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Art, Tech, and Power: An Interview with Salome Asega

By: Salome Asega

REPRESENTATIONS

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As part of our "What Is Just Tech?" series, we invited several social researchers—scholars, practitioners, artists, and activists—to respond to a simple yet fundamental question: "What is just technology?" This interview was conducted by Just Tech program officer Catalina Vallejo, who spoke with Salome Asega, an artist and researcher whose practice celebrates dissensus and multivocality.

Asega (she/her) is the director of NEW INC, the New York New Museum's incubator for art, design, and technology. She has also been a Creativity and Free Expression Technology Fellow at the Ford Foundation.

In their conversation, Asega and Vallejo spoke about public interest technology and art that challenges the harm and power imbalance tech can create.

Catalina Vallejo (CV): I want to start by asking you about your career trajectory and how you became interested in art and technology.

Salome Asega (SA): I credit my uncles, who are computer scientists and computer engineers. When I was young, my uncles would include me in their process and they would have me take apart a computer and rebuild it with them, or, when they were learning to code, they would send me video games they were developing. They'd mail me floppy discs with their games for me to try out and give them feedback. I was always very interested in the tactile nature of their work and the creative storytelling in their work.

I did an MFA in design and technology at Parsons and fell right back into that zone of playfulness and

creative storytelling through technology. And from there, I was working as an artist, had my own studio practice, and, slowly but surely, more arts organizations and foundations were becoming interested in this kind of hybrid practice. I found myself not only making my work but also helping these organizations and institutions understand this ecosystem.

And now, I am the director of an incredible organization called NEW INC, a New Museum program, where I help support artists, designers, and technologists by building a professional development curriculum and offering mentorship.

CV: Could you talk more about public interest tech and the role of artists in this space?

SA: There was sort of a pivot in my grad school experience where I was tinkering with all these emerging technologies and quickly realized that the tools we're using are not neutral, right, that they are extensions of their makers. There was a point at which I had to become self-aware about how I'm using these tools to ensure that I'm not reifying existing structural harm. I came into the wonderful world of public interest technology, where people were thinking about the ethics of using these tools, and my mind just exploded. I wanted to ensure that I was telling honest stories, and critically engaging with the technology that I was using to ensure audiences were engaged more robustly.

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Artists are inventive, and studio practice is similar to research practice. You're exploring not only aesthetics and visuality, you're experimenting and exploring futures and possibilities and alternatives. The artist's role is to show us what could be and what should be.

I also think that artists have a responsibility because of their inventiveness and ability to look forward and make sure that the bigger players or the people with power are not just seeing some of the darker futures as excellent models to then co-opt. I was having a conversation with an artist recently about artists who are speculatively critiquing our surveillance state—rightfully. But then sometimes their projects get seen as viable products. That's scary, right? When an artist is critiquing and someone else sees it as a product.

CV: Could you talk about some of your projects and your current work?

SA: A lot of my work is thinking about how right now there is a homogenous group of people in Silicon Valley who are creating futures for us without our consent. I'm interested in leveraging the power of collective imagination to create alternatives, radical alternatives to their visions, that kind of flattened power.

People are always asking me, "Do you hate technology?" I don't hate technology. Obviously, it's made

aspects of our lives easier. But what I am interested in is power redistribution. It's not so much a critique of technology as it is a critique of power. In my practice, I'm interested in building small systems where people can then design the futures that are most exciting to them and are inclusive of a wider set of people. I'm very interested in using participatory and speculative design methodologies to produce my work.

For a while, I was doing a project with another artist, Ayodamola Okunseinde, called the Iyapo Repository. It's a library that exists in a nondescript future and houses a collection of art and artifacts made by and for people of African descent. We would host these workshops in coordination with various community-driven groups across the country, where we would play card games and the participants would develop future artifacts. We would then take their renderings or soft prototypes back to the studio and fully realize them to be fully functioning technological objects. This became a traveling exhibition that included these final artifacts and the process pieces. So that's an example of a project that had multiple stakeholders. We were thinking about the tools we need to keep us safe in the future. And we were working across domains of art, education, health, environment. We were thinking in multisector ways.



Photo by Derek Schultz

I think one of the wonderful outcomes of that project is that people understood that there is a power that comes with design. That teams of people sat around a table and designed what objects and tools should look like. We had conversations then about accessibility, legibility, and form. I think our workshop participants realize the kind of power they have to design future objects, analog or technological.

I love sharing an Amiri Baraka text called "Technology and Ethos" that was written in 1969 where he talks about how there's a power to building machines. He criticizes the form of the typewriter. He writes, "How boring is it that I can only tell a story through the tips of my fingers? What if I want to dance a

story? What if I want to sing a story? ..." and he goes into this beautiful poetic rant about how the way we are developing technology is so boring. It limits us in our creative expression, and there are wider ideas and multiple perspectives for how we can show up in the world.

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CV: You seem optimistic about a more just technological future, whereas others may be more cynical. What are some of the reasons you are confident about the possibilities for tech justice and what the future of tech will look like?

SA: The new cohort at NEW INC has been inspiring. One of the first things we did was reassess our organizational values. I asked the members to edit, annotate, and rip up. There was great energy and conversation around the idea of stewardship, which moves away from this idea of solo practitioners who are working toward their own genius and success and instead moves toward bringing others along with intention and care. Care, then, becomes central to the work. We are moving away from outdated ideas of entrepreneurship and innovation. For example, the starving artist figure is no longer relevant. We want to think about a critical engagement to capital and money with our labor and work. Because artists are workers. So, we also talked about cooperative economies and solidarity economies; these are part of those futures, and people are hungry for new structures.

CV: Lastly, what recommendations do you have for people who are curious or want to know more about art and tech justice?

SA: In addition to my own work, there are incredible artists that are working across technology and the challenges tech creates, including Stephanie Dinkins, Mimi Onuoha, Lynn Hershman, American Artist, and so many more. People should also follow NEW INC, because we have ongoing public programs where you'll hear visions for more equitable futures directly from the artists in our community.