

Textiles and Spaceflight
A London Arts & Humanities Partnership Event
28 May 2025
Dana Research Centre & Library
Science Museum, London

Bullet Points for Panel Discussion

This was a conversation-style discussion, where each participant was invited to share their thoughts on one (or more) prompts/ questions that Varvara set out below, presenting their contribution as a short response/ position statement (3-5 minutes). This part of the session will be followed by Q&A.

What does the idea of flight entail in relation to our imagination? How does the concept of human flight shape collective myths, metaphors, and visions of the future- from Icarus to Elon Musk? Can the aspiration to leave the ground transform our understanding of identity, freedom, or transcendence?

When we think about flight, what real and imagined materiality can we envisage? How does this materiality connect to potentialities of artistic iterations and interpretations of flight technologies? How do textiles relate to space and flight imaginaries?

How do we see the evolving relationship between science, academic research, and art practice? How does this relationship extend into the critical, curatorial and museums' domains? What can we expect from these interdisciplinary cross-pollinations?

Varvara Keidan Shavrova - 'Textiles and Spaceflight' Position Statement

Since the development of flight technologies early in the 20th century flight and flying has captured the collective imagination, yet its potential has been firmly harnessed by patriarchy. In her research Varvara explores what flight represents from a feminist perspective – by defining flying, lifting off, as well as fleeing, escaping – whilst trying to re-imagine what a subjectively emancipatory, politically deterritorialised mode of flight might look like, when flight is reimagined and reclaimed through haptic technologies, and collaborative and collective feminist practices of textiles and fibre-based art projects. Varvara's new artwork *The Blade* (2025), that resulted from her research placement at the Science Museum, is being shown as part of this event. This tufted carpet artwork is based upon the evolution of Rolls-Royce jet engines. *The Blade* is a transformation of the materiality of flight intended as a critique, positioning aviation and spaceflight outside the military-industrial complex and proposing an interpretation of flight as a radical innovation borne out of domestic craft skills. It challenges the materiality and deliberateness of aviation and space museum displays, analysing museums' approaches from a feminist perspective which is manifested through an innovative use of textile materials.

Fatos Üstek: Discussion points

As the boundaries between disciplines become increasingly porous, the evolving relationship between science, academic research, and contemporary art presents fertile ground for advancing artistic discourse and institutional transformation. My recent research focuses on reconfiguring institutional frameworks to support the development of learning institutions—spaces where knowledge production, experimentation, and artistic thinking are not only accommodated but prioritised. In this context, the incorporation of new technologies—ranging from artificial intelligence to data systems and sensory computing—becomes a compelling terrain for artistic inquiry. Artists are not passive recipients of these tools; they actively reframe their meaning, explore their implications, and expand the possibilities of how they operate in cultural and perceptual terms. This presentation will consider how art institutions, curatorial practices, and museum models can evolve to better sustain the complexity of contemporary art practice in dialogue with scientific and academic methodologies. Rather than framing this convergence in terms of civic duty, I argue for its generative potential within art itself: to enrich artistic language, deepen conceptual rigour, and open new modes of perception. Through this lens, interdisciplinary cross-pollination is not instrumental—it is integral to the future of the arts. Institutions must position themselves as agile, thoughtful platforms that nourish this development and that affirm the role of the artist as both innovator and thinker across disciplines.

Dr Jennifer Thatcher Discussion points:

In my own research, I have looked at the interconnections between the history of artist interviews and print, broadcast and audio and audio-visual reproduction technologies. The modern invention of the interview in the mid-19th century is intrinsically tied to advancements in print technologies and thus the rise of popular, cheap newspapers and the new content needed to fill them. It is also linked to other technologies – such as the invention of the telegraph, the microphone, radio broadcasting, photography and sound and video recording – and the ways in which they have created opportunities for capturing, amplifying and disseminating artists’ voices, offering new powers to artists but also prompting anxieties over how their voices might be manipulated. I see a link between this history of communication with the history of flight, in that both responded to and prompted changes in the ways that humans psychologically understand their place in the world. Flight and communication both evoke feelings of fantasy, power and fear. I found displays at the Science Museum to be helpful, as well as recently an exhibition at the Bodleian library titled Listen In: How Radio Changed the Home, in which it was possible to listen to the earliest recordings of BBC radio broadcasts in all their crackliness. I would love to see more exhibitions and displays that acknowledged the link between the history of art and that of science, and more art historical research that emphasised the material conditions of producing art, art documentation and art criticism.

Dr. Rebecca Mellor: Discussion points:

Art and science as fields of experimentation, analysis, and creative practice (i.e. the artist as scientist or engineer) – challenging the false idea that art and science are at odds or in some way completely separate processes & methods

Immediately I thought of the hierarchy of material in fine art collections when I explored your work. Gendered (and often racial) materiality of textiles for example – ‘craft’ as subversion to the patriarchal narrative of STEM, productivity, and creation.

Specifically discussing how and why the Science Museum collects and displays art:

Expressing lived human experience of science and technology – including political and environmental uncertainty

Telling under-represented stories and celebrating figures from science history

Using art and visual objects that aid the collection of areas of science and technology that are otherwise difficult to represent at the museum scale

The differences in audience at Science Museum – e.g. creating art and interpretation for younger audiences and families

While I don’t necessarily have an answer to this, I would be keen to learn how artists feel museums can better support their practice and collaborations. Also, what are the challenges and benefits of working in a museum context rather than a traditional art institute or gallery?

Dr Barbara Brownie: Textiles & Spaceflight, Position Statement

Barbara views artists’ and designers’ engagement with space as essential in the democratisation of space. As we begin to colonise space, it is important that we take all of human culture with us, including the diversity of problem-solving and craft skills that are represented in the arts, but are under-represented in the spaceflight sector. In collaboration between the arts and spaceflight sectors, it is often assumed that there is a hierarchy of knowledge, or that artists’ engagement with space must involve advanced technologies. However, Barbara’s research into space wear and art in orbit has found that the arts’ contribution to space exploration is most valuable when it respectfully embraces the experiential knowledge, intuitive experimentation, and low-tech craft practices that are fundamental in the arts. By employing these practices in the context of spaceflight, artists have potential to contribute to the democratisation of space, and to learn new lessons that may advance terrestrial arts, challenging many of the assumptions about art materials and techniques that underpin terrestrial practice.

Doug Millard : Responses:

What does the idea of flight entail in relation to our imagination? How does the concept of human flight shape collective myths, metaphors, and visions of the future- from Icarus to Elon Musk? Can the aspiration to leave the ground transform our understanding of identity, freedom, or transcendence? – I’ll talk about Cosmists and Tsiolkovsky here. Weightlessness. Freedom. Korolev’s depiction of our ‘swimming’ through space and juxtapose with the American idea of frontier.

When we think about flight, what real and imagined materiality can we envisage? How does this materiality connect to potentialities of artistic iterations and interpretations of flight technologies? How do textiles relate to space and flight imaginaries? I’ll talk about how we moved away from thinking to imitate the wings of birds to achieve flight. Then how today’s images of flight tend to the metallic and streamlined while some (microlight enthusiasts) speak of their being reunited with nature and unencumbered with the ‘weight’ of technology.

How do you see the evolving relationship between science, academic research, and art practice? How does this relationship extend into the critical, curatorial and museums’

domains? What can we expect from these interdisciplinary cross-pollinations? It is already happening. Art is not science (it can be technology) but can speak to and supplement both. I'll talk about how science needs art as a tool to both critique and enhance it.

Speakers Bios

Moderator: Dr Marquard Smith

Marq teaches, edits, curates, programmes, and cheerleads. Since 2016, he's been employed at UCL, mostly on the IoE's MA Museums & Galleries in Education programme, but also at Slade working with MA/MFA/PhD students. Since 2017, he's been employed in the Department of Doctoral Studies at Vilnius Academy of Arts. Since time immemorial, he's been Editor-in-Chief of Journal of Visual Culture. He's currently also Deputy Director (Collaborations & Partnerships) of the London Arts & Humanities Partnership, one of the AHRC's doctoral training partnerships. Marq is weary but unbowed, and lives in hope.

Varvara Keidan Shavrova is a visual artist and researcher. She received an MFA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths, University of London, and has been awarded AHRC LAHP Studentship for her practice-based PhD at the RCA. She received the LAHP placement award at the Science Museum in London. She has exhibited internationally, including at the Venice Biennale of Architecture (2014), Photomuseum Ireland (2012), Espacio Cultural El Tanque Tenerife (2011), Beijing Art Museum of Imperial City (2008), Imperial War Museum Duxford (2019), Dilston Grove Southwark Park Galleries (2022), Beaconsfield Contemporary Art (2023, 2024). She curated 'The Sea is the Limit' at the York Museums (2018) and at the Virginia Commonwealth University Gallery in Doha, Qatar (2019). She co-curated 'Beijing Map Games: Dynamics of Change' at Today Art Museum Beijing, Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery UK, cAoS Centre for Contemporary Art, Italy (2008-2009). Keidan Shavrova has contributed articles, essays, and exhibition reviews to international publications, including Visual Artists Ireland, Virginia Commonwealth University Arts Qatar magazine, and Yale Publications, among others.

Fatoş Üstek is an independent curator and writer with over two decades of international experience in contemporary art. She is the author of [The Art Institution of Tomorrow: Reinventing the Model](#) (Lund Humphries, 2024) and serves as curator of [Frieze Sculpture](#) (2023–2026) and curator of [Cascading Principles Expansions within Geometry, Philosophy and Interference](#), Mathematical Institute, Oxford University (2022-2025). She is the Co-founder and Director of FRANK Fair Artist Pay, advocating for fair practice in the arts in the UK. Her curatorial expertise spans biennials, exhibitions, festivals, and public art commissions, shaping critical discourse and institutional transformation within the arts. She writes regularly for exhibition catalogues, artist monographs and art magazines, sits on multiple advisory and jury roles in Europe and the UK, and nominates artists for awards and residencies.

Dr Jennifer Thatcher is an art historian, critic and public programmes curator. She holds an AHRC-funded PhD in art history from the University of Edinburgh, and is a

British Academy Post-Doc Fellow based at Manchester School of Art. She was the co-curator of the 2023 Folkestone Book Festival. She curated the public programmes for the Folkestone Triennial (2014, 2017) and the Whitstable Biennale (2016); and was co-Director of Talks at the ICA, London (2003–10). She recently co-curated an exhibition on the symbolism of animals in art, *The Poplar Bestiary*, at TondoCosmic (March–April 2025). She publishes regularly as an art critic, and has written features for *Art Quarterly*, *Art Monthly*, *ArtReview* and *ARTnews* magazines, as well as contributing to numerous exhibition catalogues and artists' books. She collaborates regularly with Dr Lucia Farinati on artist interview-based research; their co-edited volume, *Theorising the Artist Interview*, was recently published by Routledge. She is a member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA). She has taught at many UK universities and art colleges, most recently at Sotheby's Institute of Art and Chelsea College of Art.

Dr. Rebecca Mellor is Curator of Art and Visual Culture at the Science Museum London. She was awarded her PhD from the University in York in the History of Art and specialises in the reception of classical sexual objects in 19th century museums digital collections online and the complexities of censorship, colonial narratives, and gender and sexuality in British collecting histories.

Dr Barbara Brownie is Associate Dean (Education) for the School of Communication at the Royal College of Art. Barbara's research explores space as a site for art and design, with a particular focus on effects of weightlessness. Her book, *Spacewear: Weightlessness and the Final Frontier of Fashion* (Bloomsbury, 2019), considers the challenges and opportunities that the commercial space age presents to fashion designers, and how weightlessness necessitates new approaches to clothing and the dressed body. Her next book, *Art in Orbit* (Bloomsbury 2025), explores the relationship between the arts and space sectors, and the spaceworks that demonstrate art's value in space exploration.

Doug Millard is Deputy Keeper, Technologies & Engineering, Science Museum. Doug joined the Education Department of the Science Museum in 1985, and the curatorial team in 1994. He has produced many space exhibitions, written articles, papers, and books including a history of the Black Arrow satellite launch vehicle and its engines, lectured widely and appeared on television and radio. He worked on the 'Information Age' gallery at the Science Museum (2014) and was senior curator for the 'Cosmonauts: Birth of the Space Age' exhibition (2015) and editor of the associated publication. His book 'Satellite: Innovation in Orbit' was published by Reaktion Books early 2017. In 2019 he organised the Culture Space research programme of three workshops that investigated new ways of representing space exploration in the museum gallery. In 2020 he contributed to a BBC Radio 4 programme on the life of Konstantin Tsiolkovsky. He is currently working on a number of space-related future projects for the Science Museum including exhibitions, new galleries and associated research programmes and is seeking to add examples of new space technologies to the Museum's national collection. He is also researching a history of UK space activity.