



FUTURE CASTING: A CONVERSATION ABOUT SPECULATIVE METHODS FOR IMAGINING FUTURES THROUGH AND BEYOND THE PERMACRISIS

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What happens next? Speculative future casting offers alternative practices to imagine and scaffold hopeful, desirable and achievable futures through and beyond the confusion of the ‘permacrisis’. To move beyond states of perpetual reactivity to the present and emerging crises, we propose a profound reorientation of the ways we collaborate and mobilise beyond timescales to ensure a liveable future for generations to come. This chapter stages an urgent conversation between artists, educators, and activists that addresses the creative future casting methods employed in the transdisciplinary projects *Child of Now* (Walton and Coleman) and *Centre for Reworlding* (Coleman and Rae). The conversation considers the role of experimental and speculative inquiry in shifting perceptions of time in relation to the Aboriginal Australian concept of the ‘everywhen’; narratives of the present and the ‘permacrisis’; and, the figure of the child and unborn generations. The discussants consider how creative approaches may help us imagine futures centred on intergenerational justice. Walton and Coleman reflect on their collaborative work, both with each other and the public, on a massively co-authored storytelling project to collectively imagine the life of a child born now. Coleman and Rae discuss the labs and workshops at the Centre for Reworlding that build intersectional and transdisciplinary collaborative capacity, creative resilience, and climate emergency adaptation. Jessica Santone moderates the conversation.

Two ambitious projects propose radical rethinking of our relationships to the world and the challenges we face in it through speculative inquiry: *Child of Now* (Walton and Coleman) and *Centre for Reworlding* (Coleman and Rae). As numerous scholars and critics have described it, the “permacrisis” that we find ourselves in during the 2020s results from compounding and interlinked systemic problems, making it difficult to imagine forward progress (Turnbull, 2022). With these two projects, Robert Walton, Claire G. Coleman, and Jen Rae have developed collaborative transdisciplinary approaches that forge pathways through the permacrisis. Grounding their work in Indigenous knowledges, relationality, and intergenerational justice, they invite broad and inclusive participation, reminding us that we all have roles to play in asking questions to imagine more just futures.

*Child of Now*¹ is a mixed-reality artwork developed by Robert Walton and Claire G. Coleman that calls on citizens to co-create, shape, and nurture an Indigenized, sustainable, and fairer vision of the next century for an imagined child born in 2023. Experienced as an immersive tactile audio-visual installation, it invites visitors to enter the Aboriginal concept of the ‘everywhen,’ a place where all time is present, to observe the last 10,000 years of life on the Birrarung river and acknowledge the resilience of First Nations peoples who survived climate emergencies and settler invasion. As each visitor imagines all the children being born in the present moment, they are accelerated in time to the year in the future that the *Child of Now* is the visitor’s age, and prompted to become that *Child of Now*. A portrait of their performance is created as an audio and ‘digital hologram’ (volumetric video) recording, which is added to the final section of the experience: a VR archive set beneath the river where all the Children of Now are located in age order in the stream of time.

The Centre for Reworlding² (C∞R) was co-created by a collective of Indigenous, people of colour, settler and LGBTIQ2S+ artists, scientists, thinkers and doers, including Jen Rae and Claire G. Coleman, with a track record of collaboratively working at the intersections of art, climate adaptation, speculative futures and disaster resilience. It is a bold, 100-year project that centres relationality and intergenerational justice challenging dominant climate emergency and disaster preparedness discourses. C∞R brings together people who are not normally in conversation, partnership or collaboration through experimental, transdisciplinary labs informed by First Nations knowledge systems and protocols. These labs and other creative activities encourage the critical, creative, relational thinking necessary to address the complexities of the permacrisis. C∞R aims to integrate culture and the arts in national climate emergency discourses, policy frameworks and tertiary education.

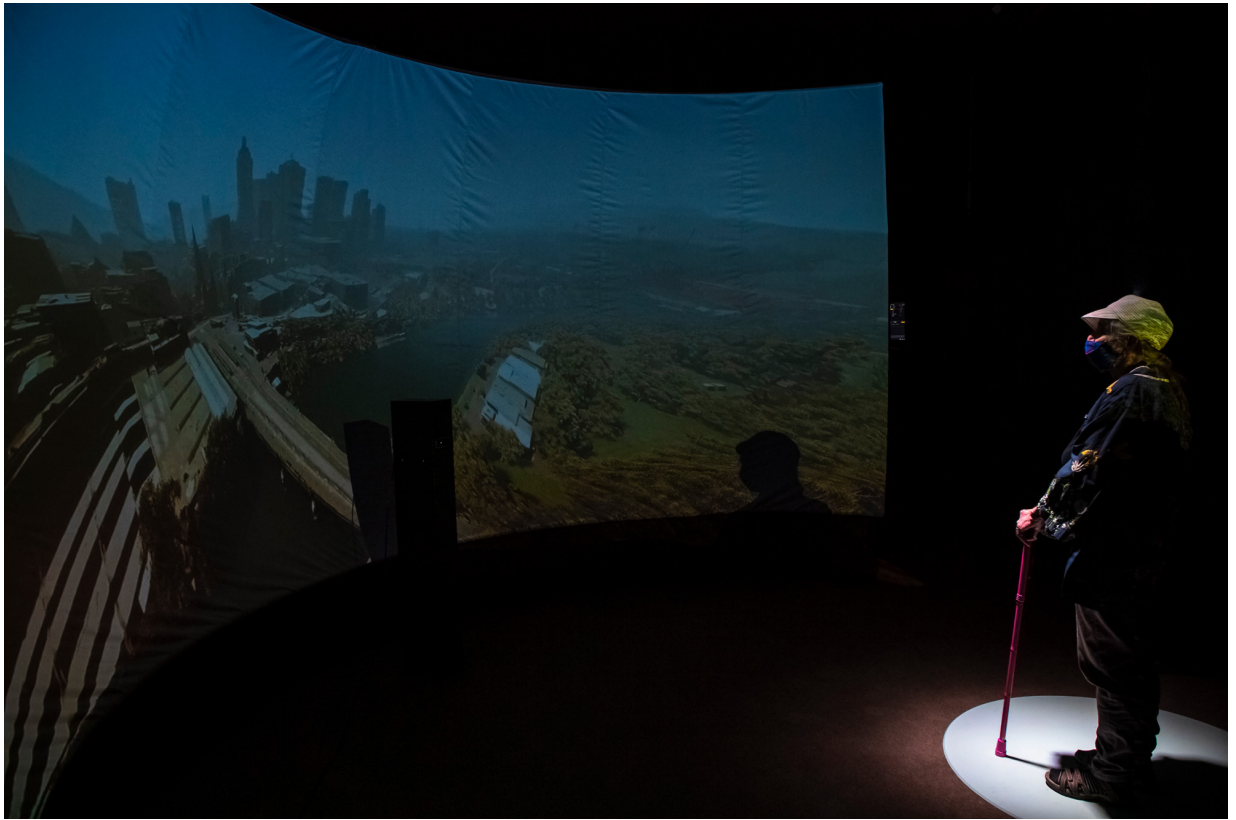
California-based art historian Jessica Santone was introduced to these projects in the course of researching pedagogical art – forms or practices of public pedagogy and/or experimental learning that expand on or challenge institutional approaches to knowledge – with particular focus on projects that address climate futures. Coleman, Rae, Walton, and Santone met remotely on Zoom in April 2024 to talk about their work. In the conversation that follows, we discuss the development of the two speculative futures projects, the importance of intergenerational justice, the plurality of knowledges embraced, and how their practices took shape as responses to the permacrisis that encourage messy, collaborative, pluralistic visions of the future.

1. For more information about *Child of Now* visit <https://robertwalton.net/project/child-of-now/>

2. For more information about The Centre for Reworlding visit <https://www.centreforreworlding.com/>

Figure 1

A visitor takes a giant's eye view over the Birrarung River in Child of Now



Note. Photo: Gregory Lorenzutti (2022)

Figure 2

Refugium



Note. Digital still from short film. Credit: Centre for Reworlding (2021)

Jessica (moderator of conversation)

Let's begin by looking at the origins of your two projects. What questions or ideas brought you to these projects?

Claire

Child of Now started as an imagining by Robert. I was invited to add my knowledge of speculative thinking. *Child of Now* has always been driven by the idea that we need to increase our empathy. To do that, we need to expand the in-group, the people we consider part of 'us', to encompass all living people and all people into the future. If we imagine that the people who are not yet born are as important as the people living now, then the drive to not destroy our world is greatly heightened – because we need to keep the people of the future alive.

At the same time, I was working on a video with Jen called *REFUGIUM*, from which the *Centre for Reworlding* arose, which was also about empathy for the children of the future. To me, the most important thing about the two projects is this idea of empathy for people not yet born.

Robert

Child of Now came from a moment in my life when I was thinking about whether I would have a child, which as a queer man, was not on the cards unless I took some radical action. This decision hit me in a more emotional way than I anticipated. I thought, if I don't have children, what could I do with my energy that my friends who are having children don't have the capacity for? What life would a child born now lead? Are we all their parents? Then, there was another thought: how do you put your money where your mouth is as an artist, to make a project that actually engages with people to enable a conversation about the next century? What does an ambitious artwork look like, and what should you spend your energy doing?

These realisations made me wonder how to create space and time to imagine the next century with people who don't feel like they have that luxurious capacity. How can an artwork enable people to develop a sense of agency over their own future and the collective future of the city? That's where the idea of radical empathy for each other comes in.

Jen

The idea for the *Centre for Reworlding* originated in 2015 after watching another monotonous climate documentary amongst an already-converted audience – world premiere, big money, big names, same narrative and standing ovations. The status quo is killing us. I sat sobbing in the back of the theatre which became a threshold-crossing moment that radically shifted my thinking and practice towards adaptation and disaster preparedness...a form of surrender per se (Rae 2019).

I first named 'Centre for Reworlding' in a fictional essay (Rae 2020) responding to an oration Claire Coleman (2020) gave during Alex Kelly and David Pledger's *Assembly for the Future* (2020). Claire and I were already writing *REFUGIUM* (originally conceived as a live performance work) via Zoom calls during the Covid-19 lockdowns. The Zoom call format inspired the idea of a transtemporal communication portal for us to deeply interrogate hard topics – including many unmentionables in existing climate discourses, dystopic and utopic themes from science fiction and to draw from Indigenous versus Western understandings of time and relationality. Expanding timescales and

future casting through the concept of ‘reworlding’ led us to ask: imagining the impacts of climate breakdown, could we build the foundations now so children can adapt and thrive in a climate-volatile future?

The name for our film *REFUGIUM* comes from a biological concept about how organisms profoundly reorganise their systems to avoid extinction in volatile environments. This concept, along with a Noongar story that I heard from Koreng Wudjari Noongar writer and researcher Cass Lynch, inspired aspects of the film and the *Centre for Reworlding*. It is an idea that also aligns with Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s call for ‘radical resurgence’ – “an extensive, rigorous and profound reorganization of things” (2017:48-49) that critically changes our thinking about the interconnectedness of all relational systems.

Figure 3

First Assembly of the Centre for Reworlding (2021) by Jen Rae in collaboration with Claire G. Coleman.



Note. A multi-platform creative work with ceremony and palaver. Photo: Emma Byrnes (2021)

Jessica

I'm inspired by the questions you all have been asking about how to create ambitious artworks, what conversations we're not having, and how to build foundations for the future. How did those questions become forms – that is, how did they find physical, material expression in the world? How did these initial concerns propel the development of your two projects, Centre for Reworlding and Child of Now?

Jen

It's not necessarily about form anymore for me or defining any practice to an art world constraint. My practice and the work of the *Centre for Reworlding* exist in relation to emergent and experimental practices within the permacrisis context. When we wrote the script for *REFUGIUM*, we didn't intend then to actually create the *Centre for Reworlding* as conceptualised in the film, but were prompted to explore the idea after someone asked us if it was possible and we received some seed funding. Characters in the film were actual people, so we invited them to spend a year together to ideate its formation. The *Centre for Reworlding* brings together different projects by our collaborators, under an umbrella that informs how we work together. Our work is based within Indigenous pedagogy and protocols. As it is emergent and experimental, improvisation and speculative futuring are fundamental to our processes. We are learning and iterating constantly.

Robert

We knew that *Child of Now* had to be a hybrid of artforms to create the transformative process, the ritual, we needed. Using performance and immersion, we transitioned visitors from their everyday state into the 'everywhen' scenographic environment we designed, so they could become 'the child of now'. This space was crafted for deep reflection on the past 10,000 years – a continuum of life, climate crises, settler invasion, but also love, growth, and extraordinary beauty. We invited visitors to imagine themselves as a link in this enduring chain, as the eternal child of now sensing the lineage of those who have shaped this land and taking responsibility for something bigger than themselves.

Our project creates portraits capturing the diverse spectrum of our community, not only as it exists now but as it might evolve over the next century. We wanted to enable people to approach this complex endeavour through a tactile, immersive, emotional and inviting process. We slowed things down, creating space for participants to engage more fully. One surprising part of the project was our method of asking simple questions as participants became the child of now in the future. People were able to articulate personal insights, but they also connected with broader societal themes – climate, resilience, and the future. This simplicity became the most powerful aspect of our work, overshadowing even the portraiture itself. We achieved a way for people to feel wholly immersed in this imaginative space.

Figure 4

A still from a VR experience encountering the 'holographic' portrait of a visitor.



Note. Photo: Robert Walton

Jen

The *Centre for Reworlding* is focused on methodologies, not models. People want models, instructions and directions, but none exist for the world we're living in. We need to be able to think about context, about the plurality of knowledges and resources in our networks and communities, and how they intersect with others. We need to find joy in long and deep collaboration, or what, in *Refuge* (Arts House 2022), we called "playing in the dark," a dramaturgical methodology of improvisation coined by *Refuge* artist Lee Shang Lun. It is provocation. It is "howing" together with reflexivity, problem-finding and trust in processes. It is an iterative process.

Claire

I think the most important thing about form in both these projects is a concept that Jen talks about all the time: letting questions do the heavy lifting, rather than our answers being important. The way we question ourselves is what drives both these projects. I think it's something that can be learned. We can learn a way of working in which the concept behind the work is questioning, or maybe the work itself is asking questions. Sometimes, the process of thinking about what the work is trying to achieve is the work and is the form itself. The work is completed by the time you know what it's going to be.

Jessica

What Claire just said seems really essential, that so much of the work of these projects starts from, or is, asking questions. While this conversation might not offer models, perhaps, as the beginning of a method, we might invite readers to ask questions.

Let's return to something Robert mentioned: the 'everywhen.' Claire has previously described the development of Child of Now as "using the future to influence the present, which is imagining the future" (Walton 2022, 01:19). How does imagining the future invite new forms of care and justice in our relationship to the present and prompt new ways of responding to the permacrisis? How specifically do these projects actually deploy such future castings? If we approach these artworks as forms or, rather, methods of public pedagogy, what modes of learning or relationships to knowledge do they propose?

Claire

The word "everywhen" was originally coined by an anthropologist called Stanner in 1953 (2009) in an attempt to coin a phrase for Indigenous ways of seeing time, in which there is no abstract idea of a past or future, there's merely an eternal now, where forward, past, present, and future are mere directions. When you think about time that way, then it's possible to see how the past has influenced our present, and how our actions of the past influence where we are now. What people have a hard time imagining is how the future can impact our present, because, of course, we're not in the future yet – we can only imagine it. But if we imagine the future, then instinctively we are responding to that future. The classic example that I often give in workshops is when you wake up in the morning, you predict what the weather is going to be – you do research, look at the weather report, get dressed for the weather, and if you get it wrong, you're in trouble. That is the simplest form of future casting that we all engage in every day. Wake up and, if it's going to be cold, put a jumper on.

In these projects, future casting is used for speculating on the world that is expected to come and comparing that to the world we want. It involves asking: what are we doing to lead to the world we're expecting? What do we need to stop doing to not get that expected future, but imagine

instead what we can do now to bring about a future in which we have a greater chance of our culture surviving? That's part of both projects. I think all three of us are comfortable thinking with this idea that you cannot plan for a future if you can't imagine it. You can actually change the future in important ways if you imagine both where we are currently headed and where we want to go.

Jen

Intergenerational justice is part of Indigenous relational thinking and survivance. Everyone has a role in the collective wellbeing of all things. The young are the future, so they are to be nurtured and protected by the community so they may cultivate a sense of wonder and belonging. This may be followed by a period of learning through risk-taking and initiation through ceremony as one hones their gifts and achieves a particular role or status in the community. Then comes a phase where your role is to cultivate pathways for the next generation and for some they become elders. Intergenerational justice comes from intergenerational attachment and knowledge-sharing. This is not reflected in the Western capitalist society, where generational groups are largely segregated. Take baby boomers for instance. The economic wealth and power of this generation have held power, driven socio-political and economic agendas for decades for a future they won't experience or witness, at the expense of all generations to come. How do we stop this pattern and return to original ways of thinking intergenerationally? What are the skills and knowledges at the threshold of being lost, that our future generations are going to need?

Robert

Returning to what Claire was saying about letting questions do the heavy lifting, I want to respond by asking, how do we create the environmental conditions for future casting? Where can defences be lowered? Can we create the circumstances that enable people to engage deeply enough to expand their sense of self and empathetically connect with a greater collective self? I am dubious about some of the language around this—terms like 'holistic' or 'the whole self' are problematic. But thinking about the body and the specific emotional and physical conditions necessary for future casting, and the inherent vulnerability such engagement demands, is foundational.

I thought a lot about the spatial and sensory qualities – calmness, acoustic characteristics, and textural richness – that create an open-handed invitation for people. In *Child of Now*, we aimed to offer an accessible experience of spaciousness and timefulness, that supports engagement and transformation. Jen described 'playing in the dark'. We're literally dimming the lights to create a sense of being held to encourage the exploration of emotion and imagination in a peaceful setting for growth. We created an extra-daily space for reflection, where visitors are invited to engage with strong emotions as they imagine the future.

Jessica

I appreciate these details about the invitation into the project. How do you also invite different ways of learning or knowing in both your projects? Would Claire or Jen want to add anything about engaging others to participate in the Centre for Reworlding? What is the nature of the invitation, the relationship, or the way of knowing that you propose?

Jen

In our programmes, we have 'palavers', a methodology we've been developing to have hard conversations with strangers about hard topics. Based on 'knowledge circles' or, in Australia, 'yarning circles', the palavers are guided by protocols and ceremony.

The palaver helps break down ego, competition and ‘soapboxing’. It enables inclusive forms of discourse so that long, deep collaboration is possible. The palaver and protocols guide our other work like the *BILYA* Lab and the Creative Resilience Lab.

Claire

Something occurs in both projects, but neither of the others brought it up. One of the strengths of being an artist is having the time to ask the difficult questions in and of society. Art is the process of questioning, to a large extent. Artists are in a position to question what no one else is questioning and think about what no one else has time to think about. What both these projects do – the *Centre for Reworlding* palavers and the *Child of Now* experience – is open up the visitors to the art ‘happening’ – that old sixties word. Visitors to the happening are encouraged to enter this artistic observational and questioning space, to join in the process that artists go through, imagining and thinking about the questions they might not have otherwise had time to think about.

I have discovered through this work that when given time to think about these questions, people come up with solutions and further questions we would not have imagined, because everybody’s way of answering these questions is different. If you give people time to think, we could probably solve most problems. First we have to address our culture’s taboo against adults playing. Jen mentioned before ‘playing in the dark.’ People sometimes ask about our projects, ‘What do you do all day, just play games?’ We don’t really, but that’s what it feels like. By taking away the taboo against playing or experimenting, and allowing people to question anything and take their time to answer, we could probably solve a lot of problems. We never know who has the answer. The way to find the answer to anything is to ask as many people as possible. And that’s what these two projects do. They expose a large number of people to the liminal space of, essentially, a creative development workshop (similar initial process to the production of a performance artwork), and see what happens. And that’s the most powerful thing I’ve ever seen.

Jessica

These two projects share a concern for collaboration, polyvocality, intersectionality, and transdisciplinarity, bringing lots of people in. As Claire was just describing, they invite lots of voices, ways of knowing, and types of thinking and imagination. Can you say more about why it is so important that we think more expansively about collaboration? And, for those who haven’t worked in speculative future-casting before, why does it matter to always undertake this work with others, in collaboration, with difference at the heart of the questions that emerge?

Robert

Child of Now has a deliberate agenda to shape a future distinctly different from our present. Claire and I share a vision where the status quo is not maintained; instead, we imagine an indigenized Australia, moving beyond the colonial legacy towards a reimagined, inclusive society and a future that’s not just different, but more accessible and diverse. Previously we wrote that we wanted *Child of Now* to “foster embodied experiences of indigenized, equitable and sustainable societies, to explore how the future might feel” (Walton and Coleman 2023, 20).

As we thought about a more inclusive future from an intergenerational perspective, we started asking questions: how do we include people across different stages of life? How radically different does the experience need to be for a seven-year-old compared to a 77-year-old? Claire and I realised that *Child of Now* had to offer a bespoke experience to every visitor, where no two interactions are

the same. One practical approach we took was to form a group of future advisors – initially four members, this group will someday expand to ten, spanning every decade of life. This isn't merely an advisory group, but a co-design team that helps make the project inclusive of all age groups, with experiences that are uniquely responsive to each participant, and resonant across generations, language groups, cultural backgrounds, and lived experiences of disability. This diversity brings a breadth of expertise in the room, which is crucial. Our ultimate goal was to create a portrait of a population that is as diverse as the population. So we had to think about creating invitations to participate and experiences that were equally diverse.

Jen

I have always called myself a pragmatic futurist. I often say, how do we hold that sense of urgency at the same time as relationality? Relationality takes time to build trust. As climate impacts continue, many people want the formula; they want the expert to tell them what to do. They can't navigate the complexity, context and uncertainty necessary to exist in a state of perpetual relational responsiveness openly. An intergenerational justice approach helps. I find my child is my best teacher, and right now we're talking about this: if you're always doing easy things, things will almost always be hard; if you do hard things, things will often come easier. But you don't have to do it all yourself. You just need to know how to ask questions, listen, and collaborate with others by also understanding your unique gifts.

In the *Centre for Reworlding*, we know that disasters are messy. But we are not a design company with branded packages and collateral who will offer solutions. We work with the mess as a positive thing. Our programmes are improvisational – a “live” anti-facilitation approach. There are no great instructions, no experts, no technologies that are going to fix our ‘superwicked’ situation with its many interdependencies. It took all the skills and knowledges to get us into the permacrisis. It's going to take all of the skills and knowledges to find a pathway through it. We want people to understand this plurality, that we all have a role in this – that is the invitation.

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SECTION 1:

REIMAGINING ART EDUCATION – SPECULATIVE PEDAGOGIES AND CREATIVE PRACTICES