LABORATORY FOR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN DESIGN

Royal College of Art

2020 - 2025

AiDLab

Laboratory for
Artificial Intelligence in Design
人工智能設計研究所

Royal College of Art
Postgraduate Art & Design

Contents

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Image taken at Polymorph II demonstration at the Royal College of Art SNAP Visualisation Lab, March 2025. Photo: Chris Lee.

Inside cover image
Image taken at Weather Spores AI demonstration at the Royal College of Art SNAP Visualisation Lab, March 2025. Photo: Chris Lee.

Introduction

When the Royal College of Art was founded in 1837, then the Government School of Design, it set out to train the designers of the future by embracing modern industrial technology. It became the Royal College of Art in 1897, but retained its emphasis on training world class designers who were at the forefront of modern technology. Today, over 185 years after its inception the RCA is ranked as the most research-intensive specialist art and design university in the UK.

Throughout the RCA's history, working across disciplines, collaborating with other institutions, both within the UK and internationally, and embracing technological innovations have been key to the success. The Laboratory for Artificial Intelligence in Design, or 'AiDLab' – a partnership between the RCA and Hong Kong Polytechnic University, funded by InnoHK – is exemplary of this kind of international collaboration. It brings together research expertise in both AI and Design to create innovative products and services to address challenges across a range of sectors, from healthcare and automotive to fashion and textiles.

AiDLab is a commercial Research & Development Centre located at the Hong Kong Science Park, and the first platform to focus on integrating Artificial Intelligence with Design. As a creative cluster, its primary objectives are to bring together a diverse mix of leading researchers and practitioners to conduct interdisciplinary research in three areas: Ergonomic and Inclusive Design, Innovation in Product and Service Design, and Intelligent Fashion Design and Quality Control.

Since its establishment in 2020, AiDLab has employed more than 100 researchers across both the RCA and Hong Kong Polytechnic University to collaborate on 22 art- and design-led Artificial Intelligence research projects. This has offered a unique career development opportunity for the 77 early career researchers and 42 postgraduate students involved, providing the next generation of researchers with vital cross-disciplinary skills for future projects.

The programme has also demonstrated the importance of including design research perspectives and approaches to ensure that the human and ethical, as well as commercial, opportunities of AI can be managed and emphasised as this technology advances. Throughout this publication, you'll find accounts of the AI and Design research that has been conducted as part of the AiDLab programme at the RCA.

Funder Acknowledgement

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AI for Wellbeing

Back pain in the workplace

Rama Gheerawo, Tom Stables, Narges Pourshahrokhi, Tong Lo

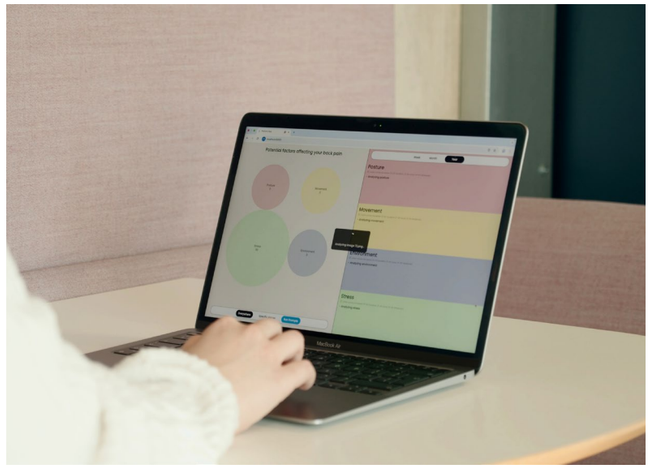
Back pain is one of the most common factors impacting any workforce, leading to reduced well-being, affected performance and absence. Back pain can appear without warning, and the causes are often subtle and happen over an extended period of time. Multiple lifestyle micro actions influence our back health - our personal geometry, work station location and set up, work schedule, level of movement, and more. This project focused on using AI to map posture behaviours in work environments and assess the effects of lifestyle and behavioural factors on health and well-being.

The rise of blended working patterns has meant that the environments in which we work can be highly variable. Traditional offices were designed with ergonomic principles in mind, however people now work from diverse locations including cafés, public spaces, kitchen tables, sofas, and even beds. Conventional workplace advice like 'sit up straight' fails to address this new reality.

The causes of back pain at work are often more complex than simply posture alone; movement, workstation setup, stress and other factors play a critical role. Through visualising the impact of these factors as contributors to back pain, we aim to empower people to make informed decisions at work.

This project aims to use an AI-powered solution that relies on ambiently recorded data to arrive at personalised interventions that take into consideration the variations in people's natural geometries, as well as the different natural and lifestyle factors that impact back pain. Through a multidisciplinary approach that combines inclusive design and machine learning, our team aims to create holistic solutions that work for everyone's unique circumstances and use AI to good effects.

The intervention is informed by Inclusive Design Research - an approach that purposely includes individuals who may be overlooked by traditional design. It considers individual differences in work patterns and locations, alongside variations in geometries, circumstances and habitual behaviours.



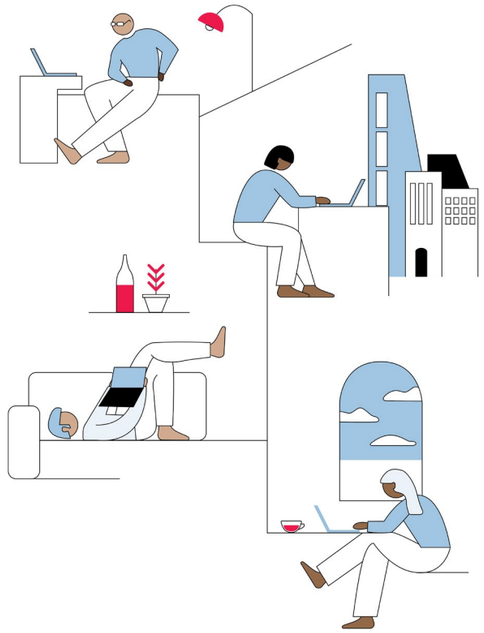
The research activities included interviews and observations to understand the multifaceted nature of lifestyle-related back pain. Interviews with experts in posture and back health gave valuable insight. The project team was able to assess and collate their individual, specialised knowledge to form a more holistic view of back health. Interviews were conducted with people who have or are currently experiencing back pain. Two age-diverse cohorts were involved in field research: under-30 and over-60. These became the project's lead users.

Observational research helped to understand issues with the participants. These research activities offered valuable and holistic insights that informed the design of the digital intervention.

Our findings established that posture is personal to individuals. Therefore, it is important to take a more expansive approach to back health in the workplace, one that considers not only anatomical features but also various lifestyle factors including environmental and behavioural factors.

Our research revealed that knowledge and perception of the causes and management of back pain is variable from person to person, and is often based on inaccuracies and assumptions. AI is particularly well-suited for deployment in this context, not only because of its ability to process complex and large datasets, but also its capacity to identify patterns and correlations between lifestyle factors and images that may be imperceptible to humans.

We have developed a prototype for an app that uses AI to provide a dynamic, personalised and contextual understanding of posture and back pain. The interface design aims to give form to the intangible behaviours that can have an impact on an individual's health, creating the opportunity for them to make personalised, informed decisions about how to manage their back health in the future. This could help people to see if work factors are potentially the cause of their back pain. The app also is intended to enable a better conversation between patients and healthcare providers about back health, empowering people to take agency in their own health and lifestyles.



AiLoupe

Intelligent Design System for Innovation

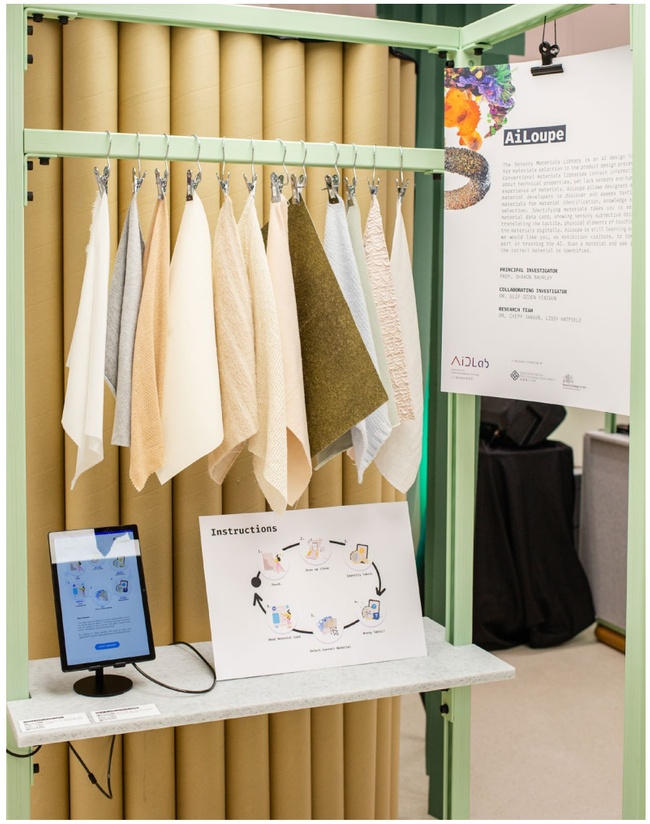
Sharon Baurley, Elif Ozden Yenigun, Chipp Jansen, Lissy Hatfield, Tuo Oscar Boyuan, Ma Toto Zhengtao

Introducing AiLoupe - a mobile application which uses image-based material recognition of textile materials in a purpose-built Sensory Materials Library to equip designers with the necessary knowledge to identify, select and source materials in the studio and at fabric expos.

Through the experience of designing and working with materials, designers develop deep sensory knowledge of the properties of materials. However, they often struggle to articulate and communicate this knowledge to others in industry because of the lack of a common language to describe the characteristics of materials.

Digital materials libraries could help to increase the accessibility of the characteristics of materials, however these libraries lack sensory data. Gathering this data is constrained by current textile industry tools which rely on expensive and high-tech equipment, as well as a focus on technical standardisation.

We developed the Sensory Materials Library, a dataset of over 100 materials, which provides an inclusive and holistic approach to making the sensory properties accessible within a materials library. To generate data on the human experience of textiles, we conducted textile assessment studies in various



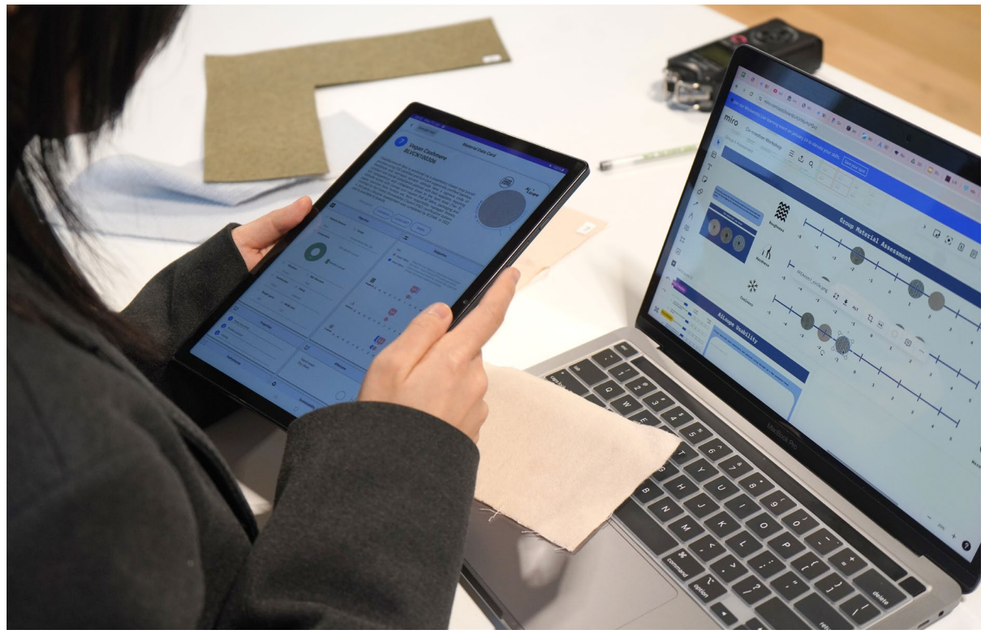
settings, including both individual assessments with textile experts, and in groups at international design conferences.

As the Sensory Materials Library grew through the use of human-centred design methods, we began developing an application, AiLoupe, to demonstrate the multisensory qualities of the data on materials. AiLoupe uses a bespoke AI image recognition model to identify similar materials within the Library, which provides designers with the necessary knowledge to identify, source and select materials in the design process through detailed Material Data Cards.

The Material Data Cards present objective data, such as composition, structure and mechanical performance properties, but also subjective data on the sensory properties of materials generated using industry equipment in the Materials Science Research Centre's Immersion Lab at the Royal College of Art. The Cards also include information on aftercare, supply chain, sustainability and recyclability.

These two tools allow designers to store and share both physical and sensory

properties of materials, thereby reducing the waste and energy that is often associated with sourcing, sampling and logistics. They enable human intervention and creativity, and allow for a responsive manufacturing process, and encourage more educated and sustainable materials selection within the design process.

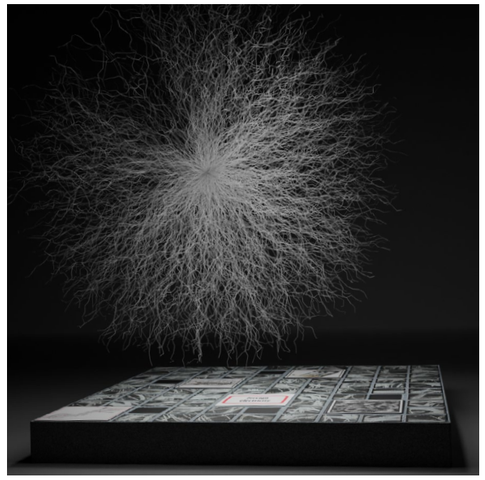


Weather Spores AI

Real World AI Narrative Ecologies

Johnny Golding, Tom Simmons, John Wild, Manu Luksch, Mukul Patel

Our Real World AI Narrative Ecologies lab investigated new practice-led logics for learning about, engaging with, and re-imagining AI storytelling in the real world. Led by contemporary art practice, our methodology mirrors cutting-edge advancements in generative AI through an interdisciplinary approach that links contemporary philosophy from poetics to complexity to emergence, symbiotic intelligence with specific emphasis on mycelium, digital directions and the sonic arts. Combined with pedagogical tools to reflect on the technologies used to build AI infrastructures and systems, our methods and outputs promote the creation of alternative and more equitable AI imaginaries and narrative structures, inspiring new routes for public awareness, active participation in innovation, technology and skill-set development.



Our approach uniquely emphasises the critical importance of asemic meaning, indeterminacy and undecidability, in contrast to traditional methods that have tended to revolve around randomness for its sense of 'creativity' and openness. The move towards undecidability over randomness has been critically significant, especially in addressing knowledge and innovation gaps relating to creative approaches to STEM/STEAM as linked with AI/XR access and development for artists, designers, higher education students and professional teams. Importantly, it has also enabled a wholly new way to experience immersivity as both a multimodal sensorial experience, as well as a hands-on method to develop multidimensional narrative ecologies.

To make this complex, playful and experimental practice-led logic accessible to wider audiences, we created a physical AI/AR game-based toolkit and XR short course, titled Weather Spores AI. The AI/AR game kit allows participants to travel through a multi-dimensional maze of five immersive portals, shapeshifting across knowledge systems and new materials, encountering AI through the throw of a dice.

In the first portal, players take an augmented wander through dense 1000-year-old forests, experiencing the symbiotic interspecies intelligence of mycelium, birds and the entangled visual, sonic and sensuous relationships that exist between the geosphere, atmosphere and electronic Noosphere.

The second portal contains Ana-Cartographies in which players navigate across expanded geographies of urban AI data systems, underground cables and complex arrays of energy-hungry cooling systems built along the route of the former British colonial all red-line, before falling through to **the third portal**, Extractivism (Capital pAIns). Here, present-tense archaeologies of the supply chains that deliver AI can be witnessed and shared, and we encounter a performative exploration of AI's hidden planetary and human costs, bringing environmental sustainability into AI design futures.

With the fourth portal, Unknowing/Asemic, or How Meaning Gets Made, players experiment with carbon and blow straws and 'sticky encounters' via the strange and wild worlds of 'emergence' and 'indeterminacy' to create art-driven algorithms to re-think the very nature of 'generative' AI as experimental, emergent materialities that literally 'make' or 'create' sense.

Or step sideways into **the fifth portal Open Deck**, where the very fundamentals of linear and non-linear thinking and creating triangulate with the political, the cultural and ethical to encourage different forms of individual and collective agency.

Players engage as makers with new logics for learning about, engaging with and re-imagining AI storytelling in the real world - including complex moves of multi-phased portal-hopping, textured topological narrative structures and generative coding platforms to express 'mood', 'atmosphere', 'curiosity' and 'sense' - rethinking immersive generative AI from the ground up and for the common good.

Spatial AI Modelling Emulator

Revolutionising Space Design Experiences

Ali Asadipour, Mohammad Kargar, Imran Hameed

Spatial AI Modelling Emulator, or SAIME (pronounced “Same”), is an AI-driven platform that converts intuitive user descriptions - whether text, speech, or sketch - into detailed 3D spatial representations, enabling non-technical users to optimise space according to their preferences.

Designing and planning new commercial and residential spaces is a complex process, often slowed by the late discovery of flaws that require costly post-occupancy corrections. While immersive technologies like Virtual Reality offer some support by simulating interior environments, they are typically expensive and limited to early design stages.

According to Knight Frank’s 2023 Wealth Report, land costs remain exceptionally high in global megacities, which has led to a disregard for the efficient use of space, further limiting the availability of land for public use. In Hong Kong, limited space has led to vertical living arrangements, with public housing averaging 13.8 square metres per person as of 2023. Retail spaces are also constrained, with rents on Hong Kong Island averaging 1,553 Hong Kong dollars per square metre in 2019.

Traditional spatio-temporal simulation methods for space and process optimisation can be labour-intensive, error-prone, and time-consuming. A more integrated, user-focused approach is needed - one that uses digital tools throughout the project lifecycle to anticipate spatial needs, reduce errors, and minimise the need for reactive interventions after construction or occupancy begins.

SAIME integrates industry best practices from interior design, construction standards, retail space guidelines, audit frameworks, and health and safety regulations and empowers users to co-create compliant, efficient spaces that align with their specific needs and behaviours. It provides no-code simulation of the necessary processes within a cyber-physical system to assess the impact of new designs on task performance. This functionality is invaluable for large businesses (e.g. pharmaceutical supply chains) that are under increasing pressure to meet stringent performance indicators, balancing regulatory compliance with operational efficiency and customer-centric service delivery. It also allows individuals (business owners rather than franchises) to personalise spaces. SAIME is not intended to replace human creativity but rather to serve as a recommender system, ensuring collaborative co-design and personalised solutions.

Market figures reveal strong opportunities for SAIME’s adoption across diverse sectors. In construction and architecture - a $11 trillion industry - real-time spatial simulations can reduce delays and costs. The $5.4 trillion logistics sector benefits from optimised space and workflows, cutting operational expenses by up to 30%. Retail and commercial real estate, worth $4 trillion, can improve customer engagement through dynamic layouts. Through its multifaceted capabilities, SAIME stands poised to revolutionise spatial planning, process simulation, and user-centred design across industries worldwide.

AiDLab Timeline

July 2020
Start of the AiDLab research programme

Oct 2021
AiDLab seminar series commences

July 2023
DeSForM Conference

AiDLab hosted the 12th edition of DeSForM - Boundless: Aesthetics, Human Experience and Intelligence for the New Normal. The conference presented leading research that investigates the integration of aesthetics, functionality and advance technologies to enhance experiences, well-being, and business.

Sept 2023
Fashion x AI exhibition at Mills Fabrica

Nov 2023
Dubai Design Week

AiDLab projects were exhibited as part of Dubai Design Week

July 2024
Culture x AI event at the V&A Museum

Culture x AI exhibition and fashion show at the V&A Museum in London included a display of AiDLab research projects

Sept 2024
London Design Festival

AiDLab projects were included in an exhibition in Battersea as part of London Design Festival

Oct 2024
Times Higher Education Shortlist

The project was shortlisted for the International Collaboration of the Year award at the Times Higher Education Awards

June 2025
AiDLab Celebration of Research at RCA

Designing AI Experiences for Autonomous Mobility

How Design is Shaping the Future of Autonomous Vehicle Experiences

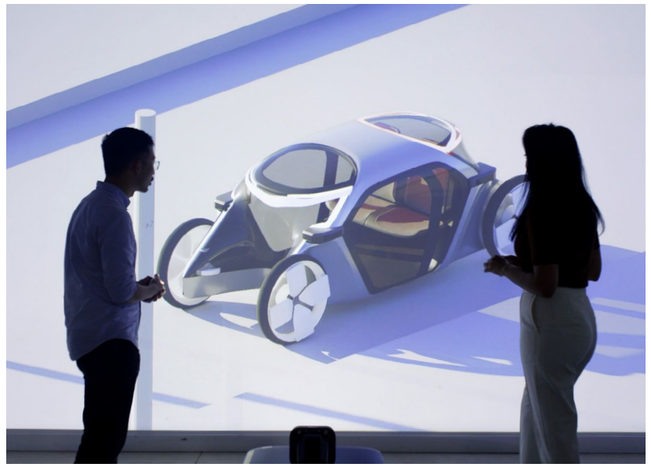
Dale Harrow, Cyriel Diels, Farhana Safa, Yichen Shu, Herin Haramoto

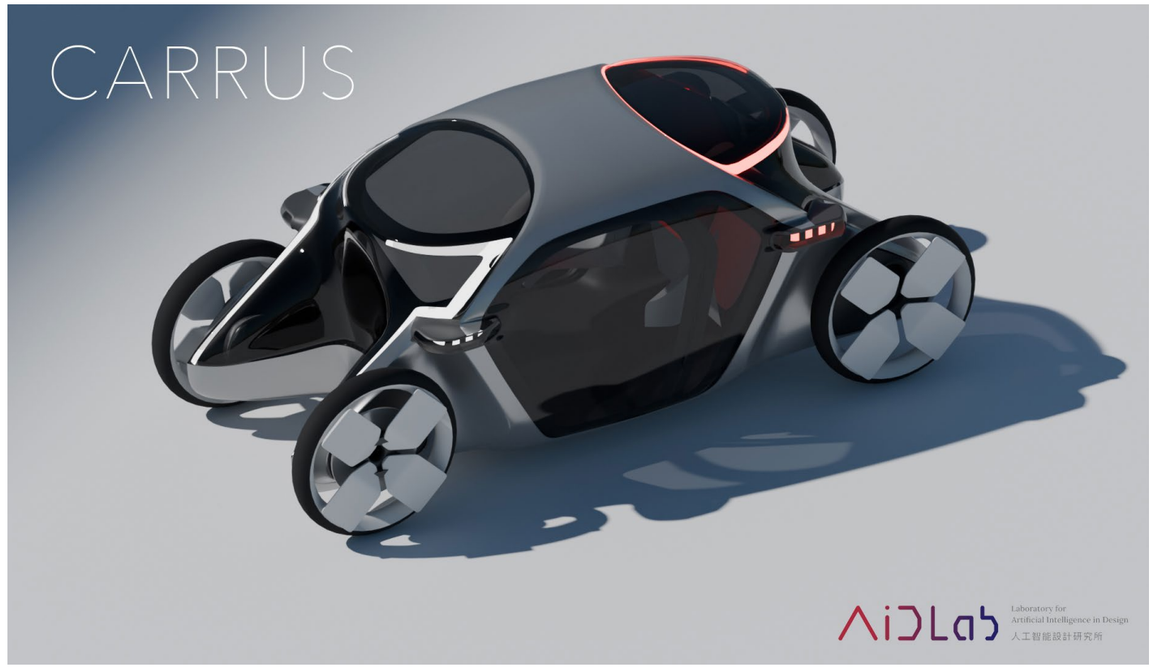
As autonomous vehicles transition from concept to reality, the focus of innovation is expanding beyond the enabling hardware and software. Increasingly, the critical question is not just how these vehicles will operate, but how people will engage with them. This project addresses that emerging challenge by reimagining people's experiences of autonomous vehicles, emphasising trust, inclusivity, and emotional resonance.

The project centres around the experience of Artificial Intelligence as it is embodied within autonomous vehicles. It is about crafting interactions that communicate clearly and intuitively, inspire confidence and elevate our journey experiences for both passengers inside the vehicles and pedestrians on the street.

Guided by principles from social robotics, the project advanced along two interconnected design streams. The first involved the development of intuitive, embedded interfaces that facilitate seamless communication between autonomous vehicles and their users.

These interfaces are designed to humanise the technology, shifting the perception of these vehicles away from





impersonal machines to approachable, intelligent companions. At the same time, the vehicle's exterior was treated as a communicative medium, employing ambient sensory cues - such as lighting or motion patterns - to intuitively convey intentions to pedestrians and other road users.

The second design stream focused on the physical form and spatial layout of the vehicle itself. Interior and exterior elements were considered as vital communicative and emotional touchpoints. Drawing inspiration from the iconic Brougham carriage of 19th-century London, the team envisioned a compact, accessible autonomous vehicle with a strong identity and a premium feel - an elegant nod to history, reimagined for tomorrow's streets.

Ultimately, the project aims to drive public adoption of autonomous vehicles by making the journey not only safe and efficient but emotionally resonant. In doing so, it positions future mobility as not just autonomous, but also empathetic, and nudges society one step closer to embracing more sustainable mobility futures.

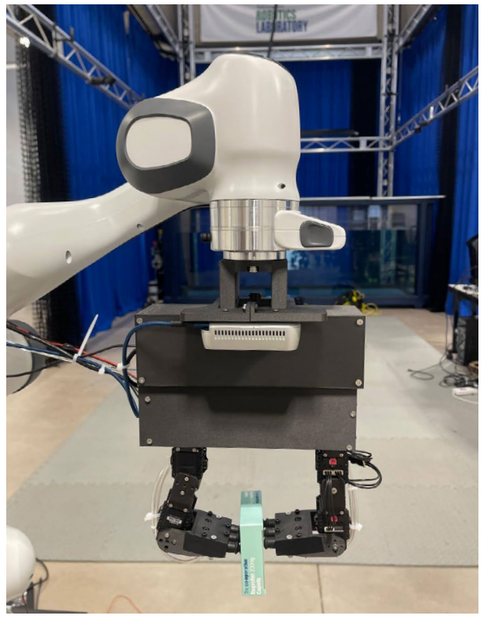
Supported by a series of publications, the project resulted in an innovative concept for a premium, inclusive two-seater autonomous vehicle, showcased through imaginative digital and physical designs. To bring the experience to life, a mixed reality environment allowed people to explore interactions with the vehicle from both inside and outside.

MedSort-X

AI Enabled Efficiency for Medicine Supply Chains

Sina Sareh, Rasoul Sadeghian, Sharooz Shahin

MedSort-X aims to enhance the efficiency of recycling programmes by developing an innovative, autonomous solution to streamline the process of sorting and checking the quality of unused medicines. Inspired by previous volunteer-driven initiatives, such as the UCL recycling of unused medicine, our system automates this critical process, removing the need for manual intervention. The machine is designed to receive medication packages in a mixed form, perform a thorough quality check for visual damages and expiration dates, and then sort the usable medicines into designated categories for safe reuse or proper disposal.

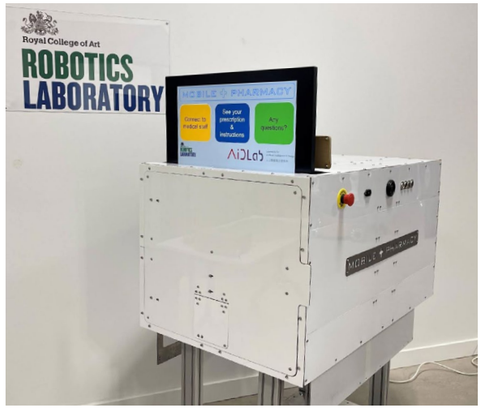


The first step in the project involved designing a robust and scalable machine capable of autonomously receiving, inspecting, and sorting a variety of medication packaging formats. This machine is integrated with computer vision technology, sensors, and artificial intelligence algorithms to inspect the surface of the packaging for visual damages, such as tears, discolouration, or leakage. It also checks expiry dates on labels using Optical Character Recognition to extract and read text from the packaging, ensuring that it identifies expired medications accurately.

The system's ability to learn and adapt to new medication types and packaging formats is a critical component. Machine learning algorithms were trained on a diverse dataset of medication packaging images, allowing the system to classify and recognize different types of packaging while considering environmental factors such as lighting and angle. The AI system evaluates whether the visual integrity of each package meets the standards for reuse and whether it remains within its expiration window.

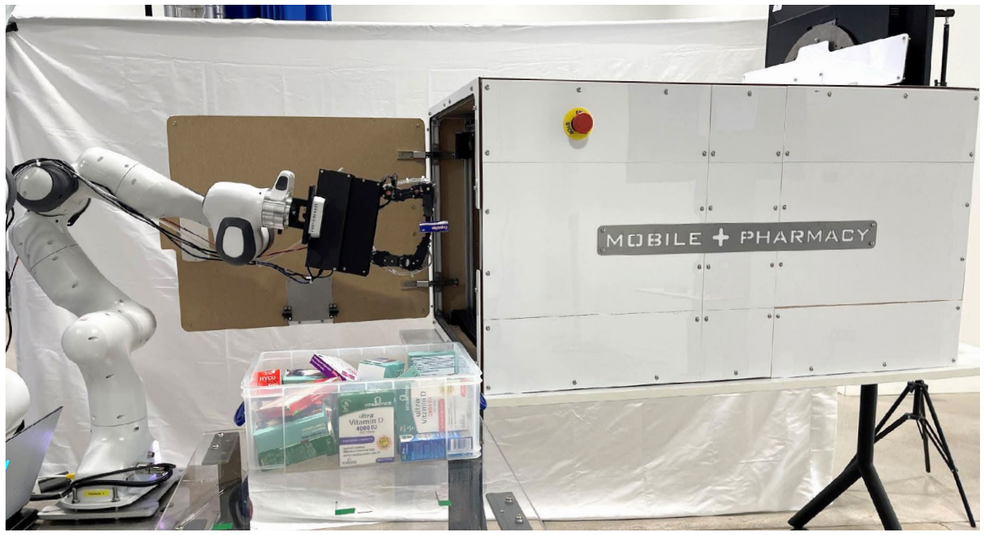
Once the inspection is complete, the system employs an automated sorting mechanism to separate the usable medicines from those that are either damaged or expired. The sorting process involves different categories based on the level of usability, ensuring that only safe and viable medications are redirected for reuse, while expired or damaged ones are sent for proper disposal. Testing was conducted to refine the machine's capabilities, ensuring a high accuracy rate in detecting defects and sorting medicines appropriately.

The autonomous system significantly improves the efficiency and accuracy of unused medicine recycling. Automating the process reduces the dependence on human volunteers and mitigates the risks of human error, and ensures that only medicines in good condition are reused.



By ensuring that only usable and safe medications are recycled, the system helps reduce the waste that occurs when products are disposed of without proper checks. This contributes to more sustainable practices in healthcare, decreasing the environmental impact associated with unused pharmaceutical products.

The underlying technology behind the system is adaptable to a variety of industries beyond medicine. For example, it could be used in the food industry to inspect and sort food packaging based on expiration dates, visual defects, or contamination. This flexibility opens up numerous opportunities for automation in quality control and sorting across diverse industries.



Polymorph II

Artificial and Distributed Intelligence and the Challenge of the 4th Industrial Revolution

Johnny Golding, Maggie Roberts, Jeremy Keenan

This project asks how we can begin to develop collective agency, new forms of imagination, ethical responsibility and build trust in AI, given the challenges it presents and the increasingly entangled ecologies of human-interspecies-machine co-evolution.

We were inspired by the nine brains and distributed skin transitions of the common cephalopod, and in particular, focussing on the playful ways they can instantaneously reconfigure themselves, with different textural and camouflaged patterning allowing them to uncannily become a variegated coral reef or rock. This was the starting point for our different approaches to collective agency, imagination and the challenge of human-interspecies-machine co-evolution linked to generative AI.

We sought to foreground 'noise' and other peculiar forms of patterning – uneven, disruptive, atonal and oddly textural – often in the form of psychedelic topologies, point-cloud skins and camouflage. Taking a deep dive into systemic phase transitions, exploring both localised dynamics and topological mechanisms that could drive a self-assembly of such transformations, we emphasised indeterminacy over probability or randomness. We emphasised multidimensional time flows and odd forms of grammar over targets and retrieval indexing, producing 'sticky cohesions' that incorporated wildly multi-modal inputs which enabled the development of a new logic that could account for the emergence of complex adaptive systems and architectural self-organisation within multi-sensorial physical and multi-modal synthetic systems, where collective/topological self-assemblage emerges amidst systemic frustration.

Focusing on generative AI models and platforms, with specific emphasis on Stable Diffusion's inability to get beyond internally generated bias, we developed the complex adaptive system Intermodal. Intermodal retrained the current Stable Diffusion model, resulting in the creation of a generative AI architecture that can adapt to the stimulus around it (image, sound, light, motion) – creating its own 'authentic' or 'original' output assets and,

in so doing, filtering out existing biases of the base AI model.

This cutting edge result took existing visual programming environments Touch Designer and Stable Diffusion and fine-tuned them to create a prototypical testing and training ground for AI models. We were able to create a 'living system' AI model, one that was continuously trained through responding to a complex adaptive network. By focusing on a Machine Learning architecture as a living system and re-thinking it as coded skin forming disruptive patterns of distributed intelligence, all trained on feedback loop responses between different kinds of synthetic and real-world environments, we were able to challenge current systems of bias and learning in AI. We have exhibited some of these models as immersive, interactive real-time environments called 'Polymorph', a continuous training model that creates a data imprint with unique aesthetics to the asset.

Our Artificial and Distributive Intelligence Lab led to an understanding of how bias is embedded in popular AI generators such as Stable Diffusion. This has enabled a precise way to pinpoint areas in the AI architectures responsible for the replication of bias. Importantly, presents a new way of working with multi-modal sensory data input where participants become part of a living system that produces an immersive environment in real time and develops a 'living currency' around trust and authenticity. This marks a critical and urgent breakthrough in the challenge of moving from 'players' to 'makers' to create new imaginaries in real time and via immersive multi-sensory participant environments that can now be prototyped using sensor technology and evolving AI models.

Future plans include a commercial development of the Intermodal complex adaptive system to create immersive and emergent digital assets that act as unique trust markers. Named GLYPH (Generative Layer for Procedural Holomarks), these markers can be positioned as visual systems that make cryptographic processes perceptible to human users offering the potential to transform how digital trust is communicated and understood across sectors.

Neo Couture

Development of User-centred Methodologies for AI Assisted Bespoke Craftsmanship for Couture Fashion

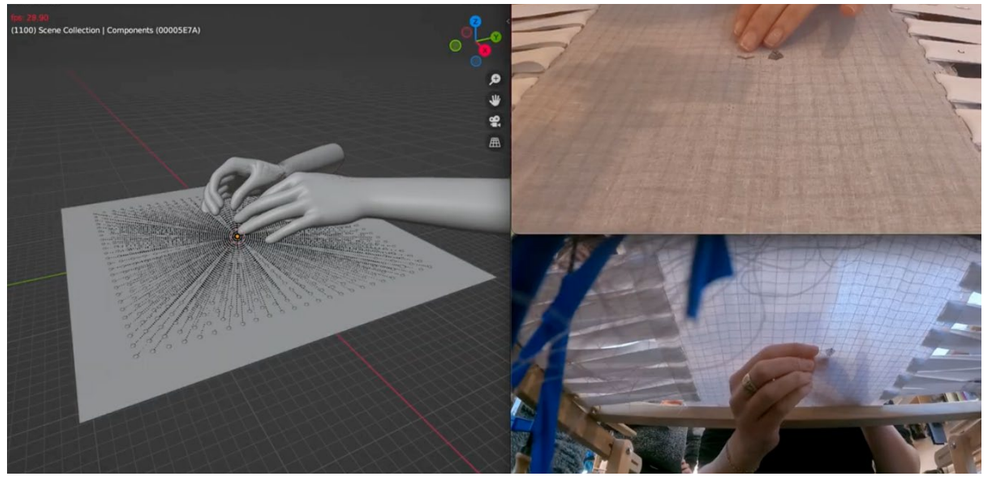
Anne Toomey, Zowie Broach, Louis Alderson-Bythell, Henrietta Dent, Chaonan Lin, Duncan Carter

Neo Couture focuses on advancing AI capabilities in digitised craftsmanship, particularly in haute couture embroidery. It is not about replication or expediency. Instead, it is about capturing the hands of the embroiderer and creating unique focused data sets to archive their process. The Neo Couture suite looks to extend the practice of tomorrow's couture craftsmanship.

The project responds to a recognised challenge in the global luxury fashion industry to foster new ways of stabilising the diminishing skills needed for the high-end luxury market. While automated digital fabrication for embroidery is commonly used throughout the ready-to-wear sector, the fabrication technologies still trail behind the human hand when it comes to the complexities, sophistication and beauty for which couture embroidery is known.

The research shows the importance of the authorship of the artisan's intuitive approach to co-create with this integrated AI system. A system that will enhance future training programmes for fashion houses and educational institutions, sustain the luxury markets' dependency on training a sufficient number of artisans, and at the same time preserve the artisanal embroidery skills that are essential to the world of haute couture and other luxury industries.

Neo Couture combines a computer-vision and sensor-based system to accurately capture hand gestures and stitch data



during embroidery. This data is used to train AI models that provide real-time feedback and long-term mentorship for skill development. The platform also includes an interactive design tool, Creative Draw, where users can sketch motifs and generate embroidery-style visuals. It is powered by a custom image-generation model fine-tuned on traditional references, helping users explore ideas and grow new patterns inspired by historical techniques.

Together, these components form a dual-intelligence system where human expertise and machine learning work together to preserve, teach, and evolve the craft of embroidery. At this critical stage in the development of machine learning, this research combines traditional craftsmanship with digital technology that respects the humanness and time taken, facilitating both the archiving and the passing on of these rare and specialist skills.

> "Intelligence is not something which exists, but something one does.
>
> It is active, interpersonal and generative and it manifests when we think and act.
>
> James Bridle, Ways of Being, 2022

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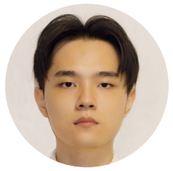

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