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What is it that makes us human?

Exploring our future creativity and identities

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In Futurescoping

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Ghislaine Boddington

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Following on from this year's festival, FutureFest curator Ghislaine Boddington explores some of the key takeaways, and asks: what is it that truly makes us human?

Here we are, in mid 2018, in globally fluid times where we all are required to deal with changes, nearly daily, in our work and home lives. This is not an easy

to shifting political scenarios, rapid technological advances and the corollary societal complexities, demand us to be open to change, and to engage and learn in the 'now.'

One of the most exciting and yet also the most challenging debates of our times, and one that was scrutinised thoroughly in many of the debates, experiences, talks and presentations at FutureFest 2018, is that of the integration of automata, machine learning and AI into our daily existences.

For several years now media articles detailing the rapid advances of these technologies of today have featured striking headline warnings of 'robots taking over our jobs'. Additionally, pressures from within our workplaces to 'up-skill' in readiness for these new technologies causes stress and anxiety over job security.

Yet shifts towards automata and AI are also heralded as complementary and supportive for humankind, solving the issues of monotonous, repetitive jobs and eliminating dangerous workplace scenarios

Certain occupations, for example those involving production lines and public facing services, have been automated for years. Our ATMs deal with most of our banking needs, the internet enables self-activated access to mass communication methods, our mobile phones function as our guides, info stations and memory banks. Yet today we face many questions regarding other occupations that are facing potential extinction due to technological

accountants to scan all contracts and prepare the end of year audits - could this mean we see the transference of many more skills to robotic workers? Questions around adapting to these impacts were explored by many of the speakers and the audience at this year's FutureFest.

Yet what of creativity? Journeying through our bodies into our minds and delving into our consciousness, we redefined human creativity and identity at this year's festival, re-examining what our inherent understanding of human creativity is.

Individually and together we actively and extensively express ourselves and our creativity using art and design, music and literature, dance and drama, and with many other forms, including cooking, gardening, photography and video and other daily outputs often distributed nowadays to online platforms. We output our imaginations, thoughts and visions to others, share our feelings, express our concerns and innovate original concepts. Most importantly we define our own identities and the identity of others through our creative outputs and intakes.

This creative spirit, pretty much universally acknowledged today as intrinsic to every human (if enabled to emerge), is often put forward, rightly or wrongly, as that which determines the distinctiveness between humans and other living creatures - it is still viewed as 'unique' to human and a special part of our 'being' in this world. It is linked to our consciousness, our selfhood, our agency, our collective intent - it is how our inspiration emerges into our world.

Many reports in these last years have therefore concluded that creativity is, and always will be, well beyond the possibilities of future artificial intelligence scenarios. The main debate at present is that those of us with creativity in our work are somehow 'protected' by the nature of our skills. Yet is this true? Should we also prepare for the automation of creativity? How will advanced machine

technologies we make will surely be creative too.

At FutureFest this year Nesta and the curatorial team bought together an inspiring set of experts from diverse backgrounds, many approaching these humanist issues from differing angles and specialisations. Through debates, presentations and experiences we set out to explore how we can begin to grapple with what these changes could mean to our identities, our bodies and our creative outputs.

This selection of inputs outlined below are from those speakers already deeply involved in human creativity, our bodies and the evolutions of these through technological and algorithmic integrations. They helped us understand the issues and potentials for the future of our own creative talents.

On Friday the hip-hop artist and writer Akala opened the event with his own visions on race and youth engagement, questioning the real strength of our collective affinities in Is Britain having an identity crisis?.

Akala revisited and updated the imperative debate on 'otherness' - can we reduce our judgemental behaviours by remembering we are all somebodies 'other'?

Akala on Britain's identity crisis

In the Debate space, Just the job brought together professionals working on the future world of work, exploring new vocational callings in a digitalised world. Should we be focusing onwards on only teaching skills and talents that are beyond machine learning?

This could free up space for the enhancement of the unique creativity and imagination of human beings. Exploring visions for younger generations Professor Noel Sharkey, expert on robotics and AI, started his input with the phrase "Don't Panic!" and Anne-Marie Imafidon from the Stemettes pointed out that we need to make sure the people who create algorithms are as diverse as the people who will use them.

Jude Kelly (Women of the World) and Russ Shaw (Tech London Advocates) also discussed Occupational futures, exploring global mobility and the power of networking in terms of future employment and careers. They emphasised the need to take care to up skill those important people working in the caring

Experts gathered later that day to debate the convergence of Machines that care for us, focusing deeper on our health and wellbeing in relationship to social robotics, therapeutic VR experiences, implants and online personalised GPs. Longevity, loneliness, mental health, rehabilitation, women's health and autism were all discussed. Technological integration into our health systems was acknowledge to have big advantages, yet it should be woven in as complimentary, as additional support to work alongside our human professional carers. The agreement amongst all the speakers was that a machine will never be a substitute for human touch and intimacy, and that we have a responsibility to safeguard venerable people when they are using new immersive technologies such as VR. This links to a session reviewing the recent Nesta report Dr Robot.

Near the end of the day Prof. Noel Sharkey examined the biases that endanger us as big data and algorithms create decisions for all types of human needs, increasingly impacting on our lives. And yet the data is taken from sources that are biased at their core, inherently sexist and racist. He explored how these core aspects of our identity are being attacked as "neither an optimist or a pessimist but as a scientist in the middle", yet his multiple examples shared clear evidence of the growth of algorithmic injustice across many sectors.

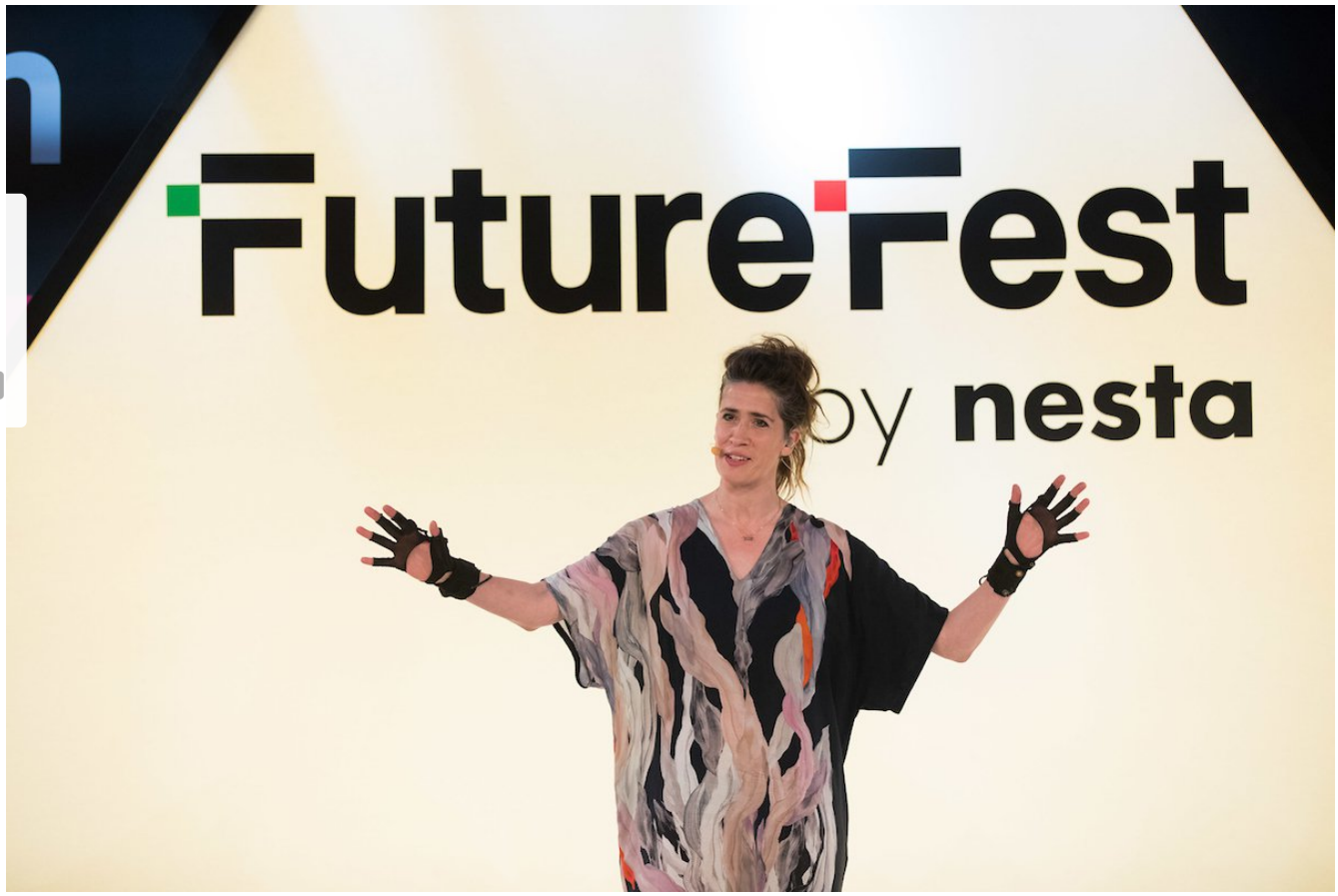
Saturday brought us several key players in the debate. Pioneer artist-scientist Rebecca Allen shared her long-term work on the human body, behaviour and the nature of artificial life in her talk The tangle of mind and matter. What is the future of 'the self', what is consciousness, what exactly is our physical reality? These questions merged into many of the debates across the day.

Douglas Rushkoff expanded on the anti-humanist agenda he sees embedded in our technology, our markets, and our major cultural institutions as he expressed his concerns that "digital technology has moved from being a connector of

as the individual players we have been led to imagine ourselves to be, but as the team we actually are: Team Human.

New generation artist/technologist Kyle McDonald looked at what he calls 'Weird intelligence' and helped us to reimagine the interaction between humans and machines. With the advancement of AI, can/will these technologies take over from human creators and be creative in their own right? Kyle outlined the engagement of us humans in exciting creative collaborations and conversations with machine learning. Aral Balkan added in his important thoughts on cyborg rights with warnings about the trade off between privacy and public security being a false dichotomy.

The Virtual physical immersion debate delved further into the future and explored the expanding holistic interactions between our physical and data bodies, following on from Imogen Heap's wonderful Mi.Mu musical gesture gloves demonstration on Envision stage.

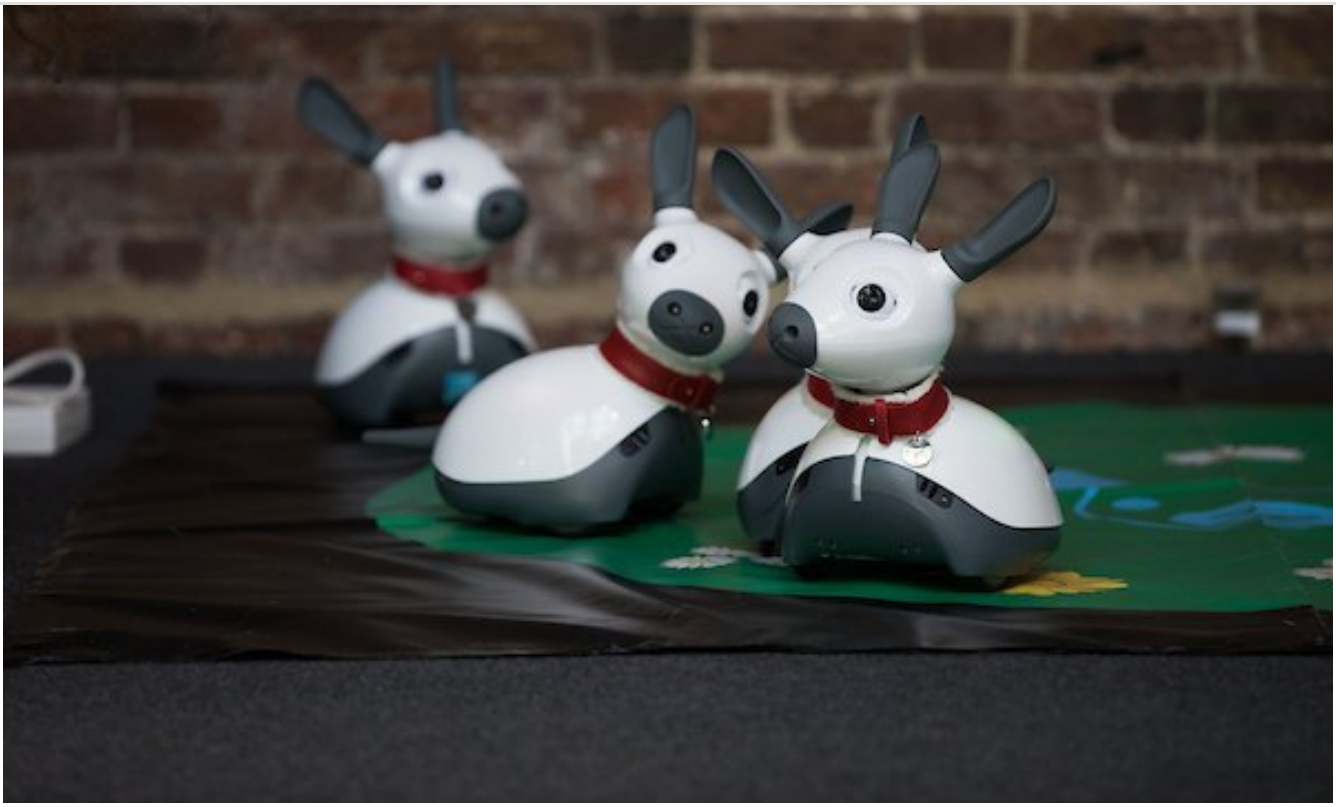


We examined the convergence of haptic, tactile and proprioceptive tech and its increasing facilitation of the enhancement of our senses. How much more enabled will we be as humans though the evolution of data spaces allowing collective embodiment in the next 20 years, both civically and educationally?

A final discussion, Future humans: augmented selves, reviewed the utter importance of our human bodies in this topical identity debate. Modern day techniques such as implants, connected prosthetics, biofeedback and neural transmission networks are transforming the lives of many, yet also are at the genesis of hybrid (cyborg) human beings. Jasmine Idun Isdrake called for less judgement and more acceptance of cyborg evolutions as humans move into integrating technologies into the body. Yet discussion led clearly to how we will deal with such huge identity shifts in ourselves and those around us, and how we avoid a body divide easily created through access and costs.

A session Your future health followed this through by exploring the role of power, networks and authentic human connection in the care sectors, drawing on Nesta's work on People Powered Health.

Experiences across both days included a set of pioneering projects in the Bio-Body-Tech installation that only work in connection with our bodies through expanding and enhancing our senses, utilising our bio-signals and reacting to our body transmissions. Touch, gesture, vibration and muscle motion give us biofeedback data which is extending all around us and enabling us to extend our bodies collectively into new realms. Extensively explored by many people this room was buzzing with interaction and debates form the audience all weekend.



Robot pets in the Bio-Body-Tech room

Finally The Reader by Stanza, a hi-tech sculpture that illustrates the whole - the lone figure of a human (a 3D scan of the artist) concentrating deeply on reading a book, whilst outwardly sharing the knowledge being gained. In a quiet room where people chilled and relaxed, the Reader truly engaged us in what could happen when embedded chips in our bodies have a direct connection to all the world's information, data, and knowledge.

These presentations all enabled us to communally engage in how we (and our bodies) can ensure we benefit from creative collaborations with intelligent machines.

It proved that as our human agency shifts in a world that is increasingly atomised and fractured around us, we have a deep need to bring our human experience to the forefront, and this need is intuitively and inherently correct.

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Author

Ghislaine Boddington

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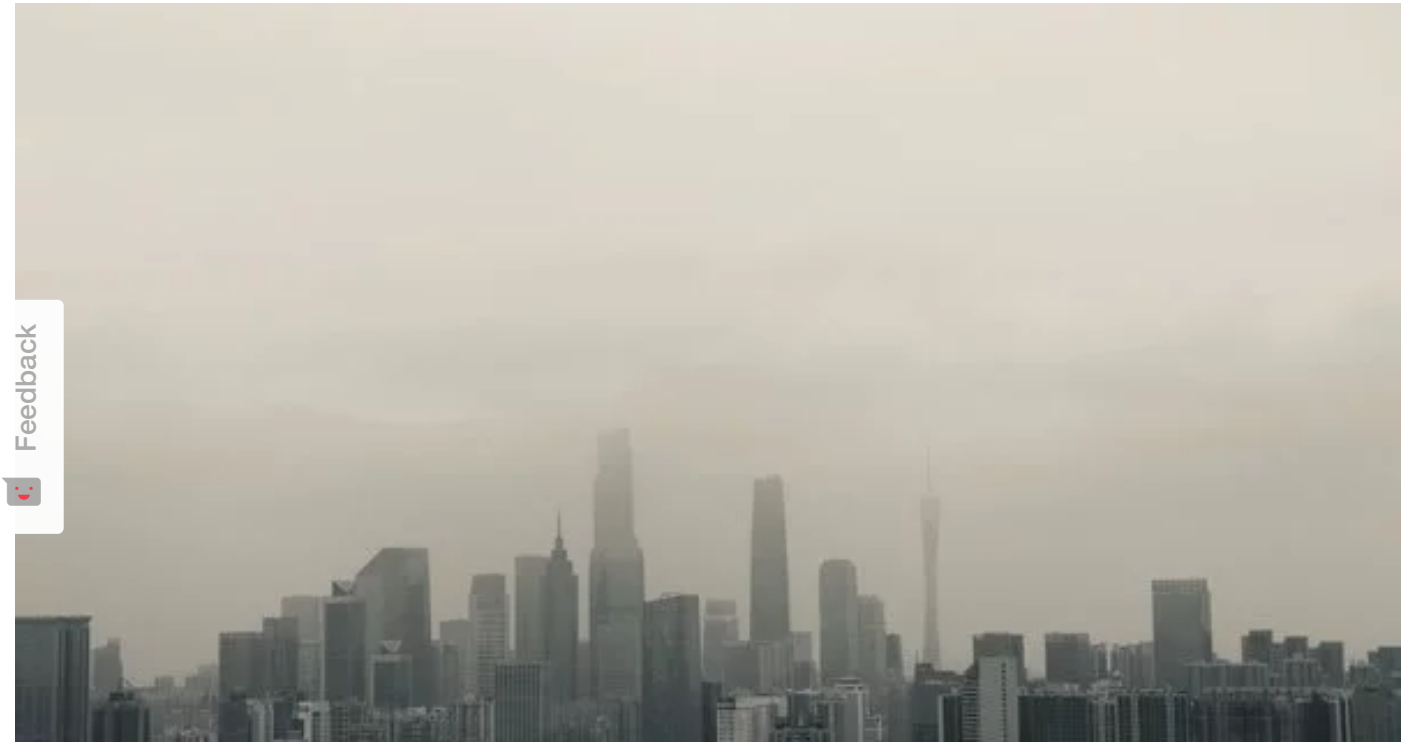

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