Ident: [a voice with an American accent] Serpentine Podcast: REWORLDING. [the words multiply through different voices, echo and distort over a low thrumming tone; all the sounds fade out]

Gaylene Gould: Just a heads-up, this episode contains some strong language.

Irenosen Okojie: [reading from her piece, 'Black Planetarium', with distortion and panning on her voice] The mouths, her other openings, have yet to gain their bodies. They are anagrams on this plane that could be the renegade sky of another. They begin to sing an incantation gathered from the bends of their travels. Difficulties they succeeded through like forms of ascension.

Tai Shani: Any of the things that do have that idea in them, of what the world could be (are) casting a stone into darkness, but that stone gets met at some point. Well, that's the hope, isn't it?

Gaylene Gould: [with initial slight distortions on her voice] That is the hope. At times like these, when I lose hope, given the state of the world, I find myself asking, what is the point of art? What is the point of imagining a new world where our energy might be best-placed working out how to survive this one? Is our imagination simply a pointless pastime? Or could it be our route to a new future?

Welcome to REWORLDING, a Serpentine Podcast series with me, Gaylene Gould.

I’m a creative director and broadcaster, and I’m on the hunt for urgent new ideas, because I’ve been somewhat freaking out. It feels like the old world is crumbling, fast. Many of the tried and tested methods are now proving tired and contested. We seem to be teetering on the edge of a new world, and probably for this reason, the idea of worldbuilding is getting popular right now. But if we’re going to sidestep the problems that have plagued us so far, we are going to need to first take some time to work out what matters and then to learn new ways to be together, to live and to connect.

That’s what we want to do in this series: seek out the tools we’ll need to create new worlds together. We think that artists can help: those who know how to imagine dream to still and create new worlds within this one. In REWORLDING, we’ll be dreaming, listening, playing, remembering, and connecting in radical new ways. I’m talking to artists and thinkers, looking for a breadcrumb trail that will lead us somewhere new. Now, alongside their practical skills, artists can build entire imaginary universes that
mirror our potential back to us. And that’s what we’re going to be talking about in this episode. The art of reimagining.

[theme music transitions into a different, gentle, xylophone-like sequence of high, warm tones]

I want us to think about how art can offer new perspectives on the reality we live in and how fiction can show us new ways to exist. When I think of the power of imagination, I’m transported back to being a kid and gathering all my little friends and announcing in a theatrical whisper: "I know, pretend we’re..." Because most of my games consisted of enacting made-up stories and were some of the happiest moments of my life. Our imaginations were able to transport us to a place much larger than we had access to.

[theme melody fades out; tense, dramatic music fades in with ominous pulses of strings and occasional rattling percussion]

**Performer in Tai Shani’s The Neon Hieroglyph:** We lived a thousand real lives, we protected and were all worthy of protection. You were terrifying there. How beautiful you are. We all are.

**Gaylene Gould:** [over tense, low, repetitive string tones] One artist who has this kind of unbridled, imaginative thinking at the heart of their practice is the Turner Prize-winning Tai Shani, who works across film, text, sculpture, installation, and performance.

**Performer in Tai Shani’s The Neon Hieroglyph:** The baby’s tools, and the poor pea hen, the spoon, the moonlight and the flax, the spittle and the dust.

[low string tones, high synth-like sequences and percussion crescendo then drop out with a bass kick]

**Gaylene Gould:** [a few sparse musical tones return] Her works are like expansive, gothic, 'what if' experiments, blending social reality, myth, science fiction, and the metaphysical – and are simultaneously playful and horrifyingly confronting. Like *The Neon Hieroglyph*, which this audio piece is from, and which includes a series of surreal psychotropic effigies and moving image works. And *Dark Continent* or DC, a series of filmed monologues which assembles real, mythic and imagined women from across time who might inhabit a future women-only world.

**Performer in Tai Shani’s The Neon Hieroglyph:** [with the dramatic music recurring, throbbing, then fading out with an electronic muffled effect] In this flow, we are cusp-dwellers constituted of stardust, only just holding back the panic with all this magnificent beauty and horror around us and in us too.

[the music pauses]

**Tai Shani:** [in a corridor, with squeaking doors and background chatter] We’re going into the bowels.

[repeated, dramatic string sounds recur]
Gaylene Gould: I visited Tai at her studio at Somerset House. It’s funny how Tai, in her work, is all about reimagining new worlds. Yet, here she is in the bowels of an imposing, 250-year-old Georgian building. You don’t get more old-world than that! Somehow though, given Tai’s ability to reimage the past as well as the future, perhaps it’s the perfect place.

[Music fades; we hear only voices in a quiet, contained space]

Tai Shani: I’ve been thinking about, what is the imagination? What, you know... like any language that you create as an artist is a form of worldmaking, whether it’s in painting or... I think creativity comes into play in many ways: in everyday tasks, all the time, everyone dreams. Everyone has dreams. And that also is a process of worldmaking. And I think there are social structures that facilitate certain people to engage with (this) – it’s not even a skill, it’s something everyone has! – and develop it and then I think the toil of material survival can make it very difficult to be engaged with that, it demands a lot from you to be able to do that. I think if you are in a situation where your survival is really at the door all the time.

Gaylene Gould: And I’m curious, given that, because you’re right, I think essentially for many of us, most of us, just dealing with the reality is enough, right? That can take most of our time and energy. So, I’m curious about what was it... Taking, for example, the DC project, what was it that inspired you to explore a kind of future utopia alternate space?

Tai Shani: I always was very attracted to epicness and I also was interested in how that affect... The affect of the epic had often been used by fascists and fascist kinds of politics, and spectacle has often been associated with right wing politics. And I was very interested in seeing how that could be reclaimed from a leftist position, let’s say, and a feminist position specifically. So, there was definitely something about the expectation around artists or women. I don’t identify not as woman, but I don’t identify particularly as woman, as a category, anymore. But at the time (of making DC), I very much did. I’m 47. At that time, I felt that there was an expectation... I also had experience of how unpalatable femininity was to the world that I grew up in. Definitely. So, I also was very aware of that expectation that women artists were to deal with the body, with the domestic space, with craft, there were certain expectations around what was deemed as a feminine practice, or a woman’s practice, at the time.

I really wasn’t interested in those things. I wanted to have this epic, transformative project that reimagined interiority as this endless space. Also, to try and kind of think about what transformations can happen in that, particularly in relation to trauma. Typical trauma and atypical trauma as well. So, those were things that were interesting to me. So, a lot of the characters that I made did specifically look at gendered violence, sexual violence, whether typical or extraordinary. And the building of that city (in DC) was very much a space where those things could be passed and transformed into something else, I guess.

Gaylene Gould: Mm. I’m wondering about how normal it is or how usual this is. When I see your work, I remember what I felt like as a seven-year-old girl, you know, the way in which I could dream things in
a way. But the older I got, I think I’ve lost some of that. So, is that something that you always had? I guess that’s my question.

[10:00]

Tai Shani: Yeah, it’s hard for me to know otherwise, I guess. But sometimes life does present things that make it very difficult to stay completely in awe and in a state of wonder at the world or to kind of constantly be aware of its miraculousness, let’s say – of life, of being alive, of whatever it means. Especially as a secular person, I don’t have any answers for those things. And that sense is often what drives me, it’s a kind of sense of wonder or almost... I call it brimming with unassigned faith. It’s like being on the edge of a precipice. And that’s often the motivation in the work, is trying to grasp at that. So, I think there’s definitely the ungraspability of everything that eludes language that I’m trying really furiously to hold onto somehow. And the only way I can do that is by transforming it or translating it. It’s like an act of interpretation into a shared world of language, really.

Gaylene Gould: I’d love to talk, to have your thoughts a little bit, about how you weave myth and myth-making through your work as well, and why that’s important.

Tai Shani: First of all, our conception of myth and fact, or I don’t even want to use fact, but let’s say, real history or consensual history or whatever. That – our contemporary conception – is very specific. Let’s say, medieval people didn’t make those distinctions at all between those things. These were almost coexistent and they existed in slightly different kind of spheres of the world, but all those spheres were real. So, I think that that (splitting them) in itself is quite a contemporary way of thinking about it. And there were questions that I wanted to start addressing. So, I started looking into ergot. There was an island in Italy that had a 450-year contamination, ergot contamination. It’s a fungus that grows on rye, but LSD is synthesised from it. It’s not an image, it’s an anecdote, but it’s very visual as well, with this milling of bread and this one mill on the whole island and that there’s just this psychedelic dust floating around this island for so long, and this remote medieval imagination, and what that would’ve meant to encounter a psychedelic reality.

So, those were things where I was like, okay: this is interesting to me. But to go back to ideas around myth and history. I started looking at these nodes, anecdotes, reports. Some of them were very slippery, historical fact. So many interesting cosmologies have psychoactive substances within them, and I was thinking what would our history have been if those experiences would’ve been brought into culture in a different way? And some of the more socialist communist ways of thinking would’ve been brought in. Because like for me, thinking about communism as a horizon is very powerful. It’s not just thinking about what will you do with iPhones or whatever, it’s something much more profound and and far-reaching and it’s the only thing I can identify as a spiritual dimension in daily life, really.

I mean, everything interesting about worldmaking, by the way, exists in physics. So, I think that thinking about these theories around time. That linearity is a subjective kind of experience, but that time, like the past and the present and the future, are just these spaces that exist. And it’s almost like a film, you know, where the light goes through each frame, but the film always exists, the material of
the film is rolled up, but it’s still there. So, thinking about things like that – I think that history is like that as well. History isn’t... Whatever we call history is one version, a very, very narrow, very ideologically constructed version. So, I think, this idea of what is a history – like, if you think about unspeakable violence, it’s happening all the time as we’re talking now, atrocious acts both personal and political are being committed. Writing about any of these things is just an invocation of something that has happened. I think everything’s anagramsmatic in that way, we’re always creating anagrams of realities.

[low, long, resonant string tones with a subtle high-pitched static sound]

**Performer in Tai Shani’s *Secular Prayer***: This is my secular prayer. All cops are bastards. This is my secular prayer, free Palestine. This is my prayer. Fuck those awful TERFs. Property is theft is my prayer. My prayer is a spectacle of remembering that they have made a world that is hell. But this is paradise. My prayer is to not forget that this is a paradise, and it is ours.

[next performer]: This is my secular prayer: ghost for revolution, I pray for you. I pray you can survive this and live forever.  
[next performer]: I have. And I will.  
[next performer]: I have. And I will.  
[next performer]: [voice echoing slightly] I have. And I will.  
[next performer]: I have. And I will. [string music gradually fades out; we hear only voices]

**Gaylene Gould**: There’s so much to dig into here, but I’m initially struck by the reminder of how epic the imagination can be, once we give it permission, like how Tai does, and how intimidating, how uncontrollable, and how radical that can be in a highly-policed world. We'll return to Tai’s world later in the episode, but joining me in this studio now to unpick the idea of reimagining is Serpentine’s Associate Curator of Live Programmes, Kostas Stasinopoulos. Thanks so much for being here, Kostas, and helping us think through how we can reworld through fiction, through dreaming, through imagining. What did you think about what Tai had to say?

**Kostas Stasinopoulos**: Thank you so much for having me, first. It’s such a pleasure to be here and to work together on this delicious episode. This is a perfect way to enter, I think, because I was there when Tai performed this piece recently and it so happened that I was next to the sound desk where the production team and Tai were stationed. And I remember the performance ending with the Secular Prayer and then the lights went off and everyone started applauding and Tai walked in front of me, and I was so moved that I moved physically towards her. I give her a hug and I whispered in her ear: "This is my secular prayer, too."

**Gaylene Gould**: Wow.

**Kostas Stasinopoulos**: I was really charged through my body, through my intellect, through my imagination by that distillation of things and how clear that message was, in the end of a performance
that asks us to reimagine. But really hard-hitting truths said simply are maybe also a very important way to start imagining a different world.

**Gaylene Gould:** Yeah. Well, it reminds me, and I would love to... I haven’t witnessed a Tai Shani performance, but I’d love to because she speaks a lot about that immersion, and how she creates these intense environments, and the way that she’d witnessed how the imagination was used in fascism to create these heightened states, and what would it be like to use the same kind of tools for a more liberatory idea.

**Kostas Stasinopoulos:** For sure. And I think that conviction of that *Secular Prayer* is important because in my mind, imagination is connected to hope and imagination. Fantasy, if you may, is as important of a function as breathing, as eating and drinking to survive. And we really need to think about the radical potential of how commonplace it actually is to imagine, but how transformative it can be. And that is what scares the forces that are trying to control our lives. So, we should be able to imagine a world where Palestine is free, where we are not policed, where we protect our trans siblings and all beings on this planet. That is radical because it’s transformative and that is what’s scary to a lot of people, but it’s not hard to imagine.

**Gaylene Gould:** Yes, it’s not hard to imagine at all. When I met Tai, I was in a bad way, hey! The night before, I’d been feeling like, this is extreme. We’re living in quite an extreme set of circumstances, and we’re sort of just sort of muddling through it. I think the conversation had a quite a transformative effect on me in that sense of saying – what you’ve actually just said Kostas – which is that this is a radical act.

Sometimes the only radical act you have is to imagine how... What it can look like on the other side, or how it might be. And it is, I think. In a world when we’re being told a lot what we can and what we can’t say, what’s allowed and what’s not allowed, freeing your voice, unbridling your imagination, you know, seems... It does seem like a radical position, yeah.

**Kostas Stasinopoulos:** For sure. And I really want to stress how important it is to not negate its actual survival function. Like, you walk through the streets going to work or going to meet someone or thinking about next month. You are imagining you, are reimagining what your life can be in the next second, in the next hour, in the next year. Or, even if we want to really talk about collective imagination, and that power, you’re starting to reimagine a future world much further down the line. And that is as simple and as transformative as it can be organically. But that is something that is very scary to people who feel threatened by the power that is amassed when we reimagine together.

**Gaylene Gould:** Yeah, I think so. And also, you know, the compassionate side of me that remembers how difficult it is to just imagine when you are exhausted, you know, when you have got mouths to feed and dwindling resources and that trip to work is getting longer and longer every day. And Tai speaks to that, this idea that it can start feeling like a privilege for those of us who have the space to do
it, if you think about Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, it’s those at the top who have the space to dream. But I think that’s why thinking about childhood for me sometimes is useful because imagination is so allowed and expected and encouraged up to a certain age, but we stop allowing it and encouraging it and expecting it when you’re an adult.

**Kostas Stasinopoulos**: For sure. But I also want to say that even if there are hardships and you’re trying to think of how you put food on the table, every thought is still an act of imagination. And that is the form what makes us sentient, compassionate beings. And if we don’t have that, it’s just life as a matter of fact. And that is not a life because we know that we are able to dream and we are able to nourish our lives with projections of alternate visions than the ones that are delivered to us, and really challenging those positions just by thinking about them.

...[intriguing, gentle, reflective electronic theme music returns]

**Irenosen Okojie [reading from her piece, 'Black Planetarium']**: [with slight distortion on the tone of her voice] She instructs these parched entities, separate from her, to open for neon bulbs, shaped like tentacles, after passing an orange-coloured sign that reads ‘Alienarium 5, gallery in the orbit, this way.’

**Gaylene Gould**: Another artist that plays with reimagining is writer Irenosen Okojie. I’ve been a big fan of Irenosen’s work for a while. She has a unique style and commitment to reimagining worlds and reimagining prose.

**Irenosen Okojie**: I’m Irenosen Okojie, I’m an award-winning novelist and short story writer. I write weird fiction, speculative fiction, fiction about characters on the periphery. I like to centre their lives and narratives because I feel very often that they’re ignored. [under her voice, the music slowly fades] So, for me it’s a joy to be able to do that, but also (I like) to give dimension to Black lives and the lives of people of colour in ways that are exciting, unexpected and bold. And there’s something about the speculative space that just allows room for that. You know, discovering this genre was like being given a key, really, to just kind of play. You can create worlds that people don’t recognise. You can create worlds that feel familiar, but suddenly you take somebody somewhere completely new and recalibrate a universe. The power of what the imagination can do, I just find that really exciting.

Very often, I think empathy is at the heart of what I do as well. I really care about my characters and I want readers to care about them and to see the expansiveness of their lives and create this sense of multiplicity that’s amazing and really liberating. I was approached by Serpentine to do a response piece to Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster’s *Alienarium 5* exhibition, which is sci-fi I guess in its broadest sense, it’s just full of strange and wonderful soundscapes and visions. And the theme of love really stood out to me, this idea of self-love actually and what this radical self-love looked like. You know, what are the tools that we have to be able to sustain it and manifest it, and I was thinking in particular about Black women and experiences that we go through, and how that can take its toll on the body. You know, structural racism and sort of trying to find your way.
This idea of regenerating ourselves came to me: how do we regenerate ourselves, and what if you could transcend planes? And Modu, my main character, was so strong in my mind, actually. You know, this woman who is of Earth but also of the metaverse, and is able to take herself away from Earth when she needs to, when it all becomes too much, to go to Shesnagehu. This fertile newfoundland that you access through the gallery in the orbit. In this idea of wellbeing, I was thinking about Octavia Butler. I was thinking about June Jordan, one of my favourite Black American poets, and her thoughts on radical self-love and what that looks like, and how do you transform without having that deep sense of yourself, an actual, real love for yourself. And it’s not about ego, it’s about valuing who you are and nourishing that sense of self. Because how do you move through worlds or move through difficult circumstances if that core isn’t there, if it’s not strong, you know?

So, that’s why I always think we have to find ways to be able to sustain it, otherwise you’re just existing. You don’t wanna just exist, you wanna thrive, you wanna flourish. So, all of this was just brewing in my head, and I was thinking about what we carry in the body and memory-making and transformation and what that can look like and how we can sort of play around with it. So, for this piece (‘Black Planetarium’) in particular, I really wanted to go there in terms of asking, what does this newfoundland look like? What does the metaverse look like? Everybody has their own version of what it looks like, the sense of colour, the sense of flight, the sense of ascension, the sense of expansion. All of that was heavy on my mind while I was writing it.

[A pause. Sound from Holorama by Perez & Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster begins: sparse, sacred-sounding, long-resonating, futuristic electronic tones reminiscent of gongs at the end of tunnels, or in a vast space]

[Irenosen begins to read]: ‘Black Planetarium’

Modu whose being is of unearthly body,
of prophet,
of planetary cycles
of jewels in Black menstruation spillage

commands her multiple mouths at the border of Shesnagehu. Luminous, unruly, they cluster in the newfoundland, in the ether to gather their sustenance. Hovering in an orbit possessing intricate blue lines crossing like electric veins. She instructs these parched entities, separate from her to open for neon bulbs shaped like tentacles after passing an orange-coloured sign that reads Alienarium 5, gallery in the orbit, this way. Dazed, Modu is unsettled from Earth’s toll on her Black body. She places one hand on the pulsing sign with her fanged heart inside it, the purple lettering leaking into her fingers. A cold air grazing her neck, a slight prickling on her skin. A cut on her tongue from the hexagon-shaped glass gallery throbbing, rotating, the artworks inside fluttering on the walls as mercurial liquid ravens ready to catapult into accidental rebirths. The doors glimmering, sliding, opening, then dropping a playing card in her hand with a gold asymmetric triangle as well as a riddle from Shesnagehu that asks ‘how does the Black woman sustain her core when she is forced to give her rich dams to an earthly world that offers her false currencies for resources she produces?’ Modu stuffs it in her frayed trouser pocket, the card
damp as if she has pressed it against her marauding heart which likes the company of signs, of new blood gained for intergalactic travel purposes. The scent of burning lingers in her nostrils. The sweetness of demerara sugar fades in her throat. The mouths contort before mimicking traces of ancestral language. They are just mouths for now, named as new Black civilisations who are women.

Mouth 1 – Diawara
Mouth 2 – Xolani
Mouth 3 – Hadiza
Mouth 4 – Ife
Mouth 5 – Mecca
Mouth 6 – Fatumata
Mouth 7 – Kirabo

Modu is hallowed, gutted by those painful earthly days. Her hands achy from catching grenade pins disguised as silver flowers in the wind. Her spirit flickering in its imitation of a drunken hologram searching for sight, her stomach attempting to grow seeds to disintegrate in blood vessels, in rhythms moving as rituals between her organs. For now, she has left behind the taking, the mule-work the world expects of women like her who find ways to thrive on the periphery, who battle to come alive again following temporary deaths, shaping their brinks to make malleable centres long before the world recognises their true power. She has left behind the hustle of the city, the sirens cracking in rear-view mirrors, the slip roads of painful legacies following her like a ventriloquist’s instrument on cold streets, the distorted histories crafted to cripple her, the trickle from the dark nub nipple that is slow poison imitating mother’s breast milk.

But parts of Shesnagehu have been infiltrating Modu’s consciousness on earthly shores; emissaries dispatched by the metaverse; bright fluttering wings, rushing mercury with inky outlines, slippery night brooks of heady water for spectral anointings, ceilings of constellations with parts crumbling into signatures on the tongue.

The mouths, her other openings, have yet to gain their bodies. They are anagrams on this plane that could be the renegade sky of another. They begin to sing an incantation gathered from the bends of their travels: difficulties they succeeded through like forms of ascension.

The matter is Black
Glimmering Black
Concave Black
Black cavities
Blackness as truth
Black Jacobin
Black intergalactic marauding
Black Mars shebeen of unknown address
SunRa Black
Black flight as sustenance
Black as source
As origin
She is here to refill the mining of her kind which occurs frequently on Earth. The taking from the Black woman’s body is
Axe edge
Shattered glass
Kinetic jackfruit turned inside out

Now the mouths hovering like last rites inherit the confessions of their future selves, sustained by this sporadic ether. Modu continues on her divine odyssey. She threads her way through the gallery to arrive at Shesnagehu. The weariness stored in her body accosts her as a bullet would a daydream, a reminder of the limitations placed upon her, but Shesnagehu has prickly cartographies with which to share her internal bruises. Blinding slipstreams wind between porous, multi-coloured cacti. [the slow melodic tones fade out and dry, clap-like, electronic-percussive sounds with complex rhythms fade in] Unidentifiable shapes bob in the surface of the streams, wielding her fingerprints like wings. They share a heartbeat with the playing card. Her pocket throbs in recognition.

In the end, Modu knows the playing card in her pocket is an edible seer, a riddle with legs. She fishes it out in a frenetic moment of revelation, shrouded by fragmented light. She eats it then sips from one starstruck slipstream with an intergalactic cactus as a conductor. The seven mouths orbit around her while the outlines of their bodies begin to form, joining to become a chorus of bright, ephemeral renewal. She feeds, chanting her incantation in a magnificent declaration of transformation, Black matter rushing through her like new alphabets.

Gaylene Gould: That was Irenosen Okojie reading her piece, ‘Black Planetarium’, accompanied by sound composed by Julien Perez and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster for a work called Holorama in Dominique’s Alienarium 5 exhibition at Serpentine.

[percussion fades out with an echo; we hear only voices]

Gaylene Gould: I tell you that I just want a tattoo that is “magnificent declaration of transformation like new alphabets.” I mean, as a Black woman, that great opening phrase, I wanna go to Shesnagehu, right? The thought of having a space that you could slip into when you need to replenish, when you need to restore, when you need to regenerate... That’s the dream, right?

Kostas Stasinopoulos: Absolutely. And the way that she speaks and connects this process to going beyond survival, being able to thrive, that made me sense it in my body as she was saying those words. It was a sensory bodily experience. Not just an imaginative one, in a cerebral sense.

Gaylene Gould: Me too, me too. I think at that moment there... It does become really emotional at that point, doesn’t it? It’s you think, God, this is the original anti-austerity story, right? That permission to say, "Yes, we want to thrive. Yes, we want to flourish. Yes, we deserve those things."
Kostas Stasinopoulos: Irenosen’s work really make me think of another piece that takes you to other space without necessarily leaving our planet, one that I absolutely love. It's a work called Heavens, by artists Revital Cohen and Tuur van Balen, that was commissioned as part of Serpentine’s Back to Earth project, our project dedicated to the climate emergency. Looking up to look down, looking up to look back, looking down to look forwards, as the artist say.

Heavens is a moving image installation that starts from the idea that the octopus evolved from a virus originating in other space, expanding, in this way, our perception of ecology as a network of interplanetary relationships.

Speaker in Cohen & van Balen’s Heavens: Life-bearing thunderstones fall into / luminescent cosmic gene pools / radioactive heat inside icy bodies sweating / interstellar organics. / Not a dirty snowball but jets of organic / molecules. / Something good is going to happen, / Something bad is going to happen. / Something is going to happen. / Interplanetary matter falls in radiant clouds of debris... [Voice and music fade out]

Gaylene Gould: Woahhh, tell me more!

Kostas Stasinopoulos: So, emerging from conversations with a philosopher, a writer, a psychiatrist, an astrobiologist, an astronomer, and an escape artist... [Gaylene is heard chuckling] ...Heavens is a constellation of text, sound and images. The way that the work is presented is that you have this incredible projection on the ceiling. When we did it in London, it was the ceiling of a church. And you walk in and you lie on the floor and experience the full work. Inspired by this idea that the octopuses a squid infected by a virus from outer space, it really turns the narrative on its head on, (narratives of) escape strategies from Earth. When we think about the climate emergency and the future images of apocalypses are coming to our heads – and SpaceX and those who are able to really want to leave this planet. But what happens if we start thinking about this planet as connected to outer space, through the mystery of outer space. It really begs us to question, why do we need these escape strategies, why do we need these imaginations when outer space is (only) as interesting as the abyss on this planet?

Gaylene Gould: I can’t wait to hear more. It reminds me of the times that I have been diving. Suddenly I was aware of the fact that there was this other planet on the planet on which I was living with which I actually had no relationship. And I’m a real fan of octopuses because they are so weird. So, I get it, and I believe it [laughing], I’m like, take me on that journey, for sure!

Kostas Stasinopoulos: And it’s really interesting, because the octopus serves as the muse for Heavens. You never get to see it. It’s not represented in some shape or form when you enter the work. And the
script is written by so many people because the octopus also has eight legs. I don't know if you know, it has a brain and there's a central...

Gaylene Gould: [disbelieving] No, it doesn't! [gasps]

Kostas Stasinopoulos: Yeah, and there is one more brain in the centre of the body. So, (the artists) really mimicked the way that the octopus behaves in order to create this really immersive and radical imagination of how we, as humans, could learn from the octopus.

[Voices and music fade up. High pitched wavering ambient tones. An occasional, ringing, high-pitched single piano note. Altered voices mutter repetitive 'buh' sounds. Push' sounds like air jets. The same flat-toned speaking voice returns.]

Speaker in Cohen & van Balen’s Heavens In the casual shock of a comet, all things should be destroyed.

[40:00]

[A pause in speech. Single piano key continues. Repeated snares begin, then are replaced by pounding techno music. After a while, the flat speech returns, much faster now, punctuated by fuzzy interference sounds] fire, fire. / If we keep expanding, up is the only way to go. / Enter Dragon to escape our eventual / extinction. / Falcon Heavy will remove us from some / doomsday Event. / We float up to Maui on its best day. No rain, no / earthquakes. / On Mars we will dig out a Sea of solution. / An oasis against the backdrop of infinity. / I went into the wilderness and I rained. Rapid heart beat / Rapid breathing / Pale skin / Flushed skin / Dilated pupils / Cold palms / Trembling. [a pause] A loud beat synchronises your body with that of the others and you know they are there but you don’t see them. There’s no meaning, there’s no figure. [Pounding techno music intensifies and speeds up. Occasional clap sounds enter. An occasional scraping, echoey industrial hollering. Distorted moaning or lowing] A loud beat synchronises your body with that of the others and you know they are there but you don’t see them. There’s no meaning, there’s no figure. [Speech becomes faster and quieter, unintelligible under the music to begin with] Transcend the sense of separation, go outside of yourself, experience weightlessness. If we keep expanding, up is the only way to go. / Enter Dragon to escape our eventual / extinction. / Falcon Heavy will remove us from some / doomsday Event. / We float up to Maui on its best day. No rain, no / earthquakes. / On Mars we will dig out a Sea of solution. / An oasis against the backdrop of infinity. / I went into the wilderness and I rained. / Hopes, dreams, steel, engines, / 5,4,3,2,1 fire, fire. [Slow, operatic soprano and alto singing returns. The speaker continues very quickly] You dance in your own room. There’s no mirror and you’ve never seen yourself dance, so you have no visual representation of your dancing and yet you are just dancing. In a sense it’s expressive, but it’s not representational. Not only because most dance is not representational in the sense that it’s non-figurative [the speaker’s voice is duplicated over their main flow, slowly repeating phrases], but it’s not representational in the sense that you’re not required to imagine an Other... You don’t have to have a sense of yourself, to have a representation of yourself to do this expressive thing. [Occasional high-pitched rusty metallic scraping sounds] Unable to stop submerging my head under / Again / Again / Again / The water is burning. / Feels both alien and strangely familiar, / We will master the sensation of loss. / In the early death throes of a massive star / Disconnected from the world around,
We feel no physical pain. / Stop time by reiterating this atemporal / present, / Floating above, again, again, again / Don't remember how we got here. / Everything seems foggy / I am space-dust again, / Boundaries and borders are gone... [The speech stops. The energy slows. Operatic singing and metallic scraping continue for some time before fading out gradually while Kostas speaks]

**Kostas Stasinopoulos**: It was really beautiful. I remember being in that space and really watching our audience just sit there and lie and lose their sense and track of time. And the bit that we also just listened to is really high energy dance music. And I know that they (the artists) are interested in how losing yourself, as they say in the script: you’re part of other bodies in a rave and you lose a sense of your body dancing (trying to form a) sense of representation. How do we create that feeling of collective ecstatic trance and a sense of cosmic wonder together? This is something that Revital and Tuur are really interested in. And the way that you dance, for example, in a sea of bodies and losing a sense of self through that process is really interesting. And they also connect it to, for example, the octopus that is able to change so many colours on its skin, but is actually colourblind at the same time, so that sense of wonder is something that is interesting here for me.

**Gaylene Gould**: Oh wow. Yeah, I think so, too. There feels like something around that relationship, I think, between the celestial and the subterranean and even in the club scene, there’s elements of both of those. You can kind of feel submerged and at the same time elevated. I think there’s a feeling of that in the sound, in the audio of this, for sure. And I also thought, in a way, I’d love to for this to be played to octopuses! There’s something about a homage, you know, to them!

**Kostas Stasinopoulos**: Oh absolutely, and they (the artists) have like this incredible research into how we as humans have related to octopuses or octopi. I’m not sure what the right way to say it is! [Gaylene laughs] Throughout history that creature has been mythologised in so many ways, and using the octopus as the muse for other ways of relating, rethinking, reimagining our lives, and our lives to (in relation to) other species on this planet, and our lives in relation to other space, above and beyond this planet, while we are firmly rooted on Earth, is something that is really incredible.

**Gaylene Gould**: Yeah, and you mentioned earlier with regards to Tai’s work about hope, and the role of the imagination and hope. In a way, what you brought is a kind of avenue, a connection, another way to think about hope which is not through our species, but through others. I’m trying to find these breadcrumbs and I just feel like bringing the octopus into the room is another breadcrumb. A big, juicy, eight-tentacled breadcrumb, for me to explore in terms of things that we can learn, ways in which our connections can be reimagined, I guess.

[intriguing, calm electronic tones]

So, this takes us nicely back to Tai’s work and Somerset House at the moment, there’s an exhibition called *The Horror Show*, which Tai is part of, and she took us down to see her piece. [electronic tones are replaced by hissing and moaning sounds that rise and fall] So, imagine a towering ghost emoji, elegantly shrouded and haloed by blue tentacles from which hang trinkets. They’re darling – glittering gold stars, sweetie-coloured bulbs – and they’re ghastly too, a bloody tentacle tooth is hanging off one of them. The work is playfully tactile and awe-inspiring in equal measure, like a benevolent goddess.
Tai Shani: There's this academic I really like called Amy Hale, and she said that I do the whims – it's a funny way to call it! but a ‘whimsical gut punch’ or something like that. [Gaylene laughs, higher scream-like vocals can be heard in the background of the exhibition] Yeah, I always want there to be a duality: things that look beautiful, but there's also a darkness to them.

Gaylene Gould: I keep using the word delicious. It's, like, lickable, or tasty!

Tai Shani: Yeah, I really wanted it to be like ice cream.

[The howling and moaning in the soundtrack of the exhibition grows in the background and becomes more of a chorus]

Gaylene Gould: Yeah. You achieved it. Yeah, it feels like ice cream, sweetie-coloured and it's that feeling I had a little girl, a seven-year-old girl, this is exactly what my imagination was like at that age. Playful and haunting, and all of that together. [Powerful, projected, soul-singing can be heard in the background] I mean, it's great in terms of where it's positioned, because you kind of go through this fever dream of a show, don't you, and then you descend the stairs, and then there's this monumental, it's almost like it's in an altar, it has this god-like kinda presence I think. So, tell tell us about how this piece ended up here.

Tai Shani: So, it is part of The Neon Hieroglyph project because I think one of the nebulous ideas I had for it was that it would end up being a mausoleum for psychedelic witches. Because there were certain witch characters... Especially on that island that I told you about, there's this really interesting witch that emerges there that is, I guess, a proto-communist witch in a way. [They] steal from the rich and brings food to the island. They're called maiaras and they're very respected. It's also one of the only truly positive (I mean at its time, you know, not as a looking back) but at it's time, a positive incarnation of the witch. She was revered.

[50:00]

So, I was interested in how that came out of this 450-year trip, that they came out with this socialist witch, at the end. [Many sounds fade; occasional hissing and moaning remain; they fade out slowly] I guess our conversation has become quite political, but I don't really understand how one can think of the word or concept of reworlding without it being implicitly political, really... and explicitly. Empathy is, in a way, an act of imagination as well. It's a somatic act of imagination. And it goes back to thinking about, what is fascism? Or, what is this death drive of the world? [by now, we hear only Tai] And a lack of imagination translates also into a lack of an ability to empathise with anyone else that doesn't fall along the same lines of status, class, identity, race... All of these subject positions. I mean, being an artist and working through what it means to, let's say, create speculative worlds is [a] privilege of also attributing some of that imagination to everybody, basically. Because it will be an act of faith.
But that is the weird thing. Things move very slowly, but there are these kind of stones that you cast into darkness. And in a way, a political manifesto, an artwork, a book, any of the things that do have that idea in them of what the world could be [are] casting a stone into darkness. But that stone gets met at some point, I think. Well, that’s the hope, isn’t it? I mean, if not, all you have is nihilism really, and then it’s a disaster.

Gaylene Gould: Yeah. Or casting seeds into the darkness.

Tai Shani: Yeah, and then you meet the tree.

[Pause. Calm, reflective electronic tones from the theme music return; they build up and continue]

Kostas Stasinopoulos: That was beautiful. I think that talking about the importance of a leap of faith. It is a gesture in itself of casting a stone into darkness, or casting a seed, as you say, and then hoping to meet a tree. That is a leap of faith. But I think what also is important for me here is to follow the analogy, to let it ripple, to trust that it will ripple, and the rippling is as important as the stone that causes it.

Gaylene Gould: Yeah, I think I was really glad that we spoke a lot about some of the current, present day questions, the more gnarly questions that we’re faced with. Because often I think this idea of the imagination and hope can [sound like] turning your back on what’s here right now, turning your back on the present. And I always feel quite disconnected in those conversations. I think there was something about Tai’s work (even though it looks like it’s been made in a Willy Wonka style or something), that it really is grounded in a conversation with what’s happening today. So, that idea of hope and the imagination being grounded, I felt that very strongly in that conversation. Kostas, thank you so much for giving me back the faith, helping me bring back the faith! I’ve really enjoyed our conversation today and I would love to be even greedier and see if you might leave me with something, another gift, something for me to remember so I can hold onto this conversation.

[Calm theme music transitions into warmer, meandering theme music with synths, which continues]

Kostas Stasinopoulos: Well, thank you for having me here and I think let’s focus on what we just exchanged. We shared the space we imagined and then imagined again, and then reimagined some more together. So, I really want to say that maybe think of the next time you find yourself in that process of imagination, and where it is. Because you’re sitting at a park and it is a beautiful day and you’re imagining things, but it is that you’re having a hard time and you’re imagining things differently. Think about that process and how special it makes you, and how that is a transformative moment, a beautiful moment, a generous moment, and that it is important that you are experiencing it by yourself. But think of the potentiality when you start bringing other people and other species into the equation. Imagine how many other lives are imagining together with you simultaneously and what can happen when you meet.
Gaylene Gould: Beautiful. I will absolutely do that. Thank you. I needed to meet these artists today. I needed help to reimagine a place that I might want to exist and grow within. And all these artists showed how to remain firmly rooted in today’s realities and still dedicate themselves to creating epic moments of wonder. In fact, they reminded me it is imperative we do so, because without experiencing it, we might forget it exists. And we might forget that the joy of this human and other experience lies in our ability to contemplate and craft it.

Tai’s gift of that image of casting stones or seeds into the darkness was enough to right me. We have no idea if the seeds will fall on fertile ground and if so, if the tree will bear fruit and then whose belly that fruit will fill, and if we’ll live long enough to see any of that. But we must cast those stones anyway, because imagination is the ultimate act of faith. So, what art, books, sunsets will you take in that will help you to feel part of something larger? When might you permit yourself the radical act of unbridling your imagination? And what seeds will you cast into the darkness?

I’ll leave you with a final gift from Kostas. This is a piece called *The Whole Earth Chanting* from artist and quantum physicist Libby Heaney and the musician Nabihah Iqbal. It uses the power of voice, sound and music to explore new expressions of belonging and collective identity between humans and non-humans. During the piece, Nabihah responds to chants generated by artificial intelligence, which was trained by Libby on data that included football fans singing, Gregorian chanting, birds, and the humming of equipment in the quantum physics lab. As all these sounds blend, the boundaries through which we usually understand the world are dissolved, allowing us to enter a transcendental slipstream into another imagined world. [warm synths are overlaid with birdsong]

Serpentine Podcast: *REWORLDING* is presented by me, Gaylene Gould. The series was produced by Katie Callin with production support from Nada Smiljanic at Reduced Listening, and curated by the Serpentine Editorial team, Hanna Girma and Fiona Glen. [synths fade out; birdsong continues; ethereal, church-like singing fades in quietly] Thanks to all members of Serpentine’s Programmes, Communications and Audiences teams for their direction and contribution. Special thanks to Serpentine’s leadership team, Bettina Korek, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Yesomi Umolu. The music for *REWORLDING* was conceived and produced by KMRU. Our thanks go to all guests, contributors and advisors on *REWORLDING*. Until next time, happy dreaming.

Extract from *The Whole Earth Chanting*: [Birdsong continues and grows. The church-like song continues, with vocals weaving over each other, with language that sounds like Latin. Some voices meander with a sense of sacred or spiritual expansiveness, while others repeat the same phrase with a warm melody. Further warm, subtle melodic tones add depth beneath the song of humans and birds. After a while, this fades out and a mechanical throbbing fades in.]