**Sustainability and Society**

Low Kee Hong, Creative Director, Factory International

TRANSCRIPT

00:00 Thank you very much Shelley and Jill and incredible CHEAD team for having me this morning. And I also want to thank Sarah and Vladan for sharing their practice and their insights into the challenges of the world that we live in and thinking about futures that perhaps for some of us may seem very blue, but in both our practices really underscore that there is so much hope to look forward, quite immediately, at least from my perspective.

0:36 A little bit about my practice. I'd been working very much in the space of speculative futures in the last eight to nine years primarily, you know when Shelley was describing Vladan's situation right now in Serbia, I lived through the Hong Kong twice, umbrella movement as well as the 2019 protests, so I feel very deeply and we’re really with you Vladan in the difficulties that we are facing globally right now.

1:08 So that really led me to really understand in order to puncture these challenges, we have to lean into other knowledge systems, other ways of thinking and other approaches by which we can rise above the storm little bit. To see beyond our current conditions. It’s also nice to be described as a local. I see myself as a Mancunian right now.

1:36 And what led me to Manchester essentially began in 2009 when I started coming to the festival quite regularly and I saw the incredible potential that the city has to offer. The city that is built on invention, revolution, as well as I think, thought leadership that underscores a lot of education systems in the city. So I want to thank you for being part of this conversation.

2:04 At Factory International of course the thinking about futures is very much ingrained into our DNA. That starts at the festival, about invention. About thinking, ways of making art, ways of reflecting art and ways of connecting the communities in all sorts of combinations that were not yet possible before.

2:24 The mission statement talks about we invent tomorrow together, that really underscores that collaboration with community like yourselves, but wider beyond everyday folk whom some of us in terms of audience development will talk about untapped audiences, but for me they are representative of experts of the everyday because everybody brings their own knowledge systems to the table and the collaboration with them. Tomorrow speaks about the kinds of futures we want to be part of. That we want to make together, invent together and speculate together.

3:01 So, prior to opening the building and I hope some of you will get to see the studios in due course in the next couple of days, our director of digital, Gabby Jenks, maybe some of you know her, she's an incredible curator, artist, thinker in her own right.

3:21 And one of the things that she developed prior to the opening of the physical building was to create a virtual factory on Fortnite primarily creative mode which is a game platform. The idea is to invite and the commission artists who work in the avatar space like the elusive Avadon.

3:40 To be the first commission, to think about, you know, in that kind of space, what kind of futures that could be possible. This led to other commissions including black trans artist Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, as well as the latest that in the end became a 15 minute film, Jenn Nkiru, incredible director, who has worked with the likes of Beyoncé. But once we moved into the building we had to go beyond that kind of virtual space because there is this physical building.

4:14 And more and more our questions started to think about what is the interface between the physical body and the virtual space. This is critical in the sense that as many of my colleagues this morning have spoken, we cannot deny the presence and function of AI and the digital space moving forward.

4:35I think to deny it, to reject it, it’s detrimental. We understand the anxieties, fears and complexities of artists who are fighting for their ownership and authorship in what they do. And of course, this is also down to the big tech companies who are, as we know, quite guilty in operating in that space.

4:49 More and more we are seeing artists who are engaging quite deeply with the space of AI. Like Vladan, for example, I really love the insanity and that irrational, almost, desire for deep knowledge and to unpack all of that structure that seems invisible is really the first step to understanding.

5:23 To really, being able to re-appropriate I think a lot of the forces that we feel completely, both vulnerable as well as we assume there is no way out. A lot of us operating within the social media world, it’s increasingly feeling like there is no hope and I think as artists, as curators, as educators, as cultural institutions, it is really our space to really redefine the conversation, leaning into artist thinking, leaning into the practice, to really show us what else is possible.

6:01So, moving into Aviva Studios, created an opportunity for us to start to think about what is that hybrid space between the physical world as well as the virtual or digital world. We started in a rudimentary level because it was a way for us to think about what are some of the quite easy entry points by which we could engage audiences.

6:30 I'm going to show you an example. We did the first 2 things under the frame called Factory Settings, led by Gabby. And Factory Settings is essentially, is as what the name suggests, you know, as you turn your computer on and you can change the settings, it;s skin, coding and so on and so forth, according to your preference.

6:52 And so the idea is to invite artists over time to take this frame and then to reset how you engage with Factory International, the building and so on and so forth. And so the first one we invited was Jack Sachs, also an incredible designer, animator, works with the likes of Nike, Spotify, Vice as well as Tate Modern, to do something quite fun, quite entry-level.

7:21 And of course the collaboration was not possible without the relationship with Snapchat to develop that interface through this app that we've developed as well as audiences through their phones. It's kind of these weird creatures that Jack is known for that kind of emerges out of the building to kind of interface with it as you kind of grow with it.

7:46 Of course, you can put your face via the Snapchat software that you kind of grow these features together with the building. Almost around the same time we did the opening commission Free Your Mind directed by Danny Boyle, designed by Es Devlin with Boy Blue Dance and written by Sabrina Mahfouz,the costume designer, fashion designer, Gareth Pugh, created really the question around where is the space of the body through fashion and thinking about the future of fashion when everything has kind of gone digital?

8:21 So the second piece, called Facsimulate, really drew, in the first instance, this is one of the key characters within Free Your Mind, which was this kind of this surveillance camera kind of character that was everywhere. Things that were super familiar, but of course, through Factory Settings and through this app it created really something that when beyond the building. I'll show you an example. So this is very classic Snapchat interface.

9:09 Your face is in it. You play with it. You can record it and you can send it to your friends, and so on and so forth. So, kind of very entry-level thinking about this space, this hybrid space between the physical building as well as the digital interface. Since 23 we paused this a little bit, partly because we were in the thick of easing into this building and running this building, as an asset, not just for Manchester but the rest of the UK and the world as well.

9:39 And ahead of this summer's Manchester International Festival, Gabby and I started to really rethink, basically, this frame of Factory Settings, away from this very basic interface and engagement with the coding. We started to invite Superflux, an award-winning design studio, for quite a long-term project that likely would span across 10 years.

10:10 This is a temporality that as an organisation we didn't talk about before but more and more now we have this building, it led us to really focus what it means to have deep engagement with communities, with our audiences as well as artists over extended periods of time.

10:31 So, the idea is to invite Superflux to think with us together with audiences and communities what other possible solutions could emerge to do with the climate change crisis. One of the first thoughts that Superflux brought to the table was the theory of multipolar traps or malo traps. I don’t know if any of you are familiar with that. It came from game theory.

10:59 Essentially it looked at the zero-sum game, that the actions of an individual for short-term benefit basically screws everybody in the long-term. So, whether you are talking about AI, climate change, the economy and all of that, it’s the same conversation. And so, the many incredible efforts within the climate change conversation still feels like an impasse, still feels like we are trapped in this situation.

11:30 Primarily we are living in a world that is only run by one thing and one thing only and that's greed. There's nothing about ideology existing anymore, it’s all just run by greed. Solar panels, this technology has been around many years, but why is it not everywhere? Because of gatekeeping because of cost that’s attached to things. Supposed cost. Two years ago I was in Beirut, just kind of post the blast, and because of the collapse of government infrastructure, everybody was installing solar panels, because they needed electricity. So, it is possible.

12:10 You have many, many concrete examples around the world that this is possible. So, with Superflux, what we are doing is to begin this conversation about the multipolar traps to really understand and unpack, like Vladan has done, what is really the current reality we are dealing with on a day-to-day basis. Because in many of the mainstream conversations we are still leaning very much into post-capitalist vocabulary, structures, ways of doing things, that basically keep us in this hamster wheel conversation.

12:48 Roughly around the same time, about eight years ago, when I started this trajectory of speculative futures, I also leaned very closely to a lot of my indigenous friends’ communities and artists, knowledge systems that are not familiar to me in my context and background, but world's that I’ve have managed to enter into, really present a lot of different ways of thinking. And so this project that we’re making with Superflux, like I say, is over 10 years, we will now make a big shift in how we use the interface.

13:22 Before it was fun, getting people in the building, which is what we’re trying to do, but with this project, that is still yet to be titled, we begin with the question of the impasse that we are facing, but we’re inviting audiences, through the AR interface with the building, to propose multiple ways, suggestions by which we can rewire the building over the 10 years. So every time you come back you see via the augmented reality interface, you might see Aviva Studios slightly differently. It's a very post-industrial building.

13:59 A lot of concrete. I'm also the lead in sustainability for the organisation so in many ways it’s trying to address many of the issues we are encountering every day as we operate. The idea in this project is how we can augment our relationship to nature in order to teach us, in order to provide us very different solutions by which to deal with very everyday things like heating, electricity, cooling and so on. So the idea is that once these proposals are gathered over time we will look at what is deliverable, useful, interesting, and we literally start to rewire the building over the ten year period.

14:47 This is an image generated by AI, as one would. The idea is to think about, in the space of a 10 year timeframe, how can we really relook at alternative systems, say, running this big building, that begins to reduce our carbon footprint to net zero, a commitment that a lot of institutions in Manchester are committed to with the Manchester City Council.

15:19 So, for us, it's kind of that translation from an artwork into something that’s quite practical in nature. That’s quite real in terms of the investigation, but at the same time through that process we bring to the table many ways of other types of thinking by which we can inspire new visions and new possibilities to really deal with the climate change crisis. This is not something that we have the illusion that, oh, it's a massive global change.

15:48 But I think it's important as part of the multipolar question we need to make the first step, we need to make the first shift in order to start to move outside this vortex we feel that we are always trapped in all the time. It's very important for us that there are very tangible, physical ways by which this interface can happen not just within the building, but potentially in the many projects that we do. In some sense this kind of thinking starts to embed in a lot of the projects that we commission artists in the building as well as within the festival, so that it is not just about an artwork being seen in a city within a festival context, more and more we are starting to think what if that artwork exists and moves to another city and stays up for one year.

16:47 So, something I'm starting to call slow touring that in a way starts to become quite counterpoint to a lot of the way we run our business in arts and culture around the world right now. In many ways that idea of imagined futures or speculative futures really allows to underscore new ways of thinking, alternative ways by which we bring context situation and more importantly for me, voices, something that Sarah has presented really clearly, that these women voices, incredible important women voices, who really did that sea-change, but were erased because capitalism is structured in a particular way, it is important that we redefine who is not in the room.

17:37 Who is not at the table. Maybe we have to build a completely different table to think about it. In some sense I, this morning's conversation, I think goes back to you as educators. We are quite downstream, you are quite upstream. You are the holders of generations to come, of thinkers, artists, revolutionaries, all of these people who will lead the change we need in the world right now.

18:09 And in some ways that kind of initial apprehension around that technological change, my two other colleagues Sarah and Vladan has demonstrated very clearly that actually it is not about the anxiety that is stopping us, I think it’s a lot of the kind of impasse we assume it is stopping us from making any change. I will stop here for now. I think we are running over, I'm looking forward to the conversation between the three of us moderated by Shelley. Thank you.