Between Tech & Art: An Interview with Lauren Lee McCarthy

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PLATFORMS & INFRASTRUCTURE

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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 Lauren Lee McCarthy, an artist and associate professor of Design Media Arts at the University of California, Los Angeles. McCarthy (she/they) creates artwork about human agency and participation as it relates to technologies like artificial intelligence and social media. She also created p5.js, an open-source and web-based version of Processing, a software and programming language for visual arts.

In their conversation, Vallejo and McCarthy spoke about breaking down barriers to participation in open-source software, the intersection between tech and art, and designing tech that is accessible for all.

Catalina Vallejo (CV): I wanted to start asking you a little bit about your career trajectory. How it is that you ended up working in art and technology?

Lauren Lee McCarthy (LLM): I started out studying computer science in college. I didn't feel like I was being pushed to ask questions about why we were building this technology—what the implications were. I saw a lot of my classmates go to work for banks on Wall Street right before the financial crash in 2008. I was uninspired and concerned because I didn't know where I was going to go. I started taking some art classes in school on the side and that grabbed my attention because they asked me to consider the social and political implications of the technology we were building.

At that time, I was using a lot of open-source tools and software. The first experiences that I had trying to

become a part of programming communities felt very exclusionary. There are a lot of barriers, especially for people that don't necessarily fit the archetype of what you might expect from a programmer. That took me down this route of not just beginning my own open-source software project, but really thinking about what values the project is based on.

I got involved in a programming tool called Processing, which was initiated by Ben Fry and Casey Reas. An initial goal of that project was to make coding accessible beyond the technical fields, opening it to the visual arts and to people outside institutional spaces. I was making a web version called p5.js, and I was thinking, "okay if their goal initially was access and that meant getting beyond a university or institution, what other sorts of access barriers are there?" What would it look like to really consider these goals of inclusion, access, and diversity as the building blocks for the tool? I was seeing a lot of programming communities trying to add these considerations in after the project was already established. I thought we had an opportunity to really try to set those intentions from the start, and to let every decision we made in the project draw from those values. That meant thinking about software design, documentation, outreach, or translation—all these different pieces of a project—and having them tie back and ask: "Who is this privileging? Who is this supporting? What barriers does this put up? What access does it open?"

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CV: What is it like to commit to designing "just tech" from the beginning, rather than just as a matter of trying to fix tech to make it "more just" after the fact?

LLM: One of the things that felt really important to us with the p5.js project was that it was open to a lot of people with different backgrounds. No tool is neutral. The biases, the beliefs, and the expectations of the people making them get baked directly in. When you think about something that's a creative tool, you might think, "Oh, well, you can do anything you want with it." But that's not really true. There are some things that are easy and some that are hard, and those are all based on who designed that tool and who they are envisioning as the end user. What did the designers think people might want to do with it? That's going to be limited to the context you understand yourself personally.

That's why it felt really important to consider access not just in terms of the users of p5.js, but also who is working on it, the contributors. One of the keys to doing that was to expand the definition of what *contributing* or working on a tool is. With p5.js, contributing is not limited to specific types of coding, it also incorporates design, writing, outreach, teaching, using the tool, and sharing examples. This was important for the project, but is also important to me more generally in thinking about technology. A lot of times we're told we need to buy a product or download an app. We're trying to push back on the idea that we as people should just be consumers or users, and say, "No. You can hack, and you can experiment, and contribute, or subvert."

With this project specifically, that meant trying to lift up different kinds of contributions. It also meant really focusing on documentation. The more that you document and explain things, the more people that might be able to interact with a tool. We might even trade a little bit on the performance or speed of the tool, because we don't want to make the code so complex that you would have to be an expert to be able to contribute to it. We tried to make the software itself accessible to people with a wide range of experience levels.

CV: It sounds to me like this has also been a space to build new expertise.

LLM: Yes, for example, a big part of p5.js in the last five years has been focusing on accessibility. You see conversations about social justice, and so often basic web accessibility is left out of that. As soon as we started, one of the contributors, Claire Kearney-Volpe, came to us and said, "Okay you're saying this is for everyone, but actually if you're Blind or visually impaired this tool is totally inaccessible to you. If you want to be a visual artist who works with code, do you have to be able to see the screen? Is that the only way?" That conversation really pushed us to ask, "How do you make something that works in different ways for a lot of different people? What does that design process look like?"

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CV: I'd love to talk more about your artwork. How do you use code to make art?

LLM: My art practice asks what it means to be a person right now. In what ways do the technological systems around us shape us? As these systems mediate our interactions in our relationships, how are they influencing those relationships? And are these systems influencing them in ways that we actually want? Are we making a future that we want to see? I think of my practice as a series of interventions trying to poke at those questions, and understand what happens when you introduce glitches into these systems. What happens when you appropriate, or subvert, or play with the rules—not just rules of the technology, but also social rules. I'm ultimately asking, which of these can change or shift in ways that are productive? So just to give an example, Social Turkers, was a performance I did in 2013. It was when dating apps were just starting. I went on a series of dates with strangers, and I would stream the interaction to the web, and then pay workers on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (a crowdsourcing gig site) to watch in real time, and direct me on what to say and do.

A lot of times with my work, there's a certain amount of ambiguity. Is it a techno-utopian fantasy, or is it meant to be a very dystopic critical take? I'm trying to open up a space where people can decide for themselves—where people can sit with that, pick it apart, and make up their own mind.



An image of Lauren Lee McCarthy's work, "Social Turkers"

CV: How should we define tech justice?

LLM: To me tech justice is about reflecting on society and our immediate context, and thinking about how power is distributed and how privilege is distributed. Who is prioritized? Who is marginalized or disadvantaged? And how can we build technology that does not just reinforce those existing hierarchies and dynamics? I think that goes back to that question of who's making it. It's easy to accidentally make things that prioritize yourself and people like you. We're very self-centered organisms, right? I think the project of tech justice would be to try to break that self-reinforcing pattern. How you do that is a constant question and negotiation.

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Tech justice is a process of learning, of being open to being wrong, of believing in the knowledge of a lot of other people, and of trying to listen. But also, there are times to speak, and there are times that are important to push for what is not the status quo. A phrase like tech justice sounds so lofty. It sounds like a large project because the problems are so large. But there are so many grassroots projects and movements that began with a small intervention that led to huge changes.

CV: I would like to finish asking you for some book recommendations. What are you reading now that you feel others should also be paying attention to?

LLM: I recently read *Disability Visibility: First Person Stories from the 21st Century* edited by Alice Wong. it's a collection of essays from the perspective of different disabled people. It's really been challenging me to think about what inclusion and access mean when the access needs are so varied.

Another one by Sara Hendren is called *What a Body Can Do: How We Meet the Built World*. She's also looking at disability, and thinking about it in the context of urban planning, architecture, and space design. It really resonated with me in this time when we're so virtual to think about: "How much does the physical space around us matter, and how does it support our needs?"