faid and Nii Lartey

Right:
Dose of Society question: Should university be free?

Right bottom:
Sir Richard Branson

Patient listening

That first day on the street taught Faid a crucial lesson about authentic connection – it takes patience. In busy London, three hours passed before any of the strangers he approached agreed to be interviewed. But he persevered, asking the same question over and over: "If you could change one thing in society, what would it be?" The answers he received were wildly different, ranging from "more love and understanding" to "less immigration".

This diversity of responses reshaped his understanding of what it would take to create genuine social change: real open listening to other perspectives. "I realised it was important, because so much of what we have now – Trump, Brexit – is because we don't listen enough to people outside our own little bubbles." This insight would eventually become the foundation for Dose of Society: Real People, Real Stories, a digital storytelling and social media platform which Faid co-founded with college friend Nii Lartey.

"We started Dose of Society in 2017, because we felt ordinary voices weren't being heard," says Faid. "The media often only spotlights celebrities or influencers." Faid and Lartey wanted the platform to give young people in particular a space to share their authentic voices and personal perspectives on life, community and current affairs. The idea was to capture raw, unfiltered reflections from youth.

Dose of Society gives a voice to everyday people – marginalised groups and communities that are often overlooked by mainstream media – through the creation of short, impactful videos that highlight perspectives ranging from street-level conversations to global humanitarian issues. At its core, the platform uses authentic digital storytelling to foster genuine connection and understanding. It does this with its interviews by prioritising authentic listening over performative engagement – crucial for starting conversations that can lead to more profound social connections and actions, not just feed the mill of passive online entertainment.

Lartey, who left traditional journalism because he felt "pigeon-holed" and unable to share unfiltered community stories, is not surprised that their approach has resonated. "When it comes to news, it's just very filtered, there's a lot of bias." Faid and Lartey also saw their work as representative of ▶

Scan the QR code to watch Dose of Society's Grenfell Tower video

To hear from Serious Youth Violence Specialist Faron Paul, scan the QR code

“At its core, the platform uses authentic digital storytelling to foster genuine connection and understanding”

Scan the QR code to learn more about Fazamnesty

a generational shift, a desire to move away from extracting quotes for predetermined narratives, and towards creating space for authentic community voices to drive social agendas.

Stories for system change

Dose of Society’s breakthrough came early. Says Faid: “In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, I went out to speak with local residents and community members who were grieving and demanding justice. The question I asked was, ‘What’s something you want the world to know?’ One response that stayed with me was from a resident who said, ‘This is a crime against humanity.’”

According to Faid, the video was the first that “went really viral – with millions and millions of views” but the impact extended beyond simple metrics to create tangible impact. “It gave international awareness to Grenfell. People asking where to donate, how we can support.” He points out that, with mainstream news, you often “can’t feel it, whereas when you hear people speak passionately about the impact on the local community, it can turn into real action.”

With the Grenfell video, Faid realised he had discovered a formula that could spark real-life change.

Real-world impact

While Dose of Society’s engagement metrics are certainly impressive, Faid and Lartey can share numerous other examples of times their digital stories triggered community action.

When they asked Serious Youth Violence Specialist, Faron Paul, “What’s an experience that has changed your life?”, they little realised he would share a story of being stabbed multiple times in defence of a female family member who was being attacked. Paul shared: “When I got stabbed, I was only young. I was participating in athletics. I was going to school… my whole social life just stopped abruptly. And I was left with a lot of physical damage to really take in and accept.” After the stabbing, Paul went on to start an organisation called Fazamnesty, “which is now being engrained into the government Coalition to Tackle Knife Crime and we’ve now got a mobile amnesty van that’s going around the whole country trying to get as many knives off the street as possible.”

When the video went live, the public response was immediate – people all over the country commented, asking where they could turn in their knives. The UK Home Office also saw Paul’s video and its impact, leading to Faid and Lartey being invited to No. 10 Downing Street. Dose of Society and the Home Office are currently exploring how they might collaborate to amplify government social initiatives.

In yet another instance of a video turning into mass action, Dose of Society asked a man on the street “What are you most grateful for?” He replied, “I’m most grateful for a roof over my head this time of the year because I’m actually currently homeless… what gets me through each day is my TikTok account. I have over 5,000 followers.” When asked about the purpose of his account, the man shared it was “helping more homeless people to source places to go to get hot food, places to go to get a shelter over their head and

To see “What are you most grateful for?” scan the QR code

Left: Will.i.am

Above top left and right: Dose of Society question: Should university be free?

Lessons from the field

Lartey and Faid have distilled their model down to three basic premises, each with broad applicability to those inspired to take action and create change:

Start with questions, not answers: **“Always ask what your community wants, what serves them best,” Faid advises. Too often, initiatives begin with predetermined solutions rather than authentic needs assessment.**

Prioritise purpose over profit: **“Understand your purpose, why you want to serve that community,” Lartey emphasises. “If the why isn’t there, you’re driving for nothing.” Sustainable action requires deep personal investment beyond good intentions.**

Learn to say no: **Drawing from Snapchat founder Evan Spiegel’s advice, “You have to get good at saying no. Not every opportunity is an opportunity.” This applies to funding, partnerships and strategies that potentially compromise core values.**

that’s my aim going forward.” As soon as the video aired, the Dose of Society community mobilised, asking “What’s the best way to support him? Is there a donation link? Has he somewhere to stay?”

These examples and more revealed to Faid how authentic storytelling can create “empathetic action”, responses driven by genuine emotional connection rather than guilt or obligation.

Sustainable missions

Today, Dose of Society has more than 6 million followers across platforms, with advocates in 97 countries. The company received Snapchat investment in 2019 and now works with companies (including Netflix and Valentino) using the lessons learnt from their street interviews to help humanise brands, making them more relatable across social media. But this partnership has posed a fundamental challenge: how to maintain authentic local connection while operating globally and for profit?

Faid says the connection between Dose of Society’s street interviews and corporate partnerships lies in purpose and sustainability. The grassroots work, the raw, unpaid interviews from the streets, are “where the heart of Dose of Society lives, where we listen to real people, amplify unheard voices, and build authentic community connections”. The corporate collaborations with brands like Netflix help fund that mission, “ensuring we can continue capturing and sharing stories that don’t usually make it to mainstream platforms”. In essence, “the commercial work sustains the social mission, while the social mission gives our corporate work authenticity and meaning”.

Empathy over obligation

“We all go through something,” Faid reflects. “Regardless of what you look like, your religion, language – regardless of differences, you’re still able to build genuine connections.” The challenge now is for our social institutions to create robust structures supporting authentic listening and response.

But, as Faid and Lartey demonstrate, when we create genuine space for authentic community voices, the result isn’t just better engagement. It’s the foundation for the type of true social cohesion democracies desperately need: connection based on shared humanity rather than shared ideology, action driven by empathy rather than obligation and change emerging from within communities rather than being imposed upon them.

“You turn on the news, you hear what’s happening, you don’t feel it,” Faid explains. “But when you speak to someone from that country, it hits differently because you’re hearing from locals about exactly how their local community is being impacted.” This model offers an alternative to top-down global communications; authentic local voices creating resonance through shared human experience rather than shared ideology. ■

Billie Carn, FRSA is the Founder/Chief Maverick at Maverick Wisdom.

DESIGN

CREATING TOMORROW

From memorial sculptures to planting schemes to 'impossible' structures, *RSA Journal* hears from the seven newly appointed Royal Designers for Industry, each set to bring a unique perspective to the prestigious title

Words: Nicholas Wroe

When Mona Chalabi was invited to become a Royal Designer for Industry (RDI), her reaction was pure delight. "It means the values that I stand for are respected in my profession," says the writer and illustrator known for transforming data into art that challenges power structures.

She wasn't alone in this joyful surprise. In November, the 2025 RDI cohort was announced at RSA House, where seven designers joined the Faculty of Royal Designers for Industry. The RDI title, introduced by the RSA in 1936, was created to recognise outstanding designers and champion the contribution of design to manufacturing and industry.

Nearly 90 years on, it remains the UK's highest design accolade. Current RDIs include iPhone creator Jony Ive, stage designer Es Devlin and fashion designer Paul Smith. Honorary (non-UK) members include industrial designer Dieter Rams and artist and designer Javier Mariscal.

Here the seven new members explain their work and what they hope becoming an RDI will bring to their practice.

Photos: @s_nappe_r

Above left: ***Good Things Come To Those Who Wait*****: Yinka Ilori (2024)**

Above right: ***The Shrine Of Affirmations,*** **SCOPE Art Show 2024**

Yinka Ilori

Yinka Ilori MBE is a British-Nigerian multidisciplinary artist and designer, with expertise spanning architecture, sculpture and furniture, interior design and graphic design – he transforms Nigerian parables and verbal traditions into vibrant, contemporary narratives through a bold and captivating visual language. Ilori regards the RDI award as a validation of his belief that "design has the power to tell untold stories".

Ilori's practice is "shaped by the people and place it's curated for". His core focus remains community, storytelling and creating "things that feel open and joyful", whether through large public installations or intimate pieces celebrating everyday stories.

"My identity as a British-Nigerian individual has always influenced my work and how I show up in the world, so if people can learn from that or be inspired to tell their own stories, I'll feel I've done my job in making a difference."

His recent projects include *Transparent Happiness* at Helsinki's Amos Rex Museum and *Grow Your Dreams*, Ilori's first-ever watch collaboration with MB&F M.A.D. Editions. This was followed by *Cherish Your Magic* at Bloomingdale's flagship store in New York. Most recently, he launched the Yinka Ilori Foundation, a global non-profit dedicated to reimagining how communities worldwide access joy, creativity and opportunity. ▶

April Greiman

April Greiman, new honorary RDI, is a transmedia artist and designer whose innovative use of digital technology spans over four decades of pushing at boundaries in the fields of communications, textiles, architecture and new media. Her practice encompasses design, photography, video and animation, environmental graphics and also colour and material palettes for the built environment. And, while her work is often two-dimensional, it also demands consideration of space around it.

She observes that design and art "play a major role in just about everything in our perceived world; cultural, environmental, psychological, even philosophical" and is currently developing two public art photography commissions for the Belmont Beach Aquatic Center in Long Beach, California, as well as writing a monograph documenting 25 years of transmedia work. She has spoken of having no fear of what she calls the "texture" of technology, "Rather than damning every new technology, I embraced it," she says, characterising herself as someone who loves "learning and trying things! A big fan of chance, I'm an explorer, with an unabashed adventure spirit." So how might becoming an RDI influence her professional practice? "No idea," she straightforwardly announces. "But I'm excited to see!"

Above top: Warehouse C, Nagasaki, Japan (1995)

Above bottom: *Does It Make Sense?* (1986) can now be viewed in digital form, in collaboration with Isovist

Above right: *Four Epochs of Paradise* (2024)

Right: *Pollinator Pathmaker*'s 'pollinator vision' filter

Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg

Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg is a multidisciplinary artist who sees her RDI appointment as an opportunity to join a community dedicated to "critically envisioning and creating more responsible futures" as well as one in which interdisciplinary collaboration can "inspire change and contribute to reimagining how we can coexist with the planet".

Her climate-positive artwork, *Pollinator Pathmaker*, designs planting specifically for pollinators (not humans) across the UK and Atlantic and Continental Europe. It deploys an altruistic algorithmic tool that creates planting schemes optimised for pollinators' tastes and is a technology especially designed and utilised to maximise empathy and care.

Ginsberg is currently expanding *Pollinator Pathmaker* to the US and says her work explicitly challenges design's traditional function within capitalism, arguing it shouldn't merely differentiate and promote products for consumption. Instead, she brings an artist's perspective, grounded in care for the planet, to offer a mechanism that can "ask questions of the world we have made and the world we want to make".

Philippe Block

New honorary RDI Philippe Block is a professor of architecture and structures at ETH Zurich's Institute of Technology in Architecture. His research and practice address climate change through computational design and sustainable construction following the principle 'strength through geometry'.

He is "truly humbled" by the RDI recognition, he says, as "driving positive change that benefits society through design is something I strive for in my career, wearing different hats – from academic to practitioner to entrepreneur."

His work is perhaps best exemplified by the Armadillo Vault at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale, in which 399 cut stone pieces are held together, without mortar or reinforcement, through geometry alone. By reintroducing Gothic cathedral structural principles, it demonstrated how good structural form reduces mass while utilising "simple, low-carbon materials" in reversible, mono-material designs. "The project also represents me personally in many ways: pushing the envelope, challenging the status quo, a little bit of provocation, and never taking 'no' for an answer."

Photos: Iwan Baan, Gabriele Mattei, naaro

Above: Armadillo Vault (2016)

Above right: New concrete technology is being used in the building of CreaTower I in Switzerland

Right: Striatus (2021)

Far left: Studio Frith created the brand identity for bakery Jolene

Left: Design Emergency's visual identity

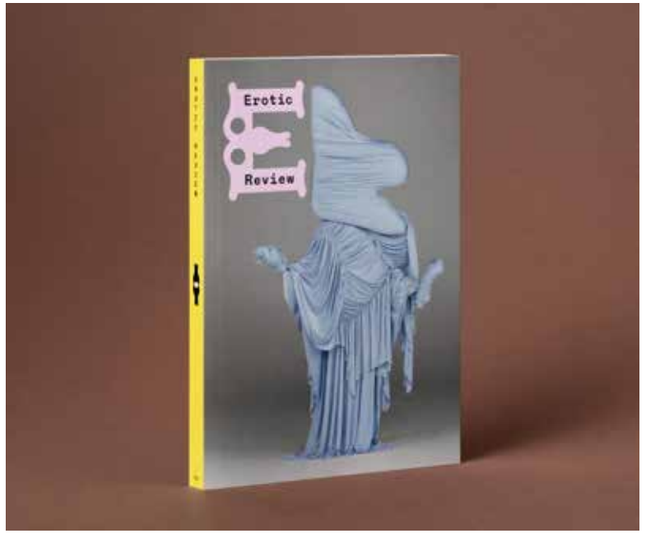
Below left: Studio Frith's work for *Erotic Review*

Frith Kerr

Frith Kerr is an award-winning graphic designer and founder of Studio Frith, where she has worked with leading cultural institutions such as Frieze Art Fairs and Guggenheim New York, on projects that have spanned product design, campaigns, packaging, film and more.

She describes design as "a messenger or a go-between between people and objects, between organisations and future people". The idea of communities, whether large or small – how they impact the wider world and how they can facilitate real change – is at the heart of her thinking.

Kerr's diverse set of recent activities range from producing film titles and a campaign for Joanna Hogg's film *The Eternal Daughter*, featuring Tilda Swinton, to a project about worms and regenerative farming and another looking at the history of Amsterdam's canal system. "Each project I undertake is singular," she says. "Design is everything. It has the ability to effect real change, even if that is simply asking questions of it. Thinking is always the precursor to positive action."



Above right: Chalabi's illustrations at the Cooper Hewitt Museum (2024)

Right: Chalabi's *100 New Yorkers* at NYC's Westfield World Trade Center (2020)

Mona Chalabi

Mona Chalabi is a writer and illustrator who uses data as the foundation for her work. She has been awarded a Pulitzer Prize, a fellowship at the British Science Association, a News & Documentary Emmy nomination and recognition from the Royal Statistical Society. Her data-informed visualisations and drawings have been exhibited at the Smithsonian Design Museum, the Tate, the Brooklyn Museum and the Design Museum and she has written for *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* among other publications.

She says the RDI recognition came as a welcome surprise following two years reporting and illustrating the Gaza genocide. "It means that the values I stand for are respected in my profession. It hasn't always felt that way. I am devastated and unbroken and endlessly grateful every time I remember how many other people I am standing with."

Chalabi's work addresses marginalisation and oppression, examining how "design, art and journalism can hold up the power structures that hurt people". She is currently finishing a five-year book project on class exploitation. "So much of my work is based in data that I hope an evidence-based approach might bring something valuable to the RSA community. But I'm open to other contributions that the community might deem valuable (just so long as I can keep on learning from other members, too)."

Photos: Ian Douglas Photography

Teucer Wilson

Teucer Wilson is one of the UK's leading letter cutters and stone carvers, specialising in memorial headstones, public art, sculptures and other projects using materials including limestone, sandstone, slate, wood, glass and metals. "I've always prioritised excellence above financial gain," he says, and he receives the RDI award as "a signal" of his work being recognised for its quality.

He cites as representative of his work a memorial sculpture in Highgate Cemetery for Sir Joseph Hotung, a prominent Anglo-Chinese philanthropist who donated ancient jade and porcelain to the British Museum: the creation of the sculpture required a diverse range of skills from client relationships to structural design, logistics, artistic design and bold sculpture balanced with typography.

"I work with different processes, from wielding a hammer and chisel like the Romans did, to power-tools and digital design. My perspective as an RDI will be that of a designer who works closely with clients, often on a very emotional level, and who makes things himself, albeit with assistants and apprentices. Attention to detail is something I am good at. I will offer the unique perspective of a sculptor often covered in dust."

Below bottom: Sir Joseph Hotung's memorial sculpture in Highgate, London

Below left: A hacha sculpture

Below right: A Welsh slate memorial inspired by William Morris's *The Strawberry Thief*

Scan the QR code to nominate a designer whose work deserves recognition for the 2026 awards. Have early-career designers in your life? Encourage them to apply for an RDI Session, where the next generation can learn directly from Royal Designers

In memoriam: RDIs we have lost in the past year

William Dudley RDI (1947–2025)
The British theatre designer was a winner of Olivier, BAFTA and Royal Television Society Awards. Bill designed more than 60 productions at the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, Royal Opera House and Glyndebourne, and on Broadway.

Knud Holscher Hon RDI (1930–2025)
One of Denmark's most respected and influential voices in architecture and design, Knud was known for his ability to combine aesthetics and functionality, creating design solutions that improve people's everyday lives.

Yrjö Kukkapuro Hon RDI (1933–2025)
The Finnish furniture designer had a career in design spanning more than 70 years. Almost every Finn has sat on a chair Yrjö designed, with collections at New York's Museum of Modern Art and London's Victoria and Albert Museum.

Sir David McMurtry RDI (1940–2024)
Former Deputy Chief Designer at Rolls-Royce and co-founder of engineering company Renishaw, he invented the 'touch trigger probe', which revolutionised the three-dimensional measurement of machined components.

Rosita Missoni Hon RDI (1931–2025)
The founder of Missoni Collections, Rosita was a trailblazer in the fashion world. Her extraordinary contributions to the fashion industry transformed Missoni from a small, family-run Italian business into one of the world's most iconic luxury brands.

Nicholas Wroe is a freelance writer and former assistant editor of *Guardian Review*.

Badging for change

Too many skills go unseen. A new RSA-backed blueprint shows how digital credentials can make invisible talents visible – and valuable

Words: Patrina Law

Think of everything you know how to do. Not just what's on your CV – the additional skills you've picked up running a community campaign, mentoring a colleague, or responding to a work crisis. Now ask yourself: who can see them?

For most people, the answer is no one. Britain has a skills recognition problem. We're a country where young people with real-world abilities can't prove them, a care worker's expertise in conflict resolution goes unnoticed, and volunteers' capabilities can remain invisible to recruiters.

Digital badges offer a solution. These shareable visual credentials acknowledge and showcase learning, ranging from short courses and work experience to personal development. Since 2012, hundreds of millions have been issued globally, appearing on online CVs, email signatures and professional profiles. And now, after 18 months of investigation, the Digital Badging Commission (DBC) has published a blueprint for how Britain can finally make its hidden skills visible.

On 13 October, we launched our final report to a packed Great Room at RSA House, with hundreds more joining online. The questions came thick and fast from Fellows, employers, educators and policy colleagues – a clear sign of growing appetite for a simpler, trusted way to recognise skills.

The work of the commission is the product of a partnership between the RSA and the Ufi VocTech Trust, and it builds on the RSA's Cities of Learning programme. Speaking at the launch of the report were: Chair of Skills England Phil Smith, DBC co-chairs Professor Sir Chris Husbands and Rebecca Garrod-Waters, Careers and Technical Education Partnership Director at Bradford Council Alexandra Willans, and myself.

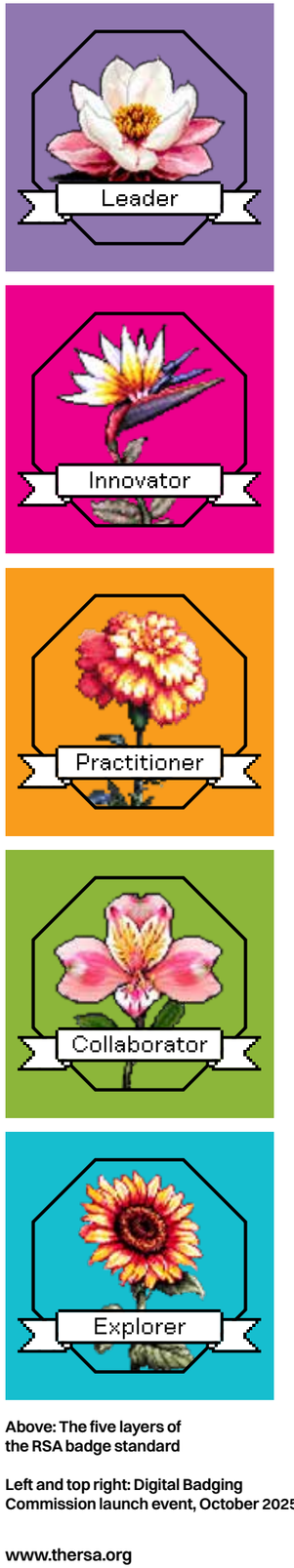
Together we set out to examine a simple problem with wide consequences: why, in a country rich in talent, do so many people still struggle to show what they can do?

Photos: Andre Pattenden

Practical blueprint for change

The commission's answer is both practical and achievable: build a coherent, UK-wide digital badging infrastructure that makes people's capabilities visible, portable and valuable across education and work. Our recommendations rest on three mutually reinforcing building blocks:

- **Integrate digital badges into post-16 education and training.** Badges should sit alongside qualifications in further education and higher education, and in government-sponsored skills programmes, making transferable skills visible to learners and employers alike.



Images: Digital badging flowers generated by Wardour using Midjourney

Above: The five layers of the RSA badge standard

Left and top right: Digital Badging Commission launch event, October 2025

- **Create a national digital skills wallet, using open standards.** A citizen-held portable digital wallet – or interoperable skills wallets – will allow people to store and share all forms of digital credentials and qualifications across their lifetime and across platforms. This would expand on the upcoming Education Record that all 16-year-olds will receive from 2026 capturing their GCSE results in a simple app.
- **Establish a national registry of quality assurance for digital badges and credentials.** This is about trust and comparability: clear frameworks and transparent guidance, so employers, providers and individuals can rely on what a digital credential means.

Taken together, these steps move us from pilots and islands of innovation to a usable, nation-scale system. The economic case is strong too, with the commission outlining that such a system could reduce duplicated training across sectors, lower recruitment costs through faster hiring and improve workforce retention through better-recognised upskilling.

The commission looked at how the world uses digital badges – finding standout cases in Australia, Central Europe and the Americas. Some countries run national, joined-up platforms; others let colleges, cities and employers lead. The big idea across all is simple: make real skills visible, not just exam results.

Why it matters

For the commission, this is not only an efficiency story – it is an inclusion story.

For learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), who are too often ill-served by rigid formal assessments, recognising skills builds confidence and rightfully highlights capabilities. Digital badges and credentials can carry evidence that reflect an individual's strengths in communication, teamwork, self-management or problem-solving – skills employers say they need but frequently struggle to verify. The exemplar badge templates produced earlier this year by the commission included SEND provision for precisely this reason.

"For the commission, this is not only an efficiency story - it is an inclusion story"

For employers though, how do we ensure badges are not 'just another layer' of an already dizzying array of UK qualifications? It's a fair challenge. Our answer is that the infrastructure is being designed with employers' needs front and centre, as evidenced in the UK Cities of Learning programme, which develops local employer coalitions linking what people can do to real jobs nearby. Bradford's experience shows how a city can convene hundreds of schools, colleges, employers and community organisations to create visible pathways into work.

What happens next

Two imperatives follow. First, co-design with those who will use the system: employers, providers and learners – including SEND learners and their families. Second, deliver through partnership: with the employers, charities and providers using them, and our partnership with the Ufi VocTech Trust convening, testing and learning in public.

The RSA and Ufi will now focus on the what's next, publishing lessons as we go. In the end, the test is simple: does a young person, a returner, or a mid-career worker find it easier to show what they can do? Does an employer find it easier to recognise and reward that? If the answer is 'yes' then digital badges and credentials will have done what they promised: making invisible skills visible, for those that need to show them most. ■

Patrina Law is the RSA's Lifelong Learning Lead.

Scan the QR code to access the Digital Badging Commission's final report. Fellows can also join the conversation on Circle, or email digitalbadging@rsa.org.uk

Jostedalsbreen National Park, Norway

The journey

1. Kinshasa, DRC ..... 9–11 April 2025
2. Lagos, Nigeria ..... 18–20 April 2025
3. Dakar, Senegal ..... 25–27 April 2025
4. Marrakesh, Morocco ..... 2–5 May 2025
5. Casablanca, Morocco ..... 9–10 May 2025
6. Rabat and Salé, Morocco ..... 11 May 2025
7. San Fernando, Cádiz, Spain ..... 1 June 2025
8. Madrid, Spain ..... 6–9 June 2025
9. Marseille and Arles, France ..... 13–15 June 2025
10. Venice, Italy ..... 17 June 2025
11. Paris, France ..... 20–22 June 2025
12. London, UK ..... 27–29 June 2025
13. Greater Manchester, UK ..... 3–5 July 2025
14. Jostedalsbreen National Park, Norway ..... 14 July 2025
15. Aarhus, Denmark ..... 18–19 July 2025
16. Copenhagen, Denmark ..... 19–20 July 2025
17. Stockholm, Sweden ..... 24–26 July 2025
18. Trondheim, Norway ..... 28–30 July 2025
19. Nordkapp, Norway ..... 1 August 2025

HERD INSTINCT

In 2025, the life-size puppets of art project *THE HERDS* traversed the globe, revealing the fragility of our world – and the urgent need for actions to preserve it

Words: Amir Nizar Zuabi

Photos: Vegard Aasen

I have just watched the sun set – and then reappear in the same spot 10 minutes later. I am lying on the ground, exhausted, nine metres from a cliff edge at the end of Europe: Nordkapp, to be exact. I am staring out at the North Sea, which stretches endlessly out into the distance; the next mass of land is the North Pole.

The light is strange – almost oily – as night and day blend into each other seamlessly.

Dusk to dawn

We drove non-stop for 29 hours straight to get here. Muaz Aljubeh, our Head of Production, is sleeping in the back of the truck between the boxes. Boxes full of our puppets – kudus, giraffes, lions, zebras and an elephant.

I am also trying very hard to sleep, but am too exhausted – and too happy, because we have finally arrived at the end of our four-month voyage. So I wander out and find a fold in the ground to shield me from the dawn-dusk wind. And that's where I see the most incredible sun playing hide-and-seek with itself.

I have 30 minutes to sleep before we need to start filming the final moments of ▶

Lagos, Nigeria

“Magnificent creatures, alarmed, frightened, powerful, running. Leaving us. Running away from us. Giving us a moment to grieve and a moment to fall in love again with nature...”

the project that has consumed the last two years of my life: *THE HERDS*. How lucky am I to be here to see this natural beauty, I think. To know that this project meant so much to so many people. How lucky am I.

I finally fall asleep, and the next thing I hear is Sarah Loader, our Executive Producer, calling my name. It’s time to start. As I jump to my feet, I see a group of similarly sleep-deprived people walking a herd of life-size puppet animals towards the edge of the cliff.

Photos: Kashope Faje, Oussama Oulhiq

Marrakesh, Morocco

Dakar, Senegal

San Fernando, Cadíz, Spain

Photos: Jean-Baptise Joire, Ayuntamiento de San Fernando

Origin of species

It’s so surreal – but then, so is this entire project.

THE HERDS is a public art project that travelled 20,000km to tell the story of the climate crisis through emotions. I was fed up with the science behind the climate debate – too many words explaining what we all know: we are ruining this earth with our greed. I wanted to create a project that talks to the heart, not the head.

The idea was simple: the animals feel that something is inherently wrong and start running. As they run, they crash into us, into what we think is safe, into what we think is human. In this unlikely encounter we will learn something profound about ourselves.

Magnificent creatures, alarmed, frightened, powerful, running. Leaving us. Running away from us. Giving us a moment to grieve and a moment to fall in love again with nature, with the other creatures we share this planet with, and even maybe with ourselves.

The team consisted of South African Ukwanda Puppets and Design Collective and our British production team – led by myself, a Palestinian. We set out to create a theatre production on an epic scale, one that would see a herd of puppet animals travel across 20,000km through 11 countries, all the way from central Africa to the Arctic Circle.

Working for months to understand the logistics of whether an artwork of this scale was at all possible, we were told time after time that it was not; that it was too complicated logistically and would require hundreds of people to successfully complete each event. That staging an event such as this in even one city is hard enough, but that doing it across so many countries in one go was madness.

But we ignored ‘impossible’ time after time until it became possible, or at least until we had no other choice but to do it. ▶

Matadero, Madrid, Spain

London, UK

Stockholm, Sweden

“I think that perhaps now we have entered the time of grieving, the time of acknowledgement. We need to change and with change (always) comes the death of the familiar”

To learn more about the voyage of *THE HERDS*, scan the QR code

Scan the QR code to view the *RSA Journal Presents* series, featuring *THE HERDS*

And so, in early April 2025, I find myself in a rehearsal room in Kinshasa surrounded by a group of talented young Congolese performers. It’s been raining heavily all night, and the city is flooded, but slowly the students start arriving to the rehearsal room. Their clothes are wet almost to chest height. They swam through the flooded areas to be here.

“It’s getting worse every year,” one says. “The rain. It is getting worse.” Climate change is not theoretical here. Not for them. It’s real, it’s happening, it’s an urban river they swim through to participate in an art project about what is happening to our planet.

On Day One we talk about rhythms, breath and how to hold a puppet properly. By the end of the day the performers are beginning to understand how to move the life-size puppets of African animals, and we are watching zebras trying to make their first hesitant steps.

Two years of theory suddenly becomes real in the breath of a gorilla. In the joy it brings to everyone in the room.

Photos: Lukasz Michalak, Jaber Ahmed, Leonard Stenberg

Seeds of change

Two days later, we are walking beside the Congo River with our majestic herd of animals. Our journey starts here, with this mighty river that has seen everything snaking alongside us.

For four months straight we travel, presenting 56 public events in 11 countries. We create huge outdoor performances everywhere we go, and the animals receive a powerful response, drawing thousands of people to the streets. We perform on the sand-swept streets of Dakar, in the bustling markets in Lagos, in the winding streets in Marrakesh, in the centre of Madrid, in the suburbs of Paris, on mountain-tops in Norway.

As we go, we teach puppetry to local participants, training more than 1,000 people who then help us bring the encounters with the animals to life. In each city we work with local artists to help us tell the story: choreographers, theatre makers and musicians.

We traverse different environments, each with different cultures and different challenges, but one refrain we hear as we travel the globe is how fragile things feel. Ecosystems collapsing, human and non-human habitats becoming more agitated, more vulnerable. Four months after we set off from a flooded Congo, ▶

Nordkapp, Norway

we perform in blistering Norway – where reindeer are running into shopping centres to escape the extreme heat.

Into the wild

I was tasked with leading this project to change the narrative but, as I take one last rest on the ground near the edge of the world, I think that perhaps now we have entered the time of grieving, the time of acknowledgement. We need to change and with change (always) comes the death of the familiar.

But I also feel optimistic, because I have met thousands of people who are willing to work together to achieve something that seems impossible. Something non-rational, something like an act of love, something like taking a herd of puppet animals across two continents and all the way to edge of the unknown. ■

Amir Nizar Zuabi is an award-winning playwright and director. Currently Artistic Director of *THE HERD*S and The Walk Productions, he was the founding Artistic Director of ShiberHur Theater Company in Palestine and an Associate Director of the Young Vic Theatre.

Provoking change

Founded in 2019, The Walk Productions creates large-scale participatory public art that brings people together to celebrate, challenge assumptions, rethink narratives and, ultimately, provoke change. It is led by Producers David Lan and Tracey Seaward, Artistic Director Amir Nizar Zuabi and Executive Producer Sarah Loader.

The company's first creation was *THE WALK*: The Journey of Little Amal, a 12-foot-high puppet of a Syrian refugee child who travelled the globe and became a symbol of human rights (especially those of refugees) in the process.

The puppets for *THE HERDS* are designed by Ukwanda Puppets and Designs Art Collective (Luyanda Nogodlwana, Siphokazi Mpofu, Sipho Ngxola), Craig Leo, Simon Dunckley, Hansie Visagie Tundra Dunckley and Kim Bednall. The puppets were made from upscaled and recyclable materials – primarily cardboard and plywood – with a focus on bio-degradable and organic materials.

Both *THE WALK* and *THE HERDS* are award-winning projects that have been experienced by more than 2 million people to date, across 26 countries and five continents.

Photos: Vegard Aasen, Ant Strack

Sweeping change

How the Society's competition to create a mechanical chimney cleaner produced a crucial weapon in the fight to outlaw the use of child chimney sweeps across the rooftops of Britain

In 1796, the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce offered a prize for the invention of a mechanical chimney cleaner. The goal was to help abolish one of the great embarrassments of the early 19th century: the employment of children as young as four to climb inside chimneys to clean them. These children were sometimes abducted by master chimney sweeps, and frequently perished in horrific accidents or of soot-induced cancers. The idea was that a technological replacement could help make the case for abolition.

Smart engineering

Although the Society played a significant supporting role by offering the prize, the overarching campaign to liberate the child sweeps was orchestrated by the snappily titled *Society for Superseding the Necessity of Climbing Boys, by Encouraging a New Method of Sweeping Chimnies, and for Improving the Condition of Children and Others Employed by Chimney Sweepers*. One of its leaders was Society of Arts member William Wilberforce (famous for his zeal in helping to abolish the slave trade only a few years later).

In 1805, the Society's prize was won by George Smart, a timber merchant and engineer. His 'scandiscope' could be operated from the fireplace, and was cheap and effective on all but the bendiest of flues. The brushes, if wetted, could also be used to put out fires in the flue – a task that would otherwise fall to the climbing boy.

But opposition from the master chimney sweeps meant that even a reliable tool was not enough to free the climbing boys from their labours.

At first, the campaign tried to get the industry on side, offering prizes for the number of flues swept using the scandiscope, subsidising their purchase of the machines, and advertising the reliable master sweeps who used them. But some master sweeps took advantage of this generosity, purposefully misusing the scandiscopes in an effort to turn customers against them.

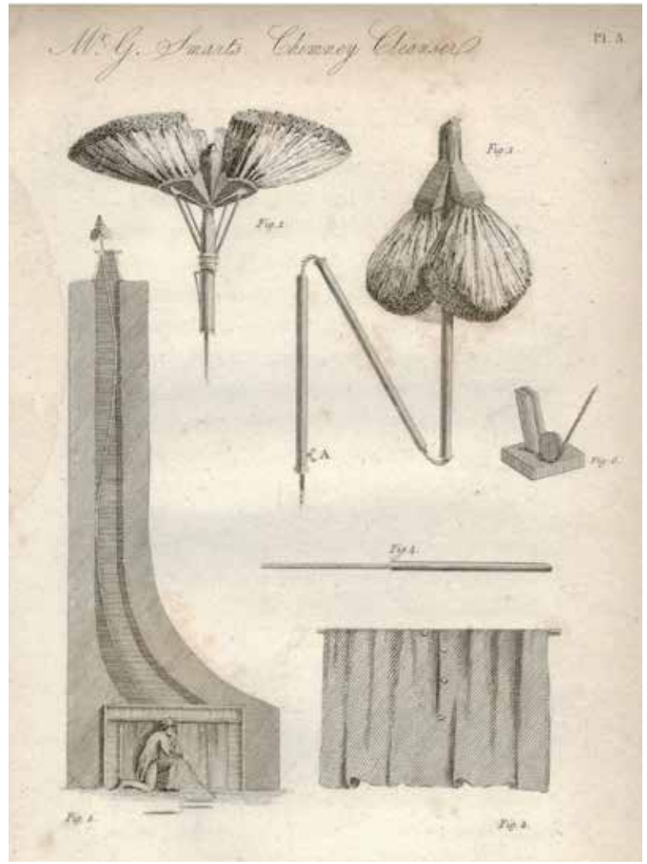


Photo: RSArchive

Scan the QR code to read more about George Smart's revolutionary invention

The road to liberation

Progress was slow, but the campaign eventually met with some success. The machines were gradually brought into use in London, as well as further afield. Crucially, the invention of the scandiscope created an alternative, which in turn paved the way for laws banning the use of climbing boys. By 1834, Parliament had banned boys under the age of 14 from working as chimney sweeps, and the ban was raised to the age of 21 in 1840.

The poor climbing boys would continue to haunt the flues and rooftops of Britain for a while longer yet – it wasn't until 1875 that Parliament passed a law that had sufficient teeth for enforcement.

Anton Howes is the RSA's Historian in Residence.

We would like to thank our corporate and strategic partners for their support across the RSA's work

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Fellowship

COMMUNITY

RSA CEO pledges 'Fellowship First' strategy

The RSA's new chief executive has committed to developing a strategy for the organisation that prioritises Fellows, improves communications, hosts 'unmissable' events and launches programmes that 'put the arts back into the heart of our work'.

Speaking at the RSA's Annual General Meeting on 15 October, David Joseph said that he had spent the summer meeting Fellows, attending RSA events and consulting with Fellowship Council members and network leads. He has also spoken with every member of RSA staff since becoming CEO on 15 September.

His conclusion from these discussions? "Everything we do will be Fellowship First. That's not a slogan, but a genuine commitment," he told Fellows in the Great Room at RSA House and watching online.

"We're putting the spotlight back on you. Fellows' stories, Fellows' projects and Fellows' ideas. Not just to celebrate them – though we will – but to inspire others. Because the most valuable thing about this community isn't what happens in this building – it's what you are doing out there in the world."

Joseph stressed that real change happens through collaboration, something that he has seen personally as chair of the Grenfell Foundation and in championing neurodiversity in the creative industries.

"We're going to communicate better: opening up our thinking, sharing the best of what is happening across the Fellowship network. Our programmes will spark curiosity and bring the arts back into the heart of our work."

RSA events and debates will become "unmissable again", he said. Circle will make connection and collaboration easier. RSA House will continue its transformation into a stronger cultural, intellectual, professional and social hub.

"But – and this matters – we're not forgetting those of you outside London. We'll come to you across the UK and internationally, building a truly global organisation."

Earlier at the AGM, RSA Chair of Trustees Sir Loyd Grossman stressed how closely he has been working with the new CEO. "David and I are determined to bring more clarity, more focus, more energy, more enthusiasm and more inclusiveness to this organisation. We feel that we are at a critical phase when the RSA has never been more needed."

Grossman also thanked Charlotte Oades, who is stepping down as Deputy Chair of the Trustee Board after serving two full terms. She will be succeeded by Eva Pascoe, who becomes Vice Chair.

Other appointments and reappointments confirmed at the AGM include: Michael Davis and Dame Alison Carnwath appointed as trustees; Dinah Casson RDI confirmed as a co-opted trustee; and David D'Souza, Sandra Boss and Hosein Khajeh-Hosseiny reappointed as trustees. ■

Details of the new Fellowship Council can be found on page 48.

APPOINTMENTS

A new Fellowship Council begins

After a competitive selection process this summer, the RSA's new Fellowship Council was officially appointed at October's AGM – and they are ready to drive change across the UK and beyond.

Up to 25 councillors – two from each area, plus three programmatic councillors – serve three-year terms (renewable once). Their role is to spark, support and lead Fellowship activities that align with RSA programmes, and to respond to local Fellows' needs and interests. Working alongside community managers and volunteer community leaders, they plan projects that create real social impact.

The Council also acts as a vital bridge, channelling Fellows' voices to RSA staff and back again.

From next year the Fellowship Council will move to a system of electing annually in thirds, so as to improve continuity and resilience between councils.

Luke Dorian and Sheridan Chilvers

Julie Samuels and Luke Dorian

RSA Fellowship Council*

Area	Name
Americas	**Maria Santiago** and Zoe Camper
Asia and Oceania	Yan Li and Andy Hsu
Central	**Julie Samuels** and Sheridan Chilvers
Europe and Africa	**Vanessa Barros** and Francesco Carignani
Ireland	Dan Khan
London	**Eva Pascoe** and Stephen Oram
Scotland and English Borders	**Ann Packard and Eric Carlin**
South East	**Ann Longley** and Elizabeth Donnelly
South West	Helen Gormley and **Robin Tatum**
Wales	Alan Mumby
North	Alan Raw
Programmes	Kim Judge, Georgina Wells and **Lira Luis**

Second term councillors in **bold*

Scan the QR code to learn more about the Fellowship Council

CENTRAL REGION: FRESH ENERGY MEETS EXPERIENCE

The Central region exemplifies what's possible when continuity meets innovation. **Julie Samuels** returns for her second term, bringing her background in academic research, community development and cross-sector partnerships. Joining her is first-timer **Sheridan Chilvers,** whose expertise in social enterprise and grassroots organising adds new momentum. Both were already active within the RSA before their election.

Sheridan has been a fixture at Nottingham's Hub Pub Club meetups, championed the Inclusive Growth Commission work with the East Midlands Combined County Authority and connected the RSA with emerging social enterprise networks.

Julie has built the Lincolnshire Fellowship network from the ground up and secured RSA involvement in the Lincolnshire Great Exhibition, showcasing our role as chief instigators of the original 1851 Great Exhibition. This created Fellowship recruitment and partnership opportunities.

Together with Fellowship Engagement Manager Luke Dorian, they are developing an ambitious programme to strengthen networks and create meaningful opportunities for Fellows to drive projects for social good across the West and East Midlands. ■

Councillor positions in Ireland, Wales and the North are still open. Interested? Contact David.Jones@rsa.org.uk

David Jones is RSA Head of Fellowship Engagement, and Luke Dorian is RSA Fellowship Engagement manager (Central).

FELLOWSHIP CONNECT

Explore opportunities to connect online:

@thersaorg
@theRSAorg
@thersaorg

Fellows' LinkedIn group *linkedin.com groups/3391*

Email the Fellowship Services team at fellowship@rsa.org.uk or call +44 (0)207 451 6939

CIRCLE OF FELLOWSHIP

Join Circle today and get your conversation started:
To activate your Circle account, log in through My RSA via the RSA website. Your global community awaits.

To get started, scan the QR code or visit *thersa.org/fellowship/community-platform*

FREE CO-WORKING SPACES AVAILABLE

There are co-working locations available across the UK where non-London-based Fellows can work for free – and we regularly add new venues.

For the latest information, please scan the QR code

ANGUS MILLAR LECTURE

"Connection lifts us higher": Jo Salter delivers inspirational lecture

This year's Angus Millar Lecture was given by Jo Salter, the first female fighter jet pilot in the Royal Air Force, in the presence of Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal and RSA Chair Sir Loyd Grossman.

In an inspirational and witty speech at the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh on 22 October, Salter discussed the power of connection. Salter attended a comprehensive school in Croydon, with dreams of becoming a hairdresser, joined the RAF aged 18, and ultimately became a flight lieutenant. She almost got blown up, endured an SAS-style interrogation – and hosted Tom Cruise.

The power of connection – to ourselves, to each other and to our purpose – was crucial, she said. It makes us steadier, braver and kinder.

"In this fragmented, fast-paced world that we're living in, we need to be connected to each other, because it lifts us higher.

"It's how together we build something which is better than where we are today. That is what connectedness and connection is going to bring, and what we must focus on – every single one of us."

After leaving the RAF, Salter has held a variety of leadership roles, including Director of Global Transformative Leadership and Global Advisory Lead for GenAI at PwC.

The Angus Millar Lecture has been held annually in Scotland since 1999. Many notable figures have been involved over the years, including Andrew O'Hagan, Lord Bilimoria, Lord Skidelsky, Professor Joseph Stiglitz and Professor Sarah-Jayne Blakemore.

We want to give our thanks to the Millar family for funding the event through the legacy of Angus Millar FRSA. ■

Amy McPherson is RSA Fellowship Engagement Manager for Scotland and the English Borders.

Watch the lecture on YouTube

RSA NORTH

Northern heights: making the most of monthly meetups

In the past few months, RSA North has started regular meetings to bring together the women and men of the Northern Fellowship with the ideals of the RSA. At these monthly meetings – in Hull, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield and York – Fellows have given generously of their experience and expertise to co-create the future of the RSA in their communities.

In Liverpool, Ian Kendrick's thinking on emergence theory combined with Alistair Rutherford's desire for the RSA to bring together a variety of local organisations. In Leeds, Stuart Morris highlighted the value of intelligent and unexpected conversations at meetings, while Olivia Stross focused on the need for the RSA to generate plans to improve communities and then follow through with them.

At the York meeting, Thomas Mason developed a pathway to link the RSA community with local universities to better engage young people. Charlotte Davies made sure that the focus expanded beyond the University of York.

These are just tastes of the conversations that took place, but they illustrate the possibilities that emerge when Fellows come together. That's why all our Activity Hubs run monthly informal meetups.

By running these events, we build the RSA's capacity for great conversation and significant social impact in our hub cities. So if you haven't been to a Fellowship event in a while, or ever before, take a look at the RSA website and consider coming along to the next meetup in your area. ■

Jason Charewicz is Fellowship Engagement Manager for the North, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Photo: Tony Marsh

RSA JAPAN

Building harmony in a fractured world: reflections from Japan

October marked a special moment for the RSA in Japan – a week of connection, collaboration and creativity that showcased the very best of what our Fellowship can do.

It began on 1 October in Tokyo, where Fellows gathered to explore a potential new venue space over dinner and conversation. Two days later, we co-hosted an event with the University of Birmingham and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy on regional growth for Japan's cities and prefectures.

Leaders from government, academia and civil society joined to explore how governance and funding can enable vibrant regional development – an exchange that bridged ideas between the UK and Japan.

From 3 to 5 October, the RSA Pavilion in Osaka brought that same spirit to life through talks, dance and music performances, and workshops exploring how can we live more harmoniously in a fractured world.

More than 80 people joined across three days, diving deeply into creative and thoughtful discussions. On Saturday evening, Fellows and guests shared food prepared by Osugi-san (The Doghouse Inn) – complete with art-inspired cocktails – capturing the warmth and connection that defined the event.

None of this would have been possible without Tania Coke FRSA and the team at Flying Carpet Factory, whose dedication turned vision into reality.

The week concluded at the World Expo, where the RSA facilitated the final talk of our series at the UK Pavilion on the Future of the SDGs – a fitting close to a week that reminded us that progress happens when we bridge worlds, listen deeply and act together. ■

Jess Robson is RSA Global Community Manager.

AWARDS

A record-breaking year for the *Journal*

***RSA Journal* and its publishing partner, Wardour, have won three more awards at two prestigious ceremonies, bringing the *Journal*'s awards' tally this year to 14.**

In October, the *Journal* won Silver at the 2025 Digital Impact Awards for best use of digital by a charity, NGO or not-for-profit. This followed double Silver success at the 2025 Summit Creative Awards in the social media campaign category and in the public awareness and advocacy (non-profit and charity communications) category.

This latest success comes on top of 11 award wins for the *Journal* earlier this year (four at the Astrid Awards in April, six at the Corporate Content Awards in June and one at the Internal Communications and Engagement Awards in June).

The *Journal* has also been shortlisted in the membership publication of the year category at the Professional Publishers Association Independent Publishers Awards 2025. Winners were due to be announced as this issue of the *Journal* went to press. ■

NEWS

RSA Oceania update

In September 2025 the RSA and RSA Oceania concluded their affiliate agreement. Stakeholder and partnership work will continue across the region, with ongoing support for our engaged community of Fellows in Oceania.

We are deeply grateful for the commitment and hard work of the Oceania Board over many years, and we look forward to strengthening ties across Australasia, Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia, and to continuing to grow our Fellowship through collaboration and collective action. ■

For further information, contact Jess Robson, Global Community Manager at jessica.robson@rsa.org.uk

Photos: Shiro Honda, Daniel Jackont courtesy of MAMA

ART

Florence Reekie at RSA House

Figurative oil painter Florence Reekie will be showcasing her new show, *The Pleasure of your Company*, in RSA House's Queen Elizabeth II Room from December 2025 to February 2026.

Reekie created these works influenced by the RSA's history and architecture, and drawing inspiration from Antonio Zucchi's *Pan Celebrating the Feast of Bacchus*, an ornate ceiling piece that can currently be found in the Prince Philip Room at the House.

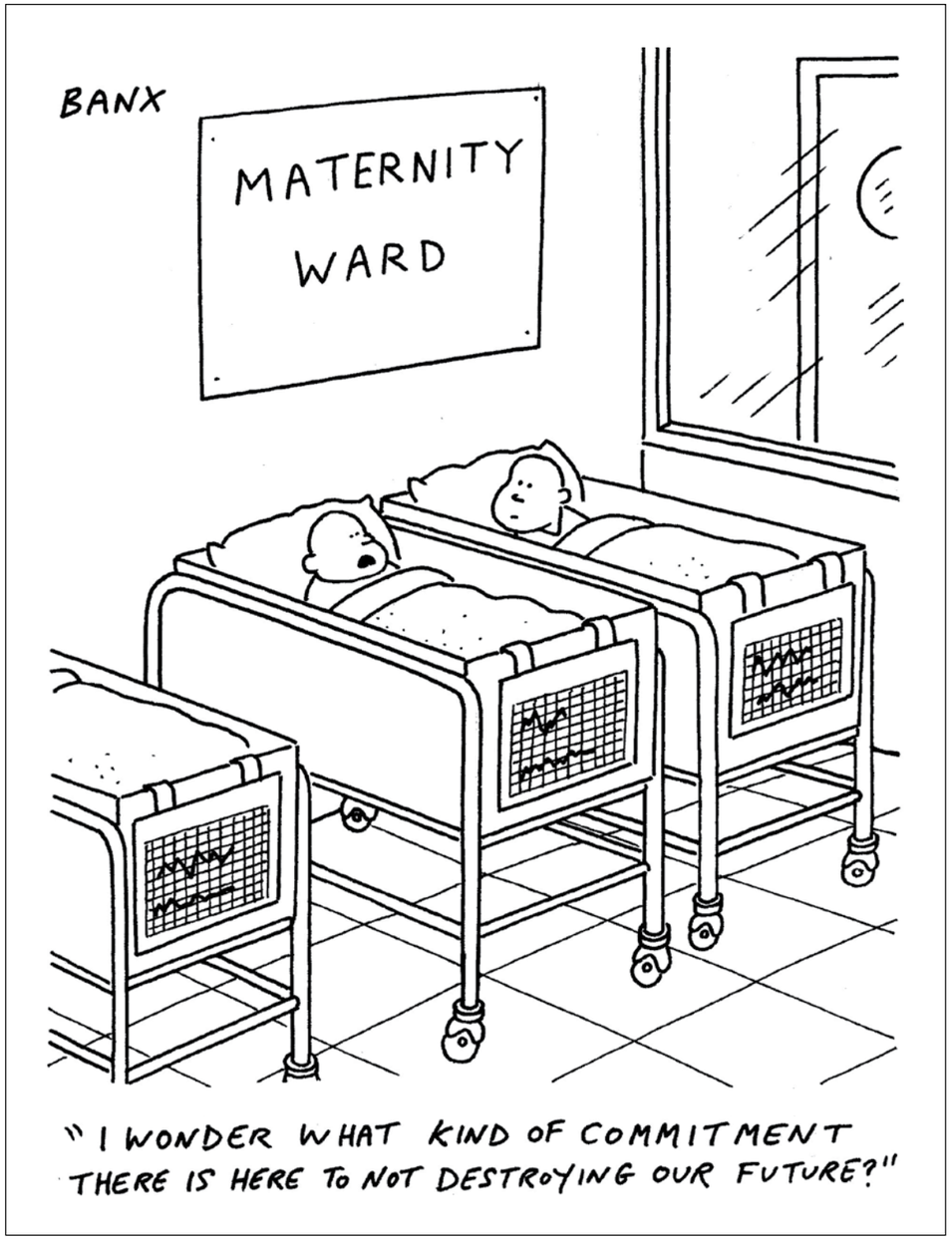
Reekie places fabric at the centre of her works, skilfully painting silk, suede and velvet on used materials – here, on re-purposed curtains. She uses fabric as a narrative tool to explore tensions around consumerism and sustainability in an increasingly moralistic culture.

Reekie also plays with the idea of 'Vanitas', a Dutch-style genre of memento mori ('remember you will die'). She reminds us of the inevitable path of desire and excess with her beautiful depiction of figures in luxurious clothing dancing amid the discarded napkins of a bacchanalian feast. This unwinding afterparty invites onlookers to carefully consider what matters most in the face of decadence.

The exhibition will be open to the public depending on room availability. Please email laure.barthelemy@rsa.org.uk to book a visit. ■

Laure Barthelemy is RSA House Curation Officer.

Commit



Artwork by Banx for the RSA. Jeremy Banx is an award-winning cartoonist, writer and film-maker, whose content appears daily in the *Financial Times*. His gags have also been featured in *Private Eye*, the *New Statesman*, *Punch* and the *Daily Express*.

WELCOME TO
MUSE AT RSA HOUSE

Just ring the doorbell for entry…

Tucked inside the historic home of the RSA, Muse is a cocktail bar where craft meets purpose. From regenerative British spirits to foraged ingredients and low-intervention wines, every drink and small plate tells a story of sustainability and traceability.

Whether you're a Fellow or simply a fan of excellent cocktails, join us for a drink that doesn't just taste good.

18 Adam Street, WC2N 6EZ | Monday to Friday | 4PM-11PM
Walk-ins welcome. Reservations recommended.

FIND OUT MORE

020 7451 6855 | RESERVATIONS@RSA.ORG.UK
THERSA.ORG/ABOUT/MUSE-AT-RSA-HOUSE | @MUSE_RSAHOUSE
CHARING CROSS AND EMBANKMENT

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