Beyond and Within: AI Talks

Episode 1 | What is AI?

As an essential part of *Ether's Bloom: A Programme on Artificial Intelligence*, the new podcast Beyond and Within: AI Talks invites experts, artists and researchers to dive deeper into the world of AI and some of the vital questions it raises. It takes the listeners on a journey of questions, analyses and knowledge, while exploring the many sides of the fast-growing technologies around AI.

In the first episode *"What is AI?"* podcast host Eliane Eid talks to cultural scientist, researcher and writer Maya Indira Ganesh. They introduce the audience to the usage of Artificial Intelligence, its relevance and relatability to the general public. The conversation highlights the use of the current terminology "AI" and its effect on today's technologies and discourses.

(As this transcript is based on a conversation, it contains colloquial phrases. It has been edited for better readability.)

Eliane Eid*:* Hello everyone, and welcome to our podcast Beyond and Within: AI Talks. I am Eliane Eid and I will be moderating the episodes of this podcast that was developed by the Artificial Intelligence (AI) team here at the Gropius Bau.

What is Beyond and Within? This limited series of five episodes will take you on a journey of reflection, curiosity and conversations regarding AI with a focus on a more artistic perspective. Within this format, we are discussing points of accessibility, fears and possibilities that come with this technology.

We wanted to create this podcast as we had a lot of questions, concerns and ideas about how AI is changing our daily and artistic lives. So we decided to jump on this ride and open up the conversation with experts, artists and researchers who have been studying and working with AI for quite some time and asked their opinions and knowledge about all those questions that are emerging.

This podcast is part of *Ether's Bloom*: *A Programme on Artificial Intelligence*, where we are hosting different artistic presentations and diving into the topic of AI on different levels, through a Writer in Residence, workshops and discussions. The thoughts of this programme will inform the development of an app that we will launch in 2024.

In our first episode, we would like to welcome Maya Indira Ganesh, who is a cultural scientist, researcher and author and is the consultant for *Ether's Bloom*: *A Programme on Artificial Intelligence* here at the Gropius Bau. In her work, she focuses on the intersection of digital technologies, culture and society. Through this talk, we will get a glimpse into the meaning of AI, its functionality, fears and power, while trying to understand how it's all connected.

Hello, Maya, and welcome to Beyond and Within.

Maya Indira Ganesh*:* Hi, Eliane. Nice to be talking to you today and thanks for the invitation.

Eid: Thank you for joining us. When we talked a few months ago, you mentioned something about AI being a doorway. And my question to you is, if AI was a doorway, what should we expect on the other side?

Ganesh: I think I might have been referring to AI as a doorway in terms of time. So in time travel movies, there's always a portal that takes us to another reality, another place in time. So, I like to think about AI as kind of existing in multiple timescales, so this makes knowing what AI is a little bit of a challenge. On the one hand, you can walk through the doorway and you're back in the 1950s when in 1950 Alan Turing published a paper called *Can Machines Think*. There was a Dartmouth Conference in 1956 in which a group of men coined the word 'Artificial Intelligence'. They wanted to call it 'Cybernetics', but that was already taken at the time. So they went with 'Artificial Intelligence'. And if this was a movie set in the past and we were walking through this doorway into the past, we would be able to ask questions. I think about what it means in the future when you're using the word 'Artificial Intelligence'. Do you know what the stakes are? I don't think those men in the past would have known that. But that's why the idea of a portal is kind of interesting because it allows us to go back and ask those questions about the world at that time and the pressures of the world at that time when they wanted to use certain kinds of words and language.

We don't know where it's going to take us. And the other way that works as a doorway is to the future. And AI has been an imaginary for a long time. I mean, past works of science fiction and contemporary works also, refer to future imaginaries of societies with AI. So we've heard about things like robots, flying cars and *The Jetsons*. It's about life with machines. I mean, ironically, our lives are already kind of full of machines. Our lives are already kind of in the future. But I think that AI is sort of a vehicle for this future society. And in fact, one of the films that's more than twenty years old sort of conveys us to some of these ideas of how we live in the future. It's a film I like a lot. It's called *Minority Report* and it's based on a book by Philip K Dick called *The Minority Report*. And we remember this film because it was one of the first times on cinema we saw predictive policing, a technology that already exists now, where the protagonist, John Anderton, played by Tom Cruise, is a detective who works in the pre-crime division where they're able to see people's crimes before they happen. And that's why we remember the film. But actually, there are other very subtle things also going on in the film that are about what the future of everyday life looks like with technology. So the moments when John Anderton is on the run and he jumps onto the subway and there's personalised advertising that is targeted to him and that knows who he is. Or John Anderton is eating breakfast and there are cartoons on the side of the conflict box. And this is not shocking or surprising to us now because we're living it. We're living some version of it now. And that book was written by Philip K Dick decades ago. The movie was made in the 2000s and is sort of inhabiting these multiple time scales at the same time. And I think maybe that's why I was thinking about AI as this vehicle into understanding the past and the future.

Eid: Exactly. Which makes me think of... Especially all those movies that focus on how we relate to machines and how we will deal with technology in the future... I think 20 years ago when we looked at those movies, we would have never predicted that this is how we would be living with AI, with VR, with augmented reality. But today, if we want to define AI and what is AI, how would you define it? How would you simplify it maybe to someone who is really disturbed by the thought of it?

Ganesh: I think there are a couple of things going on with what we think of as AI, and I think the first is we have to become comfortable with the reality that it exists as multiple things depending on who you ask. It is a technology that's being developed by big tech companies, research labs, in universities, but also in Silicon Valley. It is computer science. It's the data that we're constantly generating, and that's on the Internet. It's marketing, it's these imaginaries and culture and science fiction. It's also part of the digital infrastructure of how we live now. So it's kind of in our banking and financial systems. It is in our recommender algorithms telling us where we can go for dinner and what movies to watch next. It's also these ideas of how we think society should be organised and run, that data driven decision making or that efficiency through technology is possible, that to be globally competitive, states should put resources and regulation into harnessing the best of this technology. I think that AI is sort of these multiple things at the same time, and that's often challenging for us to kind of grapple with. But I think a lot of this has to do with the fact that AI is very much in emergency and kind of also lives in these multiple timescales, as we were saying, in the past and in the future. So I think that we have to hold these multiple realities at the same time. And my colleague Jonnie Penn and I refer to it in terms of, you know, being an imaginary, an infrastructure and ideology and an instrument at the same time. It is all of these things. So when we're thinking about AI, I think it's helpful to be really specific about which aspect of it we're talking about. And just to sort of conclude that thought, and going back to the film that I just mentioned, *Minority Report*, there's an interesting paper about *Minority Report* written by an academic called David Kirby, and he writes about how all of the stuff in that film, like most of us remember this gestural interface that they use. And at the time it was something that we had never seen before. I mean, we had smartphones and we were moving things on the screens of our phones. But this idea of a screen that was on the wall and that you could move data and information around on the screen, that wasn't a material thing. It was like a hologram that had come up. It was kind of amazing to see that. It was amazing to see these ads being served on the subway. There's driverless cars in that in a loop above the cityscape, there's the cartoons on the side of the cornflakes box. Now, what David Kirby writes about in that paper is how the studios and Steven Spielberg made that film, the studios and Steven Spielberg actually welcomed inventors, creators and technologists in to build these prototypes of what the future would look like. So a lot of our ideas about the future and what it will look like to be in this AI future are also weirdly made by people. It's not just something that's magically emerging. There's a great line in that paper that is actually from a song by the Red Hot Chili Peppers that the future is made in a Hollywood basement. And that's kind of true. And what that means is that while it might be in the past and while it might be in imaginaries and science fiction, it's also something that people are actively working on now and that we can identify those people, but also those networks of influence, financing. And it makes it possible for us then to ask questions about the technology and where it's going and what its role is in our lives.

Eid: I find it very interesting because also when we talk about Silicon Valley and about how AI is being used with the big tech companies, it will always, especially in my head, always goes back to all those ethical questions. And I remember we talked a lot about that as well before. But when we have all those challenges and when we have this dystopian fear of AI – how do we decide if we should use it or we should be part of it?

Ganesh: At one level, unfortunately or fortunately, the decision is made for us already. I think we can only change our expectations and we can only change our feelings about what's happening. There are some things that are beyond our control. It's the of price for owning a smartphone or wanting to watch Netflix.

On one level, a lot of these algorithmic data driven technologies are already there. They make life remarkably convenient. And yet I think at the same time, things are moving so fast that it's okay to also say: Hang on, there are some things I have no way to interrupt, but what are the things I can interrupt? What are the things I can ask for information about? If these are technologies that are going to be part of my social, economic, cultural, political and interpersonal life, then I think I do want to know: where is the choice that can be made? I want to understand what the technologies are, and what their applications are. There are a lot of very new, innovative, experimental applications of AI and algorithmic technologies in hiring, in health care and the criminal justice system. There's a lot of predictive technologies that are being used, and I think we are in a position to ask for information about how they're being used and what it means for us and how it's different from the systems that were there before. So I think sometimes we need to also be really clear about where we want to ask for more information, where we want to ask for more understanding about the technology, and I think that's hard for us because the dystopian narratives are quite strong. But I feel like there can be something empowering about using appropriate language, about having mechanisms to understand what the technology is doing and have it explained to us. I think that if this is increasingly something that's going to be in public systems, in institutions, but even the services that we are buying or that we're renting, then we must, as consumers, as citizens, I think we have a right to know how it's being used.

Eid: Do you think that eventually, or I don't know if it's already happening, but that AI would be censored at some point within the usage, within its access to the public? Because I know for now that, for example, with Bard in Europe, it was postponed for a while. We couldn't access it in Germany. So it makes me think of how will we censor AI or how will we maybe protect the public from its dangers?

Ganesh: That's a great question. And I think in some ways this is already happening. If you think about the oversight over AI applications. Just last week there was a report from the US FTC, the Federal Trade Commission. That had launched a new investigation into if ChatGPT is giving incorrect responses to questions that people had asked and if this had actually negatively affected them in some way. And I think that the FTC in the United States is a good example of a regulatory body that is trying to put some limits on the way that the technology is being rolled out and applied. I don't think that we need to just necessarily see this in terms of the set piece of all regulators that want to kill innovation. I think we need to just do away with that narrative because if these AI applications are going to be part of so many different kinds of technologies and applications, and it's not just this niche thing that's sitting in a lab, then we do have social, economic, political institutions and infrastructures that hold different kinds of consumer applications to account. That's what these regulatory bodies are trying to do. I don't know if it's so much censorship as it is asking for a certain kind of accountability for the technologies, their applications. And I would think about it more in terms of accountability rather than censorship, which has a more kind of draconian ring to it.

Eid: It makes me think of the term in itself, which is AI, and there's now this huge talk about if Artificial Intelligence is the right format to talk about AI, or should we use a different term because AI is different than it was ten years ago. It's different than it was five years ago, and it's different than it was one month ago. So is this term still relevant to us today?

Ganesh: Good question. I'm a fan of expanding the number of words that we use to refer to this technology. And it's not just one technology, it's multiple things. At the same time, different words have

resonance with different kinds of communities because there are, as we've been saying, multiple applications and aspects of this. It's helpful to recognise that AI can be a historical term and it can also be a marketing term. I know that many people who work in those domains will be quite specific about the words that they use. They will talk about Machine Learning, Computer Vision, Natural Language Processing (NLP) or Automated Decision Making. Depending on what their expertise is, they will have very granular understandings of something or they will say, you know, we're talking to non-expert audiences and we have to use different kinds of language for it. I feel like it is helpful to be very specific about what we're talking about because that also takes the sort of imaginary out of it – in context where we want to think about regulation, in context where we want to think about accountability. But also just to understand what's going on. There is a point we have crossed where we can say if things like Large Language Models (LLM) are in the educational system, if they are going to be in the legal system or whatever, we can start talking about things as they actually are. And it's valuable for people to understand how they work, because we have seen from the experience of the Cambridge Analytica scandal and everything that's happened with social media in the last half decade, that it is because people didn't understand and they were kept from understanding about how data was being collected, about lack of adequate data protections, about the connection between data and how it's being sold and how it's used for social and political influence. When people don't understand these things, it's quite easy for them to do just something which is harmless, like an online quiz, not understanding how that online quiz is actually being used to collect data about them and then profile them and then target certain kinds of information to them. So if we understand how the technologies work, then we can recognise their implications. And I'm not saying that everybody needs to learn how to code or become a computer scientist or anything, but there's ways to understand what the technology is doing, which even as consumers and users can be like: Right, this is what's happening. It's not magic inside. And I also don't have to always defer to experts to tell me what's going on because that gives a lot of power to experts and not to consumers. And this is in the context of AI as and in consumer applications. I think it also exists in different contexts, more kind of niche contexts, which would have different kinds of standards and regulations for it. The language has to kind of follow the usage.

Eid: There is this notion of who's in control, like is the algorithm controlling its own algorithm at this point? But there's also this factor of maybe understanding our role better as users, because as you mentioned a few minutes ago, maybe there is a certain knowledge that's still not there about what we should do with this technology and how to use it in our life. But at the same time it is very present. The first thing that comes to my mind is Siri, like it's the first thing that we may be using every day in our life and our role is somehow changing. And I think this change is maybe a bit scary because it's happening so fast and every day there's something new. My question then is how can we understand our role better as users and creators with AI?

Ganesh: Yeah, that's a good question because I feel people don't think about that enough. I think there is some sort of understanding that we need to just get with the programme, that we just need to like strap in and get ready for the future. And I think the pace of human societies is actually slower. And I think we need to extend understanding and care to people who feel nervous and uncertain with these things and sit down to explain what's actually going on. So I think one part of it is actually recognising that the implications for people in different parts of the world on different parts of the digital divide is going to be different. Not everybody is going to benefit from this in quite the same way. We're already seeing income inequality kind

of perpetuated by these technologies and big technologies. And platform companies have become really powerful and really valuable and profitable. I mean, the kinds of valuations that they have are really high. And this does not trickle down to users. The other thing having just said the word users, is I wonder if it's valuable to actually think of ourselves in different ways as not just people who are at the receiving end of these things, but as people who have more of a role to ask questions about it or to learn about it, to use it in different ways, to interact with it in different ways. And one of the challenges is that many aspects of AI technologies are still very much in emergence. But at the same time, as you were just pointing out, it's also in very banal things that we use every day, like things like email or in our music recommendations or whatever. There's algorithmic and automated technologies that are in so many aspects of our everyday lives. So I think more public education, but a part of that education is actually literacy. I think there's social and data literacy that we need in different public institutions. And if we see ourselves as more active in that way, I need to inform myself because I have this role as an educator or as a public servant or a bureaucrat as a decision maker in industry and business. I think if we think of ourselves in more proactive terms and not just as the recipients of these things, then maybe that helps us feel more confident and also saying: well, there are some things that I'm not interested in learning about, and these things I think are important to my communities, to my area of work, to my sector. So that's why I quite like being in an educational role in an educational institution, because you can do some of that work. And I think more of it needs to happen outside of educational institutions as well. So I think understanding can kind of reassure us a great deal. And at the same time, it also makes us very aware of the limits of our understanding of things that we don't know. And I think that produces some humility.

Eid: For me, this always goes back to the question: how can I explain AI? And I mean, how can we explain AI? At the same time, it's a lot to explain what AI is when trying to narrow it down because it's part of our everyday life and it's there... but at the same time it can get complicated to also simplify the access to it because there are some cultural and educational barriers and we need to be aware of that. And also in order to give this message out and to make it accessible.

Ganesh: Yeah, absolutely. I think depending on what people are interested in and what their issues are, there have to be different ways of conveying what's happening with technology. And sometimes it's also not just about AI technologies. There are some things that are just about critical digital infrastructure that we live with now that maybe like internet access, maybe like public services that are being digitised. There are many aspects of technology at different time scales, at different levels of being experimental versus being more well established. We're living with these multiple things now and it's affecting our lives in different ways. If you're somebody who is, let's say, receiving health care, if you're somebody who is a refugee or a migrant, if you're somebody who is in school, like there's different ways that you're encountering these digital infrastructures and systems. So I think depending on the public institution, you need to kind of recognise who your constituents are and kind of think about that intersection, think about good stories, think about good applications, rather than sort of talk about the whole. We can talk about specific things that people are engaging with that they're interacting with and demystify it for them and find kind of fun, creative, thoughtful, but also quite rigorous ways to describe what's going on. So it's okay for people to also know just a little bit because experts also only know like little bits of what they're working on. Very few people kind of have an understanding of the whole thing.

Eid: I think I was very dystopian in the first part of the conversation, but mainly because there is a fear about how this AI technology is working? And I think, everyone has thoughts about that. And what should we expect from it? But if you have to think about the positive side of AI and how it's affecting our life in a better way, for example, what I find fascinating is how it's also facilitating our language and our communication with others. Do you think that at some point AI would be able to bridge a barrier between human beings and nature or human beings and the unknown, the language that we don't know how to interpret ourselves?

Ganesh: I think as human beings we have pretty deep ways of connecting to nature. They might be limited, but we have decided to set ourselves apart from nature for a long time. And I think that there are many human communities who are very connected to nature. Others are trying to find their way back to nature. I don't think we've ever actually been separate from it. You could think about many of these technologies as just ways of us constantly evolving new languages, new approaches to kind of inhabit the shared ecosystem that we're part of. I think that's one part of it. So AI can be part of that but I think it's something that we may be used to sort of understanding ourselves and each other a little better. And I think that we're so obsessed with human language, with our verbal language and the things we're able to do with it. The ideas we're able to create, the way we're able to communicate. It's a pretty remarkable feat. And because we can only understand our language and not the language of dolphins or octopi or ants, there's a lot of emphasis on language and communication through language. I don't have any positive stories about AI, I'm not going to lie. There's maybe only one that I really like talking about. And it is about language, and I like it because it is grounded in communities. It is positive and forward looking and it involves community engagement. So the story is part of a series in MIT Technology Review on AI colonialism. It's about how a community in New Zealand, Māori language speakers, were able to use natural language processing technologies to develop an app for younger generations and communities of Māori people who didn't know the language to be able to learn the language. And there's lots of language learning apps out there, but they only include a fraction of the different languages that are spoken in different parts of Africa and in places like New Zealand. And Māori was a language that European British colonisers actively prevented Indigenous people in New Zealand from speaking. They prevented them from speaking it. So the language died out and now there's a kind of resurgence and there's a great story about how this community developed their own data sovereignty protocols and laws about how they wanted their data use. They knew what it was going towards. They're kind of involved in the development of this app. Nothing was done unilaterally. They used algorithmic and NLP, natural language processing technologies, that were out there. But it happened through this community for a shared goal to develop an app that would allow them to be able to speak and learn Māori. And I love that story for all of these reasons and I think we need more of those kinds of things. It's something that makes sense to a specific community. It takes time to develop. It might take a long time to get it to work right and think that's okay. I think kind of reducing the scale and the pace and not wanting AI to be this universalising, totalising thing that works for everybody in the same way, I think we can pull back from some of those ideologies and say, let's find these great examples of people using digital technologies in a way that it works for them.

Eid: Exactly. I think the biggest challenge now with AI is that we tend to generalise because this is what it's doing, that there's a code running and we're generalising the data and processing information. But the positive outcome would be if it's more community based, if the data that we're using is community based and if we're doing it for certain communities and developing it and growing it on a larger level. What you

just mentioned reminded me of something I saw on the TV when I was visiting my family in Lebanon. I decided I didn't want to watch TV when I was in Lebanon, but we were sitting all together and there was a report in the evening about a young group of students who developed a hand... not a hand... developed like a glove that you put on your hand, and then you can use sign language and it will translate it to Arabic so that you can go if you want to order or if you're outside and you can just do the signs and it will translate from Arabic sign language to the Arabic spoken Arabic. And it was fascinating because it was purely community based and it was an initiative that made me think, okay, we can look at AI on a more positive note and not just be scared of it.

Ganesh: Yeah, absolutely. That's a great example. And I think that as long as we bring the sort of recognition of politics, of community to our building and development of technology and recognising the kind of social relationships that exist between creators and producers and markets and different kinds of user communities. I think that sometimes what gets taken away in our understanding of technology just becomes about the app and the interface, and that's the stuff that people who make those things need to focus on. But I think they need to be kind of infused with an understanding of the fact that those technologies exist in a much wider web of relationships of networks, dependencies, power. And we have to kind of ask those questions from the bottom up, saying: what is this actually for? What is it doing? Who needs it? It's useful for people to ask those questions when they have very specific motivations. Financial one is a very powerful one.

Eid: Thank you, Maya, so much. I enjoyed talking to you. It's always nice to discuss those topics with you.

Ganesh: Thank you.

Eid: I also need to thank everyone who helped develop and produce this podcast. Madeleine Köberlein as co-producer, Luis Kürschner our sound designer and editor, Çağla Erdemir for all the assistance and of course Clara Meister, our supervisor and AI programme lead, along with the Gropius Bau for providing us with this space to take the audience into this journey.

The Gropius Bau and the programme are funded by the Ministry for Culture and Media. As for our next episodes, we will be diving deeper into topics related to AI and intersectionality, hallucination and different artistic practices, so stay tuned!