

New Futures Arts Collaborative: A Case Study for Intergenerational Epistemologies through Arts and Creativity in Times of Polycrises

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Abstract: This paper draws on a research project that investigates how artistic practices can be an infrastructure to intergenerational collaborations, fostering epistemological relationality in the face of contemporary polycrises. This study is grounded in the perspective that ongoing struggles, environmental, political, and social, are entangled with epistemological values that produce fragmentation, hierarchy, and processes of othering including between generations (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2011; Lugones 2007). Focusing on generational divisions as dialectically formed by and reinforcing these structures, the research examines how dominant frameworks of knowledge disrupt relational continuity. It offers potential to expand intergenerational and epistemic theory-building and its practice by embracing arts-based flora and participatory methods, thus contributing to the exploration of means of cultivating collaboration across generations as a relational epistemology that includes more-than-human agencies and challenges linear conceptions of time (Phillips 2024; Krenak 2021; Haraway 2016; Kimmerer 2013).

Methodologically, the study also contributes to expanding transdisciplinary and participatory research approaches by integrating Participatory Action Research (PAR), arts-based methods, and Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), positioning community oriented and creative processes as sites of knowledge production. These frameworks are enacted through a case study of the New Futures Arts Collaborative (2025), a four-month international arts residency that took place in Johannesburg, South Africa, bringing together participants across generations, geographies, and disciplines.

The reflections suggest that artistic and participatory processes enable forms of knowledge that move beyond fragmented and hierarchical structures, fostering relational, plural, and

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horizontal ways of knowing. While context-dependent, these practices offer grounded pathways for reimagining collaboration and collective futures within conditions of polycrisis.

Keywords: Intergenerational collaboration; arts-based research; polycrisis; decoloniality; relational epistemologies; Participatory Action Research (PAR); Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)

Introduction

How can intergenerational dialogues serve as epistemological alternatives to contemporary polycrises? In what ways can participatory and creative practices foster forms of knowledge that enact relational epistemologies? What intergenerational collaborations can emerge in art-based spaces? More than definitive goals, these questions offer us a pathway for experimenting and engaging in other ways of relating to one another and to the environment. This paper is situated within the context of what Adam Tooze (2021) defines as ‘polycrisis’, a condition in which multiple struggles (environmental, political, economic, and social) are deeply entangled and co-shaping one another (Moore 2015; Morin 2008). Rather than seeking a singular explanation or simplistic solutions for these crises, this research approaches them through an epistemological lens. It explores how particular ways of organising and legitimising knowledge shape social relations across generations and contribute to conditions of fragmentation, hierarchy, and exclusion.

Within this frame, the paper narrows its focus to generational divisions as one manifestation of these broader epistemic fragmentations. The concept of ‘generation’, while widely used to organise social life, often reinforces separation, linear temporality, and hierarchical distributions of knowledge (Mannheim 1952; Edmunds and Turner 2002). As critically discussed by Vanderbeck (2007) and Mead (1970), such divisions can disrupt continuity and limit collaborative knowledge transmission across time. In response, this research proposes intergenerational dialogue as a relational epistemology, one that embraces creativity, plurality, continuity, and the coexistence of multiple temporalities, including more-than-human agencies (Kimmerer 2013; Phillips 2024), thus contributing to expanding the field of intergenerationality in its enacted and transdisciplinary potentials.

To explore these possibilities, the study adopts a methodological framework that integrates Participatory Action Research (PAR), arts-based methods, and futures studies. PAR provides a relational and co-creative approach to knowledge production grounded in community engagement and shared responsibility (Freire 1970; Fals Borda 1987). Arts-based methodologies expand this process by enabling forms of expression and collaboration that move beyond linguistic and rational boundaries (Eisner 2002; Leavy 2015). Complementing these, Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)

offers a framework to understand the multi-layered nature of reality and to engage with futures as plural and culturally situated (Inayatullah 1998).

These frameworks are explored through the case study of the New Futures Arts Collaborative (2025), a four-month, arts-based residency that brought together participants from diverse generations, geographies, and disciplines. Through participatory and creative processes, the project created a space for intergenerational and intercultural exchange, where knowledge was co-produced across human and more-than-human relations. The case study offers a situated context in which the theoretical and methodological premises of this research are enacted, allowing for an embodied exploration of intergenerational epistemologies in practice.

While the case study is grounded in environmental struggles, particularly mining landscapes and their socio-ecological struggles, this paper deliberately focuses on their entanglements with generational divisions and interconnections with systems of extraction, inequality, and epistemic canons. Within this frame, it proposes intergenerational dialogue as a potential counter-narrative that fosters relationality, continuity, and collaborative forms of knowledge-making.

The article contributes to intergenerational dialogues, both in theory and practice, first by expanding these debates beyond human-centred and linear causal time, considering more-than-human agencies as participants in knowledge-making, and acknowledging the present, past and future strata as a dynamic entangled process. Second, it connects intergenerational dialogue with relational and enacted epistemologies, reframing it as a practice of collaborative knowledge production rather than solely age-based exchange. Third, and possibly the biggest contribution is achieved by engaging in transdisciplinary, creative, and experimental approaches while demonstrating how participatory, creative and arts-based methodologies can function as epistemic terrains through which these forms of intergenerational collaboration can emerge as embodied and studied fields.

Literature Review: From Epistemic Fragmentation to Relational Intergenerational Dialogue

Epistemic fragmentation and the crisis of relation

This section briefly establishes the contemporary conditions of polycrisis through its epistemic canons. It argues that these crises are not only material or political but entangled with systems of knowing that shape and are shaped by social structures that reinforce divisions and hierarchies.

Contemporary global conditions – environmental collapse, war, systemic racism, and gender-based violence – are marked by overlapping crises that unfold across multiple generations, scales, layers and territories. While these are experienced in situated complexities and unequal ways by bodies, communities, and lands, they are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing, forming what has been described as a condition of ‘polycrisis’² (Tooze 2021; Mignolo 2017; Haraway 2016).

More than exclusively political, social, and environmental struggles, the contextual premises of this research examine epistemological values as generative forces that structure the very conditions through which contemporary polycrisis emerges. As Michel Foucault (1980) argues, knowledge both manifests and produces power, shaping what can be known, legitimised, and acted upon.

In this sense, contemporary dominant epistemologies have been shaped by multiple historical processes, among which colonial-modern formations constitute one particularly influential source of hierarchical divisions, as argued by Walter Mignolo (2013), Aníbal Quijano (2000) and Mbembe (2011). Aníbal Quijano (2000) defines the term ‘coloniality of power’ as a system that operates through hierarchical distinctions that dehumanise and create the ‘other’, not only through economic dimensions but also through a way of organising knowledge (Mbembe 2011; Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2013). These canons are grounded in what María Lugones refers to as ‘hierarchical binaries’ separating and ranking the world in dualistic conditions where one is valued more than the ‘other’: men/women; white/non-white; mind/body; human/‘nature’; new/old, sustaining processes of othering that justify domination, dehumanisation and exclusion. In the words of the Indigenous philosopher Ailton Krenak, ‘Once you create this distance, you can justify domination, extraction, and the erasure of other forms of life’ (Krenak 2019, 17–18).

Generational division and the limits of age-based intergenerationality

Given the last argument on the divisionary epistemic conditions of current polycrises, this section unfolds generational divisions and their implications in knowledge creation, both in human and more-than-human exchange and addresses the current understanding of generations and its limitations in relation to non-human agents and multiple time perspectives.

² The Global Economic Forum’s Global Risks Report 2023 describes this as ‘Polycrisis: a cluster of related global risks with compounding effects, such that the overall impact exceeds the sum of each part.’

Although the concept of a generation has been expanded across disciplines (Mannheim 1952; Mead 1970; Edmunds & Turner 2002; Inayatullah 1998), it remains largely understood through age-based and historically situated categories. While scholars such as Mead (1970) and Vanderbeck (2007) broaden this understanding to include cultural and geographical dimensions, dominant conceptions continue to privilege human-centred perspectives and linear temporal frameworks. These assumptions limit intergenerationality to relations between human age groups and overlook epistemologies that understand knowledge as emerging across species, places, and intertwined temporalities (Haraway 2016; Kimmerer 2013; Krenak 2021; Phillips 2025). As critically noted by Rob Vanderbeck (2007), ‘the notion of generation is employed both colloquially and within the social sciences as a way of temporally positioning people in relation to one another.’

Rather than engaging in an extensive conceptual debate (see Karl Mannheim 1952; June Edmunds and Bryan Turner 2002), the aim here is to reflect on the epistemological values embedded within these conditions. As Rob Vanderbeck (2007), drawing on Kjørholt (2003) observes, there has been a tendency within social sciences to emphasise ‘generational discreteness and difference such that disruption and discontinuity between adults and children is stressed at the expense of continuity.’ As a result, generational divisions are expressed through asymmetrical configurations of authority and power, where knowledge is either concentrated in older generations or dismissed in favour of the new, producing discontinuities in transmission, recognition, and collaboration (Margaret Mead 1970; Leena Alanen 2003). This occurs as knowledge is legitimised or invalidated according to hierarchies of generational divisions, often reinforcing processes of othering and detachment that can allow oppressive dynamics to continue existing.

In this sense, generational divisions can be understood as interconnected with epistemological values that privilege separation over relation and hierarchy over collaboration. These patterns, as argued by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (1998), are deeply implicated in systemic harms, manifested in the persistence of intergenerational trauma and historical wounds.

Therefore, addressing the contemporary polycrisis with its generational implications through an epistemic shift requires the cultivation of alternative ways of producing meaning in relation to one another, moving from generational division toward intergenerational collaboration, which will be explored in the next section.

Intergenerational dialogue as relational epistemology

Following from the previous section’s discussion of the epistemic assumptions embedded in dominant understandings of generation, this section proposes intergenerational

ational dialogue as a relational epistemology. Rather than limiting intergenerationality to exchanges between older and younger people, it reconceptualises it as a collaborative process of meaning making across age, memory, place, materiality, more-than-human agency, and future imagination.

Intergenerational collaborations emerge as a practice of epistemic justice. They recognise that diverse ontologies and temporalities hold complementary forms of wisdom and that mutual transformation depends on understanding difference as a source of vitality rather than division Gill (2025). Rather than reproducing discontinuities between generations, they invite the reweaving of memory and imagination as co-creative forces through which futures remain connected to ancestral knowledge. As Ailton Krenak (2023) suggests, *the future is ancestral*. Similarly, Margaret Mead (1970) reminds us that societies endure not only through the transmission of information but through the continuous negotiation of meaning between generations.

More than an exchange between elders and youth, intergenerational dialogue is understood here as a relational field of meaning making across age, memory, place, materiality, more-than-human agency, and future imagination. In this sense, generations are not simply demographic categories but relational configurations through which different beings, temporalities, and forms of knowing encounter one another. This expanded understanding unfolds across three interconnected dimensions.

First, intergenerational dialogue extends beyond exclusively human relations. Drawing on Bruno Latour (1991), Anna Tsing (2015), and Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), this research understands more-than-human beings, materials, and ecosystems not as passive contexts but as participants in knowledge creation. Kimmerer (2013), for example, reminds us that knowledge has long emerged through relationships with the living world rather than solely through human interaction: ‘Ethnobiologists tell us that our great-grandparents spoke fluent natural history. They knew the names and personalities of dozens of birds...’ (Kimmerer 2013)

Second, intergenerational dialogue is relational across time. Rather than treating generations as fixed positions within a linear chronology, this research understands past, present, and future as continuously shaping one another. As Rasheedah Phillips (2024) argues, *time is not neutral*. Dominant temporal frameworks often privilege linear causality while marginalising other ways of experiencing continuity and memory. Reconsidering temporality therefore becomes an intergenerational gesture, opening possibilities for ancestral knowledge, present experience, and future imagination to coexist within the same process of meaning making. This resonates with Sohail Inayatullah’s (1998) understanding that both reality and futures are culturally constituted rather than universally given.

Third, intergenerational dialogue is relational across epistemologies. Rather than seeking consensus through a single authoritative knowledge system, it creates conditions where diverse ways of knowing can coexist, challenge one another, and generate new understandings collaboratively. In this sense, relational intergenerationality aligns with Quijano's (2000) call to recognise 'the heterogeneity of the world and the plurality of its histories', while also resonating with Maria Lugones' (2007) emphasis on relationality across difference.

Intergenerational dialogue is therefore understood in this research not simply as communication between different age groups but as a relational epistemology through which multiple temporalities, beings, and ways of knowing participate in collaborative meaning making. This conceptualisation provides the foundation for examining how artistic and participatory practices can cultivate these conditions in practice.

Arts-based and participatory practice as epistemic terrain

This section brings out artistic and participatory practices as epistemic terrains where such relations can be experienced. It argues that these approaches hold the potential to create conditions in which diverse forms of knowledge encounter, negotiate with, and transform one another through collective agency and co-creation.

Through the understanding of intergenerational dialogue as a relational process of meaning making across age, memory, place, materiality, more-than-human agency, and future imagination, the question then becomes how such relations may be cultivated in practice. Rather than emerging spontaneously, relational epistemologies require conditions that enable trust, reciprocity, creativity, and openness to difference. Within this perspective, arts-based and participatory practices are approached as epistemic terrains where dialogue can be embodied, experienced, and collectively enacted.

Artistic practice has the potential to enable meaning to be sensed and exchanged beyond language and where gestures, materials, images, sounds, movement, emotions, and experience are entangled and constantly negotiated in process-oriented knowledge making (Levy 2020). Art does not merely represent knowledge; it creates spaces where knowledge can emerge through experimentation, uncertainty, and collective imagination. As Elliot Eisner (2008) argues, the arts give shape to understanding that cannot always be accessed through propositional language alone. Similarly, Patricia Leavy (2020) understands arts-based research as opening possibilities for inquiry that engage affective, embodied, and imaginative dimensions of knowing.

Within this perspective, dialogue extends beyond conversation to become a relational process unfolding through multiple expressive forms. Encounters between people from diverse ages and cultures as well as materials, territories, and more-than-human beings become opportunities for collaborative meaning making in which knowledge is negotiated rather than transmitted (Eisner 2008). Artistic practice therefore creates conditions where difference does not require resolution but can remain productive, allowing multiple perspectives, memories and worldviews to co-exist while generating new processes of understanding.

Methodologies

Research design

Building on the conceptualisation of intergenerational dialogue as a relational epistemology, this study adopts a qualitative participatory case study design centred on the New Futures Arts Collaborative, a four-month, international arts residency that took place online and in Johannesburg, South Africa, between May and August 2025. The collaborative was selected as a case study because it intentionally brought together participants across generations, nationalities, artistic disciplines, and cultural backgrounds within a sustained process of collective artistic production, dialogue, and co-learning.

Through the case study, the research investigates how artistic and participatory practices acted as infrastructure to intergenerational collaborations and how these encounters contributed to relational forms of knowledge making. The study therefore approaches the residency as a living environment in which artistic creation, dialogue, reflection, and research evolved simultaneously.

The research is informed by Participatory Action Research (PAR)³ and Arts-based methods (ABM). PAR emerges as a methodological framework grounded in liberative education and decolonial epistemologies (Freire 1970) with the premises of knowledge as a relational, situated, embodied, and continuously evolving process. It suggests a research model in spiral stages of Inquiry/planning; Action/intervention;

³ PAR has been widely applied in community-based contexts where local knowledge is positioned as central to inquiry and transformation. For example, Fals Borda's work with rural communities in Colombia demonstrated how participatory research could support collective reflection, political agency, and locally grounded knowledge production (Fals Borda 1987). Similar approaches have been adopted in Indigenous research contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand, where participatory and community-led methodologies have been used to strengthen cultural continuity, self-determination, and intergenerational knowledge transmission (Smith 2021).

Observation/documentation; Reflection/Analysis that leads to new Inquiries and continues. These premises align well with the purpose of this research in that PAR offers a framework through which intergenerational collaborations can be engaged as relational circular epistemologies.

As Alice McIntyre (2008) argues, PAR is ‘a collective, self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake together’, positioning knowledge as something co-produced rather than extracted from subjects. In this sense, research becomes a relational process, shaped through ongoing interaction with communities, environments, and systems (Kendon, Pain and Kesby 2007).

Anchored in arts-based methodologies to the inquiry and data collection, the research potential expands beyond linguistic and rational values, incorporating the body, the territories, the more-than-humans and the emotional bonds to the processes of intergenerational collaboration and collective meaning making (Leavy 2015). Susan Sontag (1966) points to arts as a way to form engagement that exceeds rational interpretation.

As Adrienne Maree brown reminds us, ‘The systems we are in now were imagined and created by humans. They are not inevitable. If we can imagine them, we can imagine something else...we are in an imagination battle’ (brown, a. 2017).

Participants, selection, and residency format

Participants were selected through an international open call disseminated across the partner organisations’ networks. The selection criteria were based on the main purpose of creating a diverse group with multiple perspectives with the following criteria for the group balance: age ranges and career stage, nationality/region, race, gender, and artistic practice/mediums. Although intergenerationality was not the sole selection criterion, it formed an important dimension of the residency’s design, creating conditions in which intergenerational exchange could emerge and generate knowledge exchange and intergenerational collaboration.

The residency unfolded over four interconnected phases. The first consisted of on-line gatherings that introduced participants to one another while establishing shared themes and collaborative relationships. The second involved an intensive in-person residency in Johannesburg combining workshops, artistic experimentation, collective reflection, and community engagement. The third focused on the collaborative development and curation of the exhibition ‘Absent Matter(s): From Mine to Ours’. The final phase extended dialogue through public engagement, exhibition activities, and ongoing reflection.

Researcher positionality and role

This research adopts a participatory understanding of researcher positionality in which knowledge is generated through engagement and active participation. Throughout the New Futures Arts Collaborative, the author occupied multiple and overlapping roles as co-designer, curator, facilitator, and researcher. This commitment is integral to the epistemological commitments of Participatory Action Research, where inquiry unfolds through collaborative relationships, shared reflection, and collective action (McIntyre 2008).

Within the PAR framework the active participation of the researcher in the case study is therefore not a bias to be eliminated but a condition and potential for knowledge production engaging in personal reflections and lived experiences as valid data to be integrated in the reflections. As Orlando Fals Borda (1987) affirms, PAR seeks 'to produce knowledge that is useful to people in the process of transforming their reality', shifting the purpose of research from observation to transformation where knowledge is collectively produced and responsibility for its outcomes is shared (Paulo Freire 1970).

These engagements enabled continuous participation throughout the residency, from the design of the programme and facilitation of artistic processes to curatorial decisions, collective dialogues, and post-residency reflection. They provided access and agency to the evolving relationships, negotiations and meaning-making processes that constituted the empirical material analysed in this study.

Recognising that such proximity also shapes interpretation, the subjectivity and positionality is entangled with the research and part of its contribution, while reflexivity and engagement with the group's views were maintained throughout the research process. Reflective journals, facilitation notes, and ongoing conversations with participants formed part of an iterative practice of critical self-reflection, allowing assumptions, decisions, and interpretations to be continuously examined alongside the collaborative process itself. In this sense, reflexivity was not treated as a step following data collection but as an ongoing methodological practice accompanying the residency from its conception to its analysis.

Consequently, the findings presented in this article should be understood as situated interpretations emerging from the interaction between participants, artistic processes, curatorial practice, and researcher reflection. Rather than seeking detached neutrality, the research embraces situated knowledge (Haraway 1988), recognising that understanding is always produced through relationships and that the researcher's participation formed part of the relational epistemology explored throughout the study.

Data sources and ethical considerations

The analysis draws upon multiple forms of qualitative material generated throughout the residency, including participant observation, facilitation notes, reflective journals, documentation of workshops and collective dialogues, curatorial texts, artistic processes, exhibition design, photographic documentation, and the artworks themselves. These materials were interpreted iteratively throughout the residency and during subsequent reflection, allowing observations emerging during practice to inform later analysis.

Ethical considerations were embedded throughout the research process. Participation in both the residency and the associated research activities was voluntary, and participants were informed that the project would contribute to ongoing academic research. Permission was obtained for the documentation and reproduction of artworks, photographs, and participants' contributions included in this article. Because artistic authorship formed part of the collaborative knowledge-production process, artists are identified where appropriate with their consent.

Analysis was conducted through an iterative process combining participatory reflection with Causal Layered Analysis (CLA). During the development of the exhibition, CLA informed the curatorial organisation of the artworks as participants and facilitators were invited to engage with different layers of contemporary realities. Following the residency, the same framework was employed analytically to interpret how artistic practices, dialogues, and curatorial decisions expressed different epistemological layers of intergenerational collaboration. In this way, CLA functioned both as a generative framework that shaped aspects of the collaborative process and as an interpretative framework through which the case study was analysed.

The analysis engages with Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) as a methodological framework for understanding and imagining futures. While PAR and arts-based methods provide the conditions for co-creation, embodiment, and circular knowledge making, CLA offers an analytical lens through which present realities can be understood as multi-layered, dynamic, plural, and continuously shaped across multiple dimensions. In this sense, CLA does not treat either the present or the future as fixed but rather as a living cartography in which meanings are continuously reconfigured through interactions between social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions (Inayatullah 1998).

Developed by Sohail Inayatullah (1998), CLA proposes a mountain-like methodology in which reality can be understood across four interconnected layers: the litany (symptoms), referring to immediately observable conditions; systems and structures, concerning the political, social, and economic mechanisms that sustain these condi-

tions; worldviews and discourses, examining the cultural assumptions through which reality is interpreted; and myths and metaphors, where deeper symbolic narratives and collective imaginaries shape meaning. As Inayatullah argues, meaningful transformation requires engaging across these interconnected layers rather than addressing only surface-level symptoms.

Each of them is entangled with different time scales that co-shape the realities. As Inayatullah (1998) suggests, meaningful transformation requires engaging across all these layers rather than addressing only surface-level symptoms.

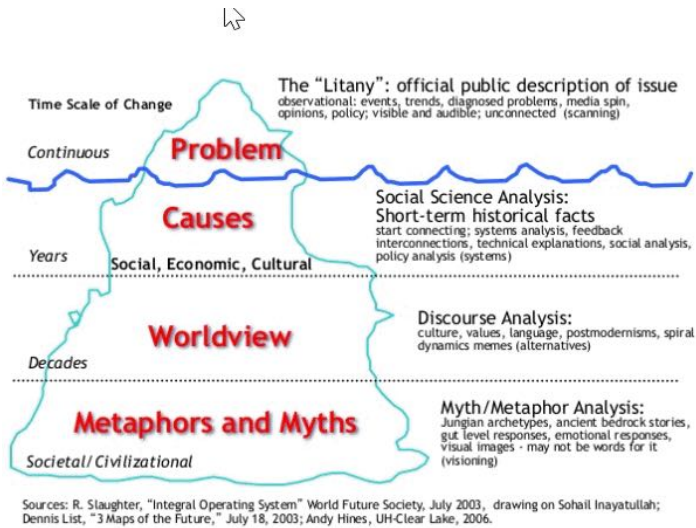


Fig. 1. CLA image

Within this research, CLA functioned in two complementary ways. First, it informed the curatorial development of the exhibition. The artworks themselves were not created through a predefined CLA framework; rather, they emerged through the artists' own creative processes during the residency. Following their development, the curatorial team employed CLA to organise the exhibition, arranging the works according to the four layers as a way of inviting visitors to experience the present as a multi-layered landscape of realities, narratives, and futures.

Second, following the residency, the same framework was employed analytically to interpret the empirical material. Participant reflections, artistic processes, curatorial texts, exhibition design, artworks and facilitation notes were revisited through the

four CLA layers to examine how intergenerational dialogue unfolded across observable practices, institutional structures, epistemological worldviews, and symbolic imaginaries. In this sense, CLA functioned both as a generative framework, shaping the curatorial organisation of the exhibition, and as an interpretative framework, guiding the subsequent analysis presented in this article.

The interpretations developed throughout the analysis emerge from multiple and overlapping perspectives. Meanings originated through the artists' creative processes, participant dialogues, and collective reflection during the residency. These were further shaped through curatorial discussions during the exhibition design and are interpreted in this article through the researcher's reflexive analysis.

Case Study⁴

New Futures Arts Collaborative: reflections grounded in PAR and arts-based methods

This section explores the case study structure and its findings within the methodological framework of PAR and arts-based methods. It also highlights the potential of interpretations and subjectivity that do not attempt to limit or capture the process. The case study is a situated and complex ecosystem of exchange from which this research unfolds and does not aim to be a claim for truth but rather an experimentation with the possibilities. This section intentionally shifts the third perspective to first-person language as it refers to lived experiences and reflections that include me as author.

Unfolding the case study constellation and structure, the New Futures Arts Collaborative was a four-month, arts-education residency that took place online and in Johannesburg, South Africa between May and August 2025. In total it was composed of 23 people, 16 artists participating, 4 team members, 1 host and media partner and 2 faculty leaders. The age range of the group was between 22 and 74 years old coming from 13 countries. The selection process of the participants was conducted through an open call broadly distributed through the networks of the institutional partners. The main goal of the selection was to create a group with diversity in perspectives especially with a balance of age/career stage, gender, race, nationality, and artistic mediums. In relation to age, there were 5 artists between 21 and 27 years of age; 5 between 28 and 33; and 6 between 34 and 40. The Faculty was formed of elders of 67 and 74 years of age, and there were two co-facilitators (in-

⁴ For more details on the project see www.newfuturesartscollaborative.online. The project was organised by a constellation of different institutions, collectives, and research partners: IoFC USA, Collective Webs, ART Africa Magazine and Exploring Visual Cultures project.

cluding this author) of 32 and 39 years. The team members were curators of 29 and 32 (this author), host and media partners of 55, and producers of 34, 39, and 46.

Although intergenerationality was not the only criterion guiding participant selection, it was intentionally incorporated alongside intercultural, interdisciplinary, racial, and gender diversity. While the residency was not originally designed exclusively as an intergenerational programme, the significant age diversity among participants, facilitators, and team members created conditions in which intergenerational exchange, on a daily, intimate, and continuous basis, became a defining feature of the collective experience and therefore a central focus of this research.

The project was divided into four phases: 1) online research (inquiries and community building); 2) In-person learning (action/intervention in relation to one another and with the environment); 3) co-creation and exhibition (documentation); and 4) continued activations (reflections/analysis leading to new inquiries).

In practice, this was enacted through a series of participatory workshops, collective dialogues, and co-creation sessions, where participants engaged with artistic processes such as material-based practices, storytelling, performance, or site-responsive work, collectively reflecting on their experiences and translating them into shared artistic outputs.

Although each phase reveals potential for research, in this paper we will focus on the in-person phases (phase 2 and 3), further deepening the analysis on the exhibition portion of phase 3. This is because it was the biggest portion of intergenerational exchange that happened in an embodied form, and when the art works were created, offered arts-based documentation for the reflections. The exhibition reveals a deep entanglement with the focus of this research into intergenerational exchanges, including the more-than-human bodies of Johannesburg landscapes and the knowledge production/knowledge transmission emerging from the curatorial process that followed a structure based on CLA proposed layers.

Participants lived and worked together for five weeks, sharing accommodation, meals, studio spaces, classes, and artistic production. These everyday encounters often became as significant as the formal workshops. Conversations during meals, collaborative studio work, site visits, and shared accommodation created continuous opportunities for exchanging memories, artistic references, personal histories, and different understandings of the mining landscape. These informal dialogues frequently informed later artistic and curatorial decisions.

The first week was oriented by Dr David Anderson Hooker (67) and focused the exchanges on narrative transformation, epistemic justice, and peace building, explor-

ing among other topics the colonial-modern paradigm and CLA. In the second week Dr Ernst Wagner (74) explored the role of arts in the face of a world in poly-crisis, diving into arts-based methodologies, historical references, and visual cultures across multi-generations and multi-cultures. In those weeks the programme was designed to integrate classes with site visits to historically exploited locations such as mining dumps and the communities living around toxic landscapes.



Group visit to Soweto Mining Dumps – Phase 2.

Moving towards phase 3 (co-creation), the same studio was then transformed into an art workshop space where the change in the environment revealed the changes in the dynamics. During this process, artistic decisions were continuously shaped through peer conversations, collective critique sessions, exchanges with facilitators, and encounters with local communities and landscapes. Ideas, materials, and narratives circulated among participants, making the artworks products not only of individual artistic practice but of ongoing dialogue.

For two weeks the artists developed their works individually and collectively focusing on artistic processes, material collection, pictures, and performances in dialogue with local landscapes and communities and peer exchanges. The shift toward a less structured co-creation phase raised collective reflections on responsibility and care for shared goods within horizontal frameworks.

For the last week the space became an exhibition space where the works were curated, interpreted, and organised to be further opened to the public. The exhibition lasted for one week and was open to the public, who joined the dialogue and explored the artists' processes. This portion will be highlighted and further unfolded in the next sections.

As for phase 4 – continuity of activations and further inquiries – it is relevant to point out that in response to the stress PAR lays on the need for accountability and mutual benefit for the community, the programme is still ongoing through online sessions and transnational activations. It has already developed two more exhibitions (in Brazil and Ghana) which members of the group lead and benefit from, either by going in person or by having the chance to showcase their work, as well as expanding the community and its inquiries to new groups and territories. It also continues to support the participants' needs in their own practices and local community projects.

Absent Matter(s) and CLA: intergenerational collaborations in present creation

Before discussing the exhibition through CLA, it is important to acknowledge that the organisation of the works emerged through dialogue rather than predetermined categorisation. While the artworks were initially developed independently by the artists, their placement within the four CLA layers resulted from collective conversations involving artists, facilitators, and the curatorial team. These discussions often generated multiple possible readings, revealing the exhibition itself as a dialogical process through which meanings were negotiated rather than fixed.

CLA was embedded in the four rooms of the exhibition. First, it presents the curatorial statement as the very first encounter with the exhibition to situate the public and invite them into the process. Then each room is first presented visually, followed by the text of the space, and then analysed and reflected upon the key insights and findings on the curatorial choices and the artworks presented there.

Curatorial Statement ran:

'silence grows solid ...Tell your story. Let it twist and remix your shattered heart. Tell your story. Until your past stops tearing your present apart.' Le-bogang Mashile

absent matter(s)

opens with a question that is also a fault line: can we transform what matters by embracing what is absent? A practice that narrative theory describes as 'unveiling the 'absent but implicit'.

In Johannesburg, the earth replies with voids. 278 abandoned mine shafts breathe sulphuric mist into Soweto. Mine dumps tower above the city like negative monuments. Toxic dust permeates lungs and laundry alike. The bodies of workers briefly surface before sinking back into the news cycle. Their dreams negotiated in court as numbers instead of names.

Absence here is not emptiness, it is thick, mineral, and profitable. 420 tonnes of 'invisible gold' lie dormant in the city's ground, wealth uncounted precisely because it is not yet in anyone's hands. Yet mine shafts extend beyond borders. In Brumadinho, Brazil, 272 bodies were folded into a single rush of tailings; the mud remains in the water table. Absences resonate across continents. An explosion killed dozens of workers in a private Iranian coal mine in South Khorasan. India, Ghana, Kenya, and beyond: voids are corporeal, intergenerational, and geopolitical; what is absent might be what connects us all. The untold stories, the silenced, embedded traces in mundane devices.

This exhibition evokes the value of the absents as shared matters that build our present. We attend to what industrial accounting omits: the slow violence of particulate time, the speculative lives of elements, and the songs of languages shaped in darkness. Absence becomes a common—a shared loss that might teach us other measures of value. The present is geological, and so is the future

Absent Matter(s) is a collective conversation among the works of 16 international artists from 11 countries developed through the New Futures Arts Collaborative residency program. Together, the artists were invited to unearth the narratives that sustain current systems and to uncover alternative imaginaries.

'Transformative change becomes possible only when we shift the deepest stories we tell about ourselves and the world.' Inayatullah 2004

Inspired by Sohail Inayatullah's research on narrative transformation in future studies, the space invites a journey through the multi-layered strata of the present. Walking through the depths of our narratives, it unfolds on four levels: from the perceptible surface, passing through systems worldviews—until the myths and metaphors—with seeds of long-term narrative change.

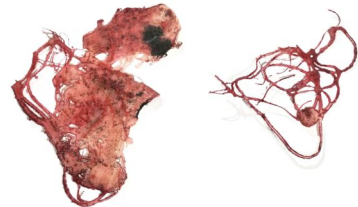
We invite you to move through the exhibition as one would navigate a defunct seam: alert to collapses, attuned to echoes, willing to feel the weight of things that are no longer present yet still insist on mattering. This is a journey into the entrails of our sensorial landscapes with the claim for a path towards a new narrative for living horizons, from mine to ours.⁵

⁵ Isadora Canela and Elsa Cuissard

The text weaves together multiple dimensions of the case study, addressing environmental struggles, epistemic and systemic injustices, and art and storytelling as resistance strategies. For this analysis we will prioritise the integration of the mountain-like frame of CLA that transformed the exhibition in itself into a visual and sensorial experience of the present strata, with focus on the intergenerational dialogues it materialises.

LEVEL I: SYMPTOMS | SURFACE

In the perceptible surface the symptoms are revealed, where socio-environmental disturbances appear as tangible matters. The senses respond to an ill socio-environmental landscape. What narratives are perceived in and by the body-land?



1.1



130
Wei

ΚΟΛΥΜΒΗΘΗΝ
Kiri Thunika
Johannesburg, 2025
Installation
Mixed media



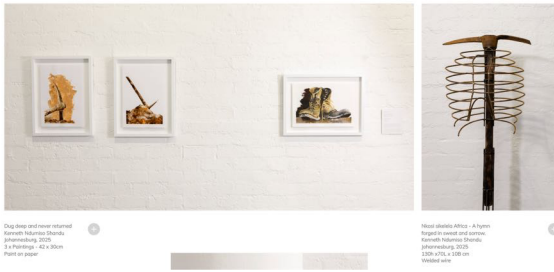
1.3

Byproducts Series I & II
Lukas Stenzenbach
Johannesburg, 2025
2 x Paintings - 60.9 x 91.4cm
Salt and hydrochloric acid on
cotton



1.4

ΠΑΥΣΙΑ
Paul van der
Kamp
Johannesburg, 2025
Installation
Mixed media



1.5

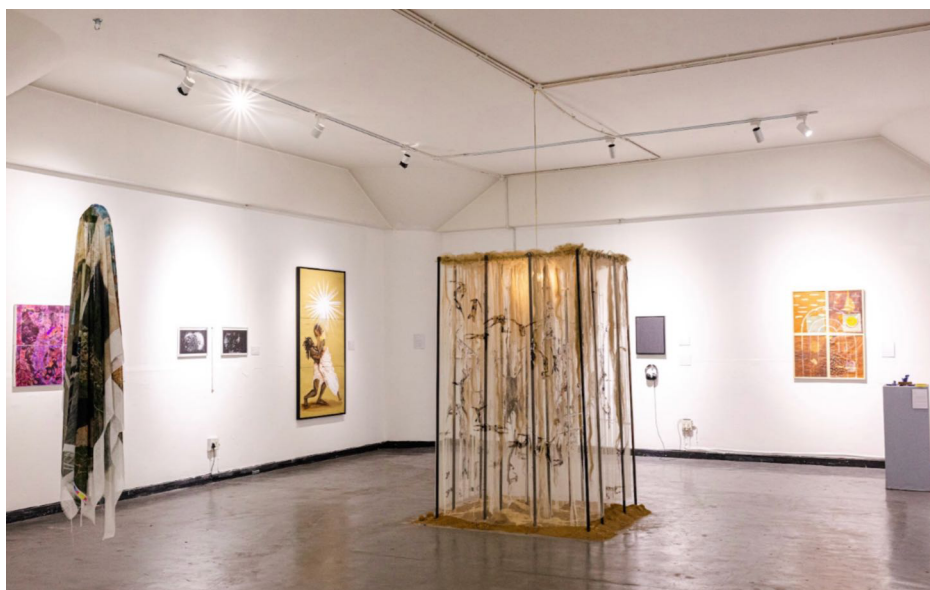
The first level of the symptoms (more commonly referred to as ‘Litany’), had five artworks, all of them reflecting on the current struggles of today’s polycrisis.

In an intergenerational approach beyond human-centred perspectives, artwork number 3 offers high potential for reflection. It was made by a young artist (23) from Germany in a relational process with the toxic soil from the mining dumps. Both in its aesthetic and in its materiality it engages with the consequences of an exploitative relationship between the human-made systems and the long before existing land of Johannesburg.

This interpretation emerged through conversations between the artist, facilitators, and curatorial team during the exhibition process, weaving together a critical approach to fragmentation and detachment as it also reveals a first layer of the realities presented by CLA, in a sensorial and arts-based approach. In the intergenerational collaboration it provokes viewers to engage with the more-than-human ancestral worlds as co-creators of the piece, responding to the movements of the artist, shifting colours and textures. Thus, it embraces a relational epistemology that can emerge from the reconnection with them as agents of knowledge rather than mere resources.

LEVEL 2: SYSTEMS

The systematic level uncovers the structures behind the edges of our existences – the trade, the laws, the rules, the institutional allegories, the borders of our societal bodies. What are the scaffolds of our socio-political landscapes? What values do they hold?



2.1

The second level concentrated the greatest number of artworks with ten pieces. Each one addresses a different perspective of systematic wounds from forced migration policies, systemic gender violence, all the way to computer binary systems, structural racism, and trade values.

More than one specific artwork, what is interesting to reflect on in this room is the time frame in which Inayatullah (1998) positions systemic change. He refers to this layer as being of years-long formation and transformation; this means that on a systemic level it is possible to experience change within one's own time, even within the same generation – change of institutional and political structures that are able to generate direct impact on symptoms or problems. While the first layer reveals more urgent and tangible struggles, the systemic layer seems to gain more attention from many artists concerned about laws and institutional values that sustain the symptoms, and this is still experienced in a time dimension. This is different from levels 3 and 4, which need multiple generations and therefore rely on intergenerational knowledge transmission to actually be transformed.

This led to reflection that the current divisions and lack of engagement between generations may be related to the concentration of efforts in this level. If intergenerational knowledge is disrupted, young artists might not perceive the resistance strategies of older generations and therefore indirectly it might resonate as less hope

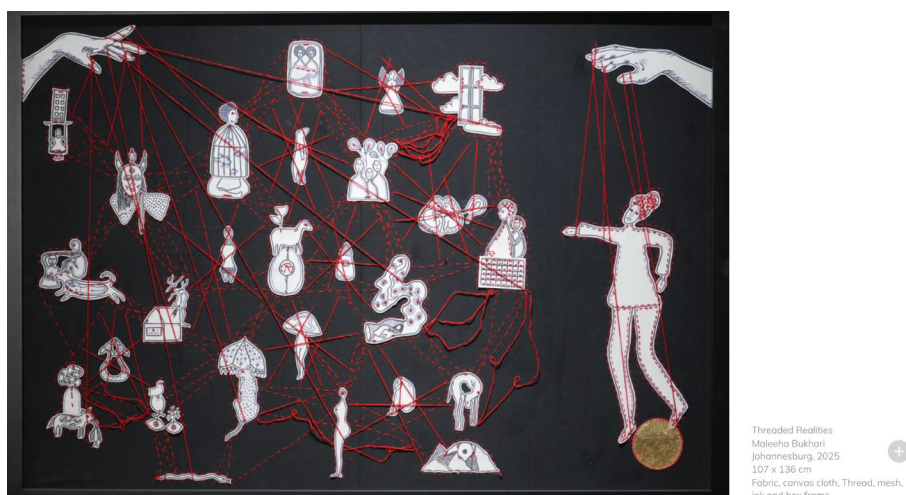
or commitment for long term societal transformation. Of course, that is speculative, and it seems to me that just the reflection in itself might hold enough potential to strengthen the time extension of our commitments to the transformations we work for.

LEVEL 3: WORLDVIEWS

In the depths of our metaphorical and metamorphic landscapes, worldviews carry the matter of our long-term perceptions, the ancestral marks, the hierarchies between worthiness and disposability, beauty and destruction, knowledge and mythology. How are the perceptions of the world shaping the matters of the world?



3.1



3.2

The third level speaks about the worldviews, the ideological forces, and the perspectives of value. There lie the deep narratives that make the systems appear natural, and it takes decades for this level to be transformed. Although any of the layers directly reflects specific domains, and the layers are always interwoven with one another, the worldviews hold a very close relationship with epistemic instances. Here is the level that sustains what kind of truth is validated as such, and it therefore reveals a very intricate connection with this research.

This level had 6 artworks, all of them somehow offering possible ways to reformulate our deep narratives. Based on curatorial dialogues, it brought together some pieces that critically reflected fragmented epistemologies and others that suggested agency to transform them from the bottom.

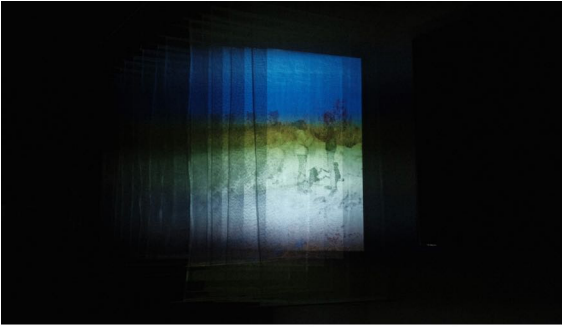
The work in image 3.2 was made by a Pakistani artist (26) with an interest in traditional symbols and cultures and their resonance between different cultures and times. She brought together Pakistani and African narratives, present in the daily life she experienced during the residency and through community bonds she has created. During curatorial discussions, the work came to be interpreted as entangled worlds, with a connection thread that invites us to reflect on the collective impacts of our beliefs. It shows on one side a collective of symbols interwoven and interacting with one another while on the other a woman tries to walk on the difficult balance of gold as a system of value. Each is controlled by an invisible hand that could be read as the hand of God or as the 'invisible hand of capital'. A third option would be to think that the movement toward change is in our hands.

LEVEL 4: MYTHS AND METAPHORS

The myths and metaphors at the bottom of our societal geology are proposed here as liminal spaces, where the potential for transition and long-term transformation live hidden beneath, in the deep tunnels of our imaginaries, those enrooted stories that carry the principles of our multi-layered meaning-making journey. It is the space for imagining, wondering, uncovering, unlearning, relearning, playing, and creating new narratives for new possible futures.



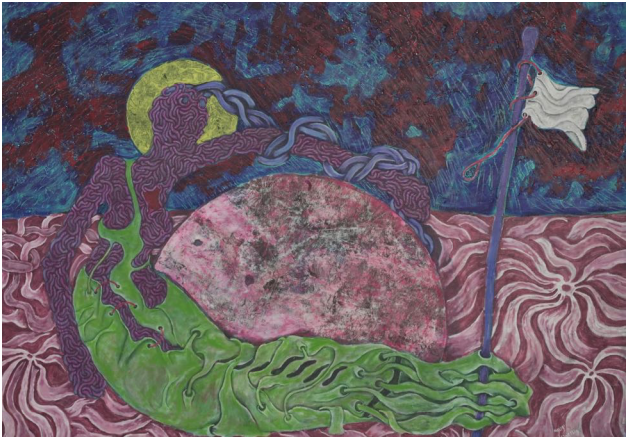
Hashiya of Sarah
Riaz Ali
Johannesburg, 2025
61 x 90 cm
Mixed media on canvas, incorporating Jadwal
grid, flower, and Acrylic on canvas



Hashiya of Sarah (Photograph by
Riaz Ali)
Johannesburg, 2025
300x50 cm
Installation, Fabric, Cotton, Steel,
Wood, Paper, etc.

4.2

4.1



4.3

The fourth level is at the very bottom of the CLA mountain-like layers. This level takes societal/civilisational time to be transformed, referring to the deep mythological forces that shape our worldviews. It is linked to ontological forces, and it is where the potential for long-standing transformation of all the other levels lies.

This was the room with the fewest artworks, four in total, which were curated based on their offerings for other mythologies to emerge. This room was an invitation to reclaim our agency in sowing new imaginaries of the future, deeply evoking intergenerational dialogues and collaboration. In image 4.2 the work by a young Pakistani artist, 27, reimagines Sara Baartman⁶ through sacred imagery, offering an alternative narrative that replaces dehumanisation with dignity, memory, and repair. In this sense, it exemplifies how artistic practice can contribute to intergenerational healing through the creation of new collective imaginaries.

Picture 4.3 is, again, an intergenerational claim. In a video installation the Brazilian artist, 30, invited the children from the community impacted by mining dumps to give a video performance of their plays. Having the toxic soil as their playground, the work invites joy, childhood, and playfulness to occupy the historical and ongoing wounds of the territory. In a world organised by pain and intersecting struggles, this work invites joy and relationality to be at the very bottom of our possible futures.

The last one, 4.4, is from a Kenyan artist, 40. It refers to looking at the planet from the mythology of Gaia instead of mythologies of othering. The work offers an intergenerational and epistemic lens where our home Earth is seen as a woman, fluidly navigating and caring for the waters and the lands. It is connected to a white flag, the symbol of peace that can only come to be through relating to the living world and to one another with affection and delicacy.

Discussion: Intergenerational Dialogue as Relational Epistemology

Returning to the central questions of this research, how can intergenerational dialogues serve as epistemological alternatives to the contemporary polycrisis? In what ways can participatory and creative practices foster forms of knowledge that enact relational epistemologies? And what intergenerational collaborations can emerge in art-based spaces?. The case study suggests that such practices hold significant potential to challenge fragmented forms of knowledge while cultivating more relational,

⁶ Sara Baartman was a South African woman exhibited as a freak-show attraction in Europe in the nineteenth century and it is a symbol of the exploitation of African bodies in the slavery of colonial times. See 'The Colonial Spectacle: Sara Baartman and the Commodification of Black Bodies' (Aiswarya and Anu 2024)

plural, and collaborative epistemologies. Beyond merely creating space for coexistence of different age groups, intergenerational dialogue unfolded through artistic, participatory, and curatorial processes that enabled participants to collectively negotiate meanings across generations, cultures, disciplines, and more-than-human relations.

The research identified that participatory and creative practices enable the emergence of shared meaning across differences, while the inclusion of more-than-human perspectives and layered temporalities expands the conditions through which knowledge is produced and validated. Furthermore, the case study revealed that when spaces of trust, horizontality, and collective agency are cultivated, participants can engage in processes that not only question dominant epistemologies but begin to embody alternative ways of knowing and relating.

The findings indicate that dialogue extended beyond verbal exchange to become an embodied and creative process. Throughout the residency, knowledge was alive and being generated through shared artistic production, collective reflection, material experimentation, curatorial conversations, and everyday interactions. Within this context, artistic practices did not simply communicate ideas but functioned as spaces where different experiences, memories, and perspectives could encounter one another without requiring consensus. The exhibition further extended these dialogues by transforming artistic processes into opportunities for collective interpretation, where meanings continued to evolve through interactions between artists, facilitators, curators, and audiences.

The case study also contributes to expanding understandings of intergenerationality beyond age-based exchange. As proposed in the literature review, intergenerational dialogue emerged not only through relationships between younger and older participants but also through encounters with places, materials, ancestral memories, and more-than-human agencies. The artworks and their curatorial organisation through CLA illustrate how dialogue can unfold across multiple temporalities and epistemological layers, as well as the potential for enactment of theoretical frames, bringing together lived experience, institutional structures, worldviews, and symbolic imaginaries within the same collaborative process in artistic ways. In this sense, the residency offers an empirical illustration of intergenerational dialogue as a relational epistemology.

At the same time, the findings suggest that these forms of dialogue did not emerge automatically from diversity alone. They depended upon particular relational conditions cultivated throughout the residency. Participants shared research, accommodation, meals, studio spaces, artistic production, and daily routines over five weeks, while receiving equal financial support and dedicating sustained time to collaborat-

ive inquiry. These conditions fostered trust, reciprocity, and shared responsibility, creating opportunities for dialogue to develop through continuous interaction rather than isolated activities. The case therefore suggests that relational intergenerational dialogue is enabled not only by diversity but by the social, temporal, and creative conditions through which collaboration becomes possible.

New Futures Arts Collaborative is not presented here as a universally replicable model; these findings contribute to dialogue studies by demonstrating how artistic and participatory practices can function as epistemic terrains where intergenerational dialogue is lived, negotiated, and collectively enacted. They further suggest that creative collaboration offers possibilities for connecting multiple forms of knowledge across age, memory, place, materiality, and future imagination, opening pathways for relational approaches to contemporary polycrisis.

Conclusion

In keeping with the principles of CLA, this conclusion closes the discussion by opening new questions and possible pathways for future inquiry. Rather than proposing a universal model, this research offers the New Futures Arts Collaborative as a situated experiment that explores how artistic and participatory practices can create conditions for intergenerational dialogue and collaborative knowledge making. It contributes to ongoing conversations on dialogue studies by expanding intergenerationality beyond age-based exchange and inviting further experimentation with relational and creative approaches to contemporary polycrisis.

At the same time, the case study developed under conditions that are not easily replicated. Dedicated time, shared spaces, and equal financial support enabled sustained collaboration, raising important questions about how similar approaches might be adapted to different institutional and community contexts. Future research could explore these methodologies within longer-term relationships, such as families, schools, or local communities, where histories, power dynamics, and conflict are already embedded.

Ultimately, this research does not seek to provide definitive answers but to open possibilities. How can intergenerational epistemologies be sustained beyond temporary projects? What conditions enable collaborative forms of knowledge making to flourish in everyday life? As adrienne maree brown reminds us, ‘what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system’ (Brown 2017). Perhaps the value of projects such as the New Futures Arts Collaborative lies precisely in their capacity to rehearse other ways of relating, creating, and imagining together.

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