A Brief History of The Arts Catalyst
Introduction

This small publication marks the 20th anniversary year of The Arts Catalyst. It celebrates some of the 120 artists’ projects that we have commissioned over those two decades.

Based in London, The Arts Catalyst is one of the UK’s most distinctive arts organisations, distinguished by ambitious artists’ projects that engage with the ideas and impact of science. We are acknowledged internationally as a pioneer in this field and a leader in experimental art, known for our curatorial flair, scale of ambition, and critical acuity. For most of our 20 years, the programme has been curated and produced by the (founding) director with curator Rob La Frenais, producer Gillean Dickie, and The Arts Catalyst staff team and associates.

Our primary focus is new artists’ commissions, presented as exhibitions, events and participatory projects, that are accessible, stimulating and artistically relevant. We aim to produce provocative, playful, risk-taking projects that spark dynamic conversations about our changing world. This is underpinned by research and dialogue between artists and world-class scientists and researchers.

The Arts Catalyst has a deep commitment to artists and artistic process. We work with artists at pivotal stages in their careers, providing opportunities for them to develop bold projects in unusual contexts. Past projects have involved flying teams of artists and scientists in zero gravity in Russia, recreating historical bio-warfare experiments off the coast of Scotland, setting up live scientific experiments as art installations, siting futuristic art-science labs in remote landscapes, and enabling artists’ access to restricted scientific establishments.

Upcoming projects develop enduring themes around deep time, autonomous research, bioethics, and the global commons (oceans, poles, atmosphere and outer space), working with both established and emerging artists to create inspiring and thought-provoking new art experiences.

Nicola Triscott, Director
‘Body Visual’ was one of The Arts Catalyst’s first major projects, which commissioned Helen Chadwick, Letizia Galli and Donald Rodney to collaborate with medical scientists to develop new work, resulting in a touring exhibition.

Helen Chadwick undertook a residency at the Assisted Conception Unit, Kings College Hospital, producing her series of works ‘Unnatural Selection’, which notably she considered her most serious body of work. Closely working with scientists and doctors, Chadwick gained a special insight into the science of human fertility and processes behind assisted conception. Her microphotographs of human embryos—which were specifically donated to her art by couples undergoing IVF—are placed in jewel-like arrangements interspersed with other images from the natural world, such as dandelion clocks, evoking the fragile potential of these human stilled lives.

Letitia Galli’s works were informed by the latest findings (at the time) in the field of neurology, and in particular reflected the effects of the neurotransmitter dopamine on obsessive states such as drug addiction and falling in love.

Donald Rodney’s photographic triptych ‘Flesh of my Flesh’ was a deeply personal statement on medical science, reflecting his feelings about what he considered to be discriminatory attitudes of certain medical personnel during his long-term treatment for sickle-cell anaemia.
Project: Atomic

Artists: James Acord, Mark Aerial Waller, Carey Young

Year: 1998–1999

Locations: Imperial College Gallery, London, and then toured nationally and internationally including to Kluze Fortress, Slovenia

‘Atomic’ was a series of three artists’ commissions, resulting in a touring exhibition that explored the cultural and economic legacy of harnessing the power of the atom.

It placed controversial American nuclear sculptor James Acord — the only private individual in the world to hold a licence to handle radioactive materials — who had moved to live on the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in the USA, into the heart of British science, Imperial College London, where he created a series of reliquaries to the nuclear age.

The Arts Catalyst also gave Carey Young her first commission for which she travelled to Russia to photograph the still radioactive legacy of the former USSR space and nuclear programmes, and negotiated access for Mark Aerial Waller to Oldbury Nuclear Power Station to film his short thriller ‘Glow Boys’, featuring the legendary Mark E. Smith from The Fall, which parodied contemporary perceptions and fear of nuclear technology.
Project: Microgravity Interdisciplinary Research (M.I.R.)

Artists & Scientists: Anna Alchuk, Ansuman Biswas & Jem Finer, Alexei Blinov, Dr Anthony Bull, Ewen Chardronnet, Kitsou Dubois & co., Vadim Fishkin, Dr Kevin Fong, Dr Rebecca Forth, Flow Motion, Stefan Gec, Imperial College Biodynamics Group, Andrew Kotting, Yuri Leiderman, Trevor Mathison, Evgeni Nesterov, The Otolith Group & Richard Couzins, Marko Peljhan, Mikhail Ryklin, Marcel.li Antunez Roca, Mike Stubbs, Andrey & Julia Velikanov, Neal White, Morag Wightman, Louise K Wilson, Dragan Zivadinov

Years: 2000–2004

Locations: Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre, Star City, Russia. European Space Agency, Bordeaux, France.

One of the most fascinating aspects of manned space flight is the state of zero gravity: astronauts and objects floating in air.

The Arts Catalyst’s pioneering zero gravity programme enabled over 50 artists, musicians, scientists and philosophers to access weightless conditions on parabolic flights, as well as other space facilities such as the giant centrifuge, at the Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre in Star City, heart of the Russian space programme, and at the European Space Agency. Prior to these flights (2000–2004), the aesthetic possibilities of zero gravity had barely been explored, due to its exclusiveness.

Outcomes of these “flying laboratories” included 16 artist commissions that continue to be presented in galleries, museums and festivals around the world, and two scientific papers. These include Turner Prize nominees the Otolith Group’s first ever commission, the film Otolith I; a collaboration between dancer Kitsou Dubois and the Biodynamics research group at Imperial College London; and Jem Finer & Ansuman Biswas’ Zero Genie, in which the artists playfully attempt to ride flying carpets and smoke a hookah.

Some of the flights were organised in cooperation with Projekt Atol, V2 Institute for the Unstable Media, Leonardo-OLATS & Moscow’s TV Gallery.
Group photo of the participants on the MIR Flight 001, 2001
The Arts Catalyst’s ground breaking artist airshows encouraged artists to work with ideas of flight, aeronautical culture, and the air as a medium, and gave audiences unique, unusual and rewarding participatory art experiences.

The first airshow took place at the former Royal Aircraft Establishment workshops in Farnborough, a deserted research facility in which covert projects had been developed during WWII and the Cold War. During the day, hundreds of people watched the launching of artists’ flying objects, rockets and UAVs, and experienced installations and experiments through the abandoned wind tunnels, test tanks and flight simulators.

The 2nd International Artists Airshow reflected the explosive nature of Gunpowder Park, formerly a munitions testing ground. Using engineering and technical expertise, artists attempted to realise the dream of flight with experiments including a spectacular one-person flying platform, a trained eagle documenting the movements of the audience below, and a large-scale pyrotechnic work that attempted to block out the sun.

The Great Glen Artists Airshow was a two-day event at Loch Ruthven, in the Scottish Highlands. Artists investigated wind currents and the flight paths of birds, gave poetry readings and GPS balloon performances, facilitated participatory flying of ‘suprematist kites’, and rendered a vast smoke drawing, tracing the contours of the fell landscape.
This page:

Simon Faithfull
Escape Vehicle no.6, 2004
Image: James Leadbitter &
stills from live video relay.

Next page, above:

Camila Sposati
Yellow Vanishing
Point, 2010
Image: Kristian Buus

Next page, below:

Ben Blakebrough
Winged Self, 2007
Image: Chis Welch
Project: **Space Soon: Art and Human Spaceflight**

Artists: **Laurie Anderson, Alan Bean**  

Year: **2006**

Location: **Roundhouse, London, UK**

For an intense week, The Arts Catalyst took over London’s Roundhouse for ‘Space Soon’, an exhibition of spectacular large-scale durational installations, accompanied by live events, reflecting on humanity’s relentless quest to leave the Earth.

The huge interior of the Roundhouse venue (a former engine shed) was transformed into a rocket factory for a gigantic rocket going nowhere, ‘Gravity’ by Aleksandra Mir, a monumental, ephemeral 22-metre high sculpture constructed from junk. In the Roundhouse car park, Danish architects N55 and artist Neal White installed their inhabited ‘Space Station on Earth’ and set out to investigate planet Earth, while in the vaults London Fieldworks’ ‘SpaceBaby’ was a live experiment and installation exploring the effects of long-term sleep pattern disruption (a hazard of space travel) with scientists from University of Leicester’s Department of Genetics.

Events included talks by Apollo astronaut turned artist Alan Bean (the fourth man on the Moon), and artist Laurie Anderson on her experience as NASA’s artist-in-residence; Michelle Griffiths’ performance-installation ‘Lunar Capsule’; film screenings; the premiere of Jerry Dammers’ remarkable Spatial AKA Orchestra; a symposium on the future of the Moon, and a concert curated by radio station Resonance FM. A series of creative projects for young people took place in the lead up to the event.
Project: Marching Plague
Artists: Critical Art Ensemble
Year: 2006
Locations: Filmed on the Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides, Scotland. Subsequent screenings nationally and internationally, including ICA, AV Festival and Whitney Biennial

US arts collective Critical Art Ensemble are known internationally for their tactical media actions and critical texts, often focused on controversial scientific or technological developments.

‘Marching Plague’ was a performance and film, commissioned and produced by The Arts Catalyst, centring on a re-enactment of a secret germ warfare experiment carried out by British government scientists sixty years ago off the coast of the Isle of Lewis in Scotland. The original 1952 series of experiments, codenamed Operation Cauldron, was part of Britain’s nascent biological warfare programme, and exposed nearly 3,500 guinea pigs and 83 monkeys to deadly germs such as bubonic plague. Operation Cauldron concluded that the germs were just as unreliable and unmanageable over water as they were found to be on the land.

Critical Art Ensemble’s film juxtaposes archival footage of the original sea trials alongside the artists’ DIY re-creation of one of the experiments, using harmless biological simulants to investigate whether microbes can be sprayed effectively over the sea at living targets—guinea pigs (in this case, looked after by members of the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals)—a mile away. Through the film, Critical Art Ensemble aim to address and dispel some of the public fear of “bioterrorism”, which they claim has been provoked and exploited by governments to initiate biological warfare programmes, diverting funds from valuable research in global public health and emergent infectious disease.
Tomas Saraceno’s ‘Poetic Cosmos of the Breath’ was the public launch of the artist’s large inflatable experimental solar dome, which was inspired by the dome created by Dominic Michaelis in 1975 for the film Hu-Man.

Commissioned by The Arts Catalyst, Saraceno’s dome was launched at dawn on 22 September 2007 at Gunpowder Park, Essex, and at that point was the artist’s first major outdoor project in the UK. At sunrise, members of the public gathered to watch the launch. The dome—made of translucent sheeting and iridescent foil—was laid out on the ground, held down by sandbags. Applying the principles of solar heated air balloons and utilising the change of temperature at dawn to create a greenhouse effect, the audience witnessed—and assisted—the artist and his team to waft air under the sheeting. Slowly, the giant dome filled with air, lifted off the ground and expanded as the sun rose, the colours of the foil spectacularly shimmering in the dawn light.

In 2013, ‘Poetic Cosmos of the Breath’ was re-presented by the artist at a temporary sculpture park in Hong Kong.
Agnes Meyer-Brandis's poetic-scientific investigations weave fact, imagination, storytelling and myth; past, present and future. In 'Moon Goose Analogue: Lunar Migration Bird Facility', a major commission by The Arts Catalyst, the artist develops an ongoing narrative based on the book The Man in the Moone, written by the English bishop Francis Godwin in 1603, in which the protagonist flies to the Moon in a chariot towed by 'moon geese'.

Meyer-Brandis re-imagines this story for the 21st century by hand-rearing eleven moon geese from birth as future astronauts on a farm in Pollinaria, Italy. She gives the goslings astronauts’ names, imprints them on herself as goose-mother, trains them to swim and fly, teaches them about orbital mechanics and the dangers of space debris, and takes them on expeditions. The commission manifests as a film, series of photographs, models, vitrines of the geese egg shells, and a control room in which visitors can interact with the moon geese via a live feed from their remote moon analogue habitat in Pollinaria.
'Fracking Futures' by Paris-based artist duo HeHe (Helen Evans and Heiko Hansen) was a largescale, technically ambitious dynamic installation, co-commissioned by The Arts Catalyst and FACT, Liverpool.

HeHe transformed FACT’s main gallery into a micro-scale fracking landscape, recreating with precise detail the sounds, tremors and risks of a hydraulic fracturing operation—complete with noisy drilling, pounding subwoofers simulating tectonic tremors, sporadic fireballs bursting from the earth, and oily emissions discharging into a murky lake of waste water.

Mischievous yet provocative, 'Fracking Futures' drew attention to the polarised debates surrounding this controversial gas extraction technique, that on the one hand regard fracking as a valuable way to obtain new energy sources and achieve economic growth, and on the other are alarmed by its potential environmental dangers and disruptions.

Refraining from making a particular stand, HeHe’s installation opened a discursive space for this pertinent local issue (Northwest England has vast reserves of underground shale gas), as well as playfully highlighting pressures on public arts organisations to generate new sources of income.
Experience & Learning

Our experience and learning programme offers people, from many backgrounds, the opportunity to explore ideas, develop skills and create new work, thematically crossing art and science.

We run labs, workshops and field trips for both artists and the general public, opening up rarefied fields of knowledge. For example, ‘Lab Easy’ with Mad Lab offered hands-on workshops in DIY biology: from culturing bioluminescent bacteria to Tiki-style DNA extraction. We even took the lab to Deptford Market!

We offer a dynamic range of workshops and participatory projects for families and young people, from one-off workshops to extended projects such as ‘East of Eden’, in which - over an 18-month period—artist Lucy Stockton-Smith with Sandwich Technology School designed, built and utilised two geodesic domes in the school grounds to explore the benefits of organic gardening versus hi-tec agriculture.

We enjoy bringing together experts and the public, in relaxed social environments, to explore new ideas and alternative perspectives in science and culture. Our hugely popular Kosmica series—a regular London-based salon event exploring the art, science and culture of outer space—has gone global, with Kosmicas in Paris, Hasselt and Mexico City.
Research

Underpinning The Arts Catalyst’s commissions and exhibitions programme is our extensive research strand. The Arts Catalyst team researches, lectures and publishes internationally on subjects including art and ecology, and cultural aspects of space exploration, nuclear energy and polar research.

From our ground breaking artistic and scientific experiments in zero gravity, we were invited by the European Space Agency (ESA) to develop a cultural policy for the International Space Station.

Through our long-standing interest in the polar regions, including projects such as Bipolar and the Arctic Perspective Initiative, we were commissioned by the British Council in 2013 to curate the international touring exhibition ‘Ice Lab: New Architecture and Science in Antarctica’. Our SymbioticA BioArt workshops and Synthesis (synthetic biology) laboratory were pioneering initiatives in the rapidly growing interest among artists in contemporary bioscience.

We facilitate long-term residencies for artists at world-class science institutions, as well as multidisciplinary research projects, such as Makrolab, conceptualised by artist Marko Peljhan, a nomadic sustainable art/science laboratory that can host teams of researchers working and living alongside each other in remote environments.

We organise talks, critical discussions, and major thematic conferences, held in partnership with organisations including the Tate and the Royal Institution.
Partnership is key to work of The Arts Catalyst. We collaborate with world class galleries and museums, universities, arts organisations, science agencies, research centres and festivals.

 Ars Electronica
 A Foundation, London
 AND Festival
 Artquest
 Atholl Estate
 Autism Research Centre, University of Cambridge, AV Festival, Newcastle-upon-Tyne
 BALTIC, Gateshead
 Barbican, London
 Bournemouth University, Media School
 British Antarctic Survey
 British Library
 Canada House, London
 Cell Project Space, London
 Central Laser Facility, STFC Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, Oxford
 Centre for Astrophysics and Planetary Science, University of Kent
 Centre for Mountain Studies, Perth College
 Cheltenham Science Festival
 CNES (French Space Agency)
 Cornerhouse, Manchester
 CREAM, University of Westminster
 DadaFest
 Delta Utec
 Edinburgh Art Festival
 Edinburgh Zoo
 Ellipse, France
 European Space Agency
 European Space Research & Technology Centre, Netherlands
 FACT, Liverpool
 Farnborough Air Sciences Trust
 Film & Video Umbrella
 Flat Time House, London
 Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Centre, Star City, Russia
 Gallery Oldham, Manchester
 Goldsmiths College, London
 HICA, Scotland
 HMKV, Dortmund, Germany
 Horniman Museum, London
 Hull Time Based Arts
 Hunterian Museum, London
 ICA, London
 IMERA, Mediterranean Institute of Advanced Studies
 Imperial College of Science, Technology & Medicine, London
 Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, India
 International Astronautical Federation
 John Hansard Gallery, Southampton
 John Moore University, Liverpool
 Kings College, London
 Kings College Hospital, London
 Laboratorio Arte Alameda, Mexico
 La Maison de la Photographie, Paris
 Landscape + Arts Network Services, Gunpowder Park
 La Societe de Curiosities, Paris
 Leonardo/OLATS, France/US
 Lighthouse, Brighton
 Lighthouse, Glasgow
 Lilian Baylis Theatre, London
 London Zoo
 Lorna, Iceland
 Lux, London
 MadLab, Manchester
 Matts Gallery, London
 Mullard Space Science Laboratory, UCL
 National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bangalore, India
 Natural History Museum, London
 Old Operating Theatre, London
 The Open University
 P3, London
 The Place, London
 Projekt Atol, Slovenia
 Queen Mary University of London
 Resonance FM
 Roehampton University, London
 Roundhouse, London
 Royal Aeronautical Engineering Workshops, Farnborough
 Royal HREATEM, University of London
 The Royal Institution
 Royal Society of the Arts, London
 San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery
 SCAN
 Science Museum, London
 Science Museum, London
 Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge
 Sevenoaks Wildfowl Reserve, Kent
 Shape
 Slade School of Art, UCL
 Soho Theatre, London
 South London Gallery
 SPACE, London
 SpaceArtOne, France
 Srirhti School of Art, Design & Media, Bangalore
 St Barts Hospital, London
 Stills, Edinburgh
 Storey Art Gallery, Lancaster
 super/collider
 SymbioticA, University of Western Australia
 S-Air, Sapporo, Japan
 Tate Britain, London
 Tramway, Glasgow
 transmediale, Berlin
 University College London, Department of Geography
 University College London, Department of Molecular Biology
 University College London, Department of Science & Technology Studies
 University of Leicester, Department of Genetics
 University of Newcastle, Intersections
 V2, Rotterdam
 Waag Society, Amsterdam
 Yard Gallery, Nottingham
 Yorkshire Sculpture Park
 Z33, Hasselt, Belgium

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 AT&T
 Brazilian Ministry of Culture
 British Council
 British Telecom
 Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation
 City of Dortmund
 City of Ljubljana
 COPUS
 Creative Partnerships
 Daiwa Foundation
 Economic and Social Research Council
 Embassy of Mexico, London
 Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council
 European Commission Culture Programme
 European Commission Seventh Framework Programme
 Goethe Institute
 Henry Moore Foundation
 Heritage Lottery Fund
 Higher Education Active Community Fund
 Highland Council
 Highland Culture Fund
 Highlands and Islands Enterprise
 Leverhulme Trust
 London Film & Video
 Development Agency
 Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia
 Mobil
 Mondriaan Foundation
 National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA), Mexico
 NESTA
 Newis Partnerships
 Open University
 Paul Hamlyn Foundation
 Pfizer
 Science & Technology Facilities Council
 Scottish Arts Council
 Sir Ratan Tata Trust
 Wellcome Trust

2014 team:

Staff team: Nicola Triscott, Rob La Frenais, Gillean Dickie, Jo Fells, Claudia Lastra, Sandra Ross

Doctoral researchers: Lisa Haskel, Jareh Das

Associates: Nahum Mantra, Ele Carpenter, Z Amber Richter, Annabel Huxley, Katrin Davison

Board: Elizabeth Lynch, Ansuman Biswas, Lucie Green, Dave Jago, David Thorp, Chris Welch
The Arts Catalyst is one of the most exciting organisations I have worked with. Their events are some of the best I have ever been to. Viva The Arts Catalyst!!!!

Tomas Saraceno, 2014

Support Us

The Arts Catalyst is an educational not-for-profit charity. In the past 20 years, we have delivered over 120 artists’ projects that experimentally and critically engage with science and technology. We are leaders in our field with an enviable track record for producing ambitious and ground-breaking projects. Through our work we open up to artists and the general public areas of knowledge and investigation that are generally perceived as scientific or technological.

We are acknowledged by Arts Council England as an important leading cultural organisation and in recognition receive an annual grant to support our work as part of their National Portfolio of directly funded arts organisations. In 2013 this grant was £267,000, and our annual budget is £400–500,000. To deliver our work, we therefore need to raise up to 50% of our funds each year from trading, individual donors, grant-making bodies and companies.

If you would like to be part of our future by supporting The Arts Catalyst financially, then we would like to hear from you. Together we can make sure that we continue to deliver provocative, playful, risk-taking art projects that spark dynamic conversations about our changing world for the benefit of society. For a discussion about how you would like to support The Arts Catalyst’s work, please contact Nicola Triscott: nicola.triscott@artscatalyst.org +44 (0)20 7633 0435

Commissioned Artists:

James Acord
Jon Adams
Marcus Ahlers
Laurie Anderson
Marceli Antunez Roca
Katherine Araniello
Lise Autogena & Joshua Portway
Brandon Ballengée
Anne Bean
Steve Beard & Victoria Halford
Andy Bichlbaum
Matthew Biederman
Ansuman Biswas
Ben Blakeborough
Anne Brodie
Ken Campbell
Brian Catling
Oron Catts
Helen Chadwick
Miles Chalcraft
Rachel Chapman
Ewen Chardronnet
Adam Chodzko
Revital Cohen & Tuur Van Balen
Tom Corby, Jonathan Mackenzie + Gavin Baily
Richard Cousins
Critical Art Ensemble
Gina Czarnecki
Beatriz Da Costa
Jerry Dammers’ Spatial AKA Orchestra
Adam Dant
Kitsou Dubois
Anna Dumitriu
Jan Fabre
Simon Faithfull
Jem Finer
Alec Finlay
Vadim Fishkin
Flow Motion
Letizia Galli
Stefan Gec
Andy Gracie
Joanna Griffin
Michelle Griffiths
Antony Hall
Sally Hampson
Hehe
Simon Hollington & Kypros Kyprianou
Melanie Jackson
Luke Jerram
Zina Kaye
Sonia Khurana

Jack Klaff
Tim Knowles
Andrew Kotting
Torsten Lauschmann
Yuri Leiderman
London Fieldworks
Los Ferronautas (Iván Puig Domene & Andres Padilla Domene)
Ruth Maclean
Nathalie Magnan
Trevor Mathison
Rachel Mayeri
Alistair McClymont
Agnes Meyer-Brandis
Aleksandra Mir
Kira O’Reilly
Sinéad O’Donnell
Chris Oakley
Office of Experiments
The Otolith Group
Lucy Panesar
Katie Paterson
Marko Peljhan
Benedict Phillips
Esther Polak & Ivar van Bekkum
Nicolas Primat
Simon Robertshaw
Steve Rowell
Tomas Saraceno
Semiconductor
Nikky Smedley
Snæbjörnsdóttir | Wilson
Camila Sposati
Lucy Stockton-Smith
Mike Stubbs
Ashok Sukumaran
Jon Thomson & Alison Craighead
Kate Tierney
Andrey & Julia Velikanov
Mark Aerial Waller
WE COLONISED THE MOON (Hagen Betzwieser & Sue Corke)
Weather Permitting
Neal White
Morag Wightman
Aaron Williamson
Jane & Louise Wilson
Paul Wong
YoHa
Carey Young
Adam Zaretsky