What Lasts? Building a Future for XR in Immersive Arts

Editing Note:

This transcript reflects a production consisting of three separately recorded segments: an introductory studio monologue, the live panel discussion, and a concluding studio summary. These sections were originally recorded at different times and locations and later assembled into a single episode.

Recording Notes – Introduction

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Speakers: Weronika Lewandowska

[background dynamic music]

Weronika Lewandowska *(DOK Exchange XR Coordinator)*:
Immersive technologies keep transforming how we tell stories and connect with audiences. But what will truly last after the first wave of excitement in the XR industry? How do we build something that still matters once the premieres and prototypes are behind us?

This podcast is a recording of the live panel "What Lasts? Building a Future for XR and Immersive Arts".

It took place on October 31st in Leipzig, during DOK Exchange XR, the industry programme of DOK Leipzig Festival, held in partnership with the British Council Germany.

This panel brought together XR producers, curators, and cultural decision-makers from Germany and the UK to explore how the field can grow in a more sustainable, connected, and thoughtful way — how to fund immersive work long-term, collaborate across borders, and support the next generation of creators.

Drawing from experiences in both the UK and German contexts, the conversation explored shared challenges, opportunities, and insights that can help shape a more resilient future for immersive arts.

The panel was introduced by Dr Susanne Jaschko, Head of Arts Germany at the British Council, who reminded us that immersive culture grows through creativity, shared knowledge, and trust.
And as part of her introduction, she also shared insights from the British Council's report on artists shaping technological futures.

You can find the link to the report in the episode description.

The discussion was moderated by Ulrich Schrauth, Artistic Director of the VRHAM! Festival, one of Europe's leading curators working between the UK and Germany, with speakers May Abdalla and Sarah Ellis from the UK, and   Max Pérmentier and Paul Hauptmeier from Germany.

You'll hear more about their experiences and their relationship with the immersive industry in just a moment.

My name is Weronika Lewandowska, curator and coordinator of DOK Exchange XR, and together with British Council Germany, we welcome you to listen in.

[background dynamic music stops]

—— End of Introduction ——

Recording Notes – Panel
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[Panel opens. Moderator introduces the session]

Ulrich Schrauth (moderator):

Hello, everyone, and welcome to our panel *What Lasts? Building a Future for XR in Immersive Arts.* I'm very happy to be here. Thanks for this wonderful invitation.

It's exciting to be here with this wonderful array of speakers and experts around me.

[introducing guest]

To my right, we have May Abdalla, director and artist at Anagram from the UK.

Also from the UK, Sarah Ellis, director of creative innovation at the Royal Shakespeare Company.

And then we have from Germany, Max Permantier, founding executive for FilmFernsehFonds Bayern and Paul Hauptmeier, composer and co-founder of ZiMMT, here in Leipzig.

So, just setting a little bit of a scene before we come to an intro of our wonderful panellists.

I would say, over the last decade, we've seen immersive technologies — VR, AR, mixed reality, everything in between, all of these wonderful, weird things that we've been experimenting with — moving from experimental art spaces into museums, theaters, classrooms, and festivals

But the question today is: what actually lasts? Are we building a sustainable ecosystem for XR and Immersive, or are these all just very beautiful prototypes and a series of explorations? What do we need to do to change that?

For me, sustainability in this context is really not about the technology, the hardware, or innovation cycles. It's about cultural continuity, financial durability, and social

responsibility.

How do we make sure that the immersive stories we tell, and the structures that support them, are going to be here for the long run and have real longevity?

And all of that is what we want to look at through the lens of collaborations and cooperations between the UK and Germany.

I tried to sort of cluster this because it's, I mean, to be honest, it's a very small topic, right?

[quiet audience laughter]

So, I thought we're going to cluster it a little bit, also to make it a bit easier for us to talk about it.

Firstly, I would love to talk about where we are in 2025. Has XR grown up? What are the models? Who are the artists? What's the ecosystem that we work in?

Secondly, we want to talk about collaboration and co-production — again, very much through the lens of how Germany does it, how the UK does it, and what we can learn from each other.

And thirdly, we really want to look into the future and the next generation. What kind of values will shape the immersive field, and what are we going to leave behind?

Before we dive into these 'small' questions *[lightly joking tone, quiet audience laughter]*, I'd love for all of our panellists to introduce themselves very quickly, so you get an overview of what they do and a clearer sense of the ecosystem we represent.

I would love to start with you, May.

May Abdalla (panellist):
Hi, everyone. Well, I had my time yesterday explaining quite a lot of what's going on in my head *[referring to her presentation at the conference]*, but just maybe a bigger picture.

So, I run a studio called Anagram. I'll press the button once you tell me I can press the button.

[waiting to start the visual presentation on the screen]

I started Anagram 13 years ago. Prior to that, I was a documentary filmmaker. Anagram's raison d'être was to use immersive technologies to make non-fiction

stories embodied experiences.

So Anagram — although not everything we do is a documentary — is very much geared around social impact and cultural topics that are socially and politically relevant to people. So it's not all fun and games.

And here's a little video of the different kinds of things we do.

[video starts; pulsing music in the background]

But very much in the first seven years of Anagram, we just threw spaghetti at the wall. We played with whatever new tech was around — EEG sensors, Bluetooth, mechanics. We enjoyed being a bit of a lab.

And then, in the past five years, really, we've been channeling *[video and music stop]* a lot into what now really is spatial computing — anything that you can make with a game engine — so that we're increasing our internal in-house reusability. We can talk a bit more about that.

As I mentioned yesterday, we've been working on this trilogy of experiences. And one of your questions was: what's going on in 2025? Yeah, it's not as exciting, but it's really thinking about reusing the IP that we've developed. So presently…

Ulrich: This is exciting. *[interrupting]*

May: Do you like that?

Ulrich: Yeah.

May:
Yeah. So Goliath was pretty successful in terms of reach. It got a million downloads in 2022, so it was an exciting thing to realize it could reach audiences. It's a piece about a man's story about schizophrenia.

Oh sorry, this is not actually *Goliat.*

[referring to the slide not matching the topic]

But the following year we developed an immersive projection version of that.

And now a lot of the investigation is: what is this kind of out-of-headset experience? We're working on what interactive projections can be. Can we bring meaningful stories that aren't just eye candy, using some of the things we've already developed?

And what does that look like? Answers to be revealed later.

Ulrich: Wonderful. Great, I'd like to hand over to Sarah to talk a little bit about her work.

Sarah Ellis (panellist):
Hello everyone, I'm Sarah. I'm Director of Creative Innovation at the Royal Shakespeare Company, and I always feel like a little bit of an interloper, because really I'm theatre — but I like this stuff.
[slide from Sara's presentation is shown]

What I love about being on this panel today is thinking about XR in the context of the different entertainment and cultural industries, and the changes they're going through.

It's quite a weird thing, because you're the outlier within the theatre industry, and you're the outlier within the XR industry. That can be an opportunity, because it allows you to think about it differently and contribute differently. It also means you get a different set of questions, which I've really enjoyed over the past 10 or 15 years of being in an institution.

We often talk about artists, but what about the producers, the administrators, the people who are building audiences? There's something about the ecology — sometimes what we see on the surface — but there's a huge amount behind the scenes in our infrastructure.

How do we support those roles? How do we think about that? And how do we enable ourselves to look at craft rather than technology? When does it become a tool rather than a shiny thing?

I think the XR industry is really cutting-edge on that, and a lot of traditional art forms learn from it. So how do we create value from what the XR industry brings into traditional ecosystems that are struggling right now?
That, I think, is something for us to talk about in 2025 — that we are like the pirate ship, and many of these institutions *[soft laughter from Ulrich]* are like oil tankers. How do we highlight and showcase our strengths? And shift some of that narrative?

[a glass bottle drops and rolls on the floor]

I haven't got any — I'm also terrible with slides. But the one thing I wanted us to think about today is the potential. So what's our net potential? Often, traditional art forms have a very manufacturing way of working: 'I make this, I put it out in the world.'
Where I think XR has huge potential is as a multi-platform — I think you just alluded

to it.

How do you create multiple platforms for your existing IP? How do you create it as live IP? If we're looking at sustainable models? That's quite a strength for the XR community to think about.

One of the things we've been thinking about at the RSC is how we extend a story world. We have these plays that are 400 years old — some a bit boring, some a bit awesome *[soft laughter from Ulrich and Sarah]* — but my point is that people have opinions.

But what if you changed that story and put it into a format that is one of the largest emerging, growing industries, such as gaming? Instead of thinking, 'I'm a theatre and I project out,' what about creating communities and worlds that want to come closer to you?

It's about asking: where do you want to be in the world? Who are you right now? What do you want to say? And how do we work with people who don't look like us or sound like us, so that we can shift our business-as-usual and spark thinking about what we have to offer?

And I think that hybridity between theatre and XR is what excites me — and what we can talk about today.

Ulrich: Beautiful. Thank you so much. Next up, we have Max. Here we go.

Max Permantier (panellist):

Thank you. I'm just waiting for the presentation *[waiting for slides to appear],* but I can already begin. I'm Max, I'm a funding executive for XR at the Bavarian Film Fund. The Bavarian Film Fund is a regional fund. We have seven regional funds in Bavaria, and five of them finance XR — we are one of them.

We don't only support films and games; we also support XR. We support a wide range of projects: digital VR and AR/MR projects, performative projects, performative experiences, installations, and immersive sound projects.

Our budget for 2025 is over 750,000 euros, provided by the Bavarian State Chancellery. We have only two calls per year, and the next decision will be in December.

Our goals are to support creative talent and strengthen Bavaria as a media hub. We want the XR market to grow, we want young talents to bloom, and we want to foster them. In Bavaria, we want to keep a diverse media culture. We primarily focus on art

and cultural innovation. We can also act as a more economic fund for XR, but that is a different story.

The success of XR in Bavaria is deeply tied to co-productions — both international and within Germany — because budgets are rising, and we need cooperation within Germany to keep up.

Another important part of our work at the Film Fund is planning strategic events to connect the different creative 'bubbles.' We want to connect the film bubble with the games bubble with the XR bubble so they can learn from each other. We want to raise visibility for XR people, nationally and internationally.

My take on what we should do is this: too few countries in Europe are funding XR. We should share know-how between funding bodies so that not only creators learn from each other through co-productions, but funding institutions learn from each other as well, to provide better infrastructure for these collaborations.

We also think that public funds must reduce early risk to attract private investment, and we should pool all budgets — regional, national, EU, and private — to keep up with the budget. Co-productions and knowledge sharing should be policy goals, not just side effects. And for this Europe must unite to stay competitive against the U.S. and China, because innovation needs collaboration, not isolation.

What we see — and this is also the topic of the panel — is that XR shines at events, festivals, installations, and in museums, but it fades too soon. There's no real long life for XR out there. We should support museums and cultural institutions to go immersive. We could create a dedicated distribution fund for touring and visibility.

And most importantly, we have to build alliances across Europe and make museums anchor partners in these projects.

So yeah — that's it from me.

Ulrich: It's all set out, we're done *[laughter and light applause from the panellists]*. And Paul, last but not least, please tell us a little bit about your work.

Paul Haupmeier (panellists):
Yes, so thanks — and I'm waiting for the slide.

[waiting for the slide to load]

My name is Paul Hauptmeier. I'm a composer and multimedia artist based here in Leipzig, and I'm also one of the founding members of ZiMMT, the Centre for Immersive Media, Art, Music, and Technology here in Leipzig, as well as part of the artist duo Hauptmeier|Recker.

ZiMMT is an organisation and venue we founded five years ago. We are a small team, but we have quite an amazing space that we renovated ourselves, and it's now growing significantly — and gaining recognition in the media arts scene in Europe.

This is our main hall. *[slide visible]*

It's about 200 square metres. We have a 32-channel immersive audio system inside, which is pretty special for an independent venue that is not an institution.

Here — *[pointing]* – I think this image is cropped — the picture should look different *[Ulrich responds with a quiet laugh]*

We have the possibility of 300-degree video projection, as well as other media technologies. We now have audience tracking through a LiDAR system, which is great — so we can do a lot with it.

We could cluster our work into three areas — and maybe one is missing.

[looking at the slide and laughing softly upon noticing one category is missing]

First, we do a lot of residencies and workshops. Knowledge sharing in immersive media is a big part of what we do. We have a free AV lab — a workshop series that happens every two weeks and deals with all sorts of media art forms.

Second, we do concerts and performances.
Third, we host exhibitions and installations.

And the fourth cluster — the one missing — is that we do a lot of development in the media arts field. Many people on our team are developing cutting-edge technologies in different parts of media art: from immersive sound to interactive movement-tracking systems, and more.

This is in the east of Leipzig — if you want to come by, you're very welcome.

Talking a little bit about my artistic practice: this is the shared website of our artist duo, Hauptmeier | Recker *[slide visible]*. You'll find a lot of different projects there.

We come from composition and music, but we work extensively in immersive media arts, and we have different approaches to XR. We also use tools we already know, like handheld displays, but mostly we try to think outside the box and use

technologies to create new artistic approaches.

I want to give one example of a work I created in 2022 for the Venice Biennale.

This is an augmented reality sound installation that doesn't use tablets or any devices — it's just this room *[slide showing work]*. I divided the room into different 'walls' using laser light. The audience could move freely in the space with headphones, and each person received their own rendering. I positioned different sound objects and compositions in space, and people could walk around and create their own composition depending on where they were.

Here's a quick example: we are listening to the person currently running into it [rising audio feedback ending in a soft, resonant bass hit]. This is her headphone feed. So you can hear — it's really quiet now — but there was this small kick sound, and then she can discover the space.

In this next example, you see *[background soft feedback with a steady bass pulse]* how she's entering the cone. *[rising, accelerating feedback sound]*

The cone creates a muffled effect — like entering a cave. *[rising, accelerating feedback sound]*

The tracking is extremely precise because I'm not tracking the centre of the body; I'm tracking the ears. *[sound stops]*

So if the ears cross the threshold — *[grainy feedback]* — she's just crossing the wall and now moving toward the window. *[seagulls and harbour sounds begin]*

We're in Venice, so outside there's a harbour. As she approaches the window, she hears a live field recording of the harbour outside, while looking at it through a filter foil. Everything is rendered in 3D. *[music stops]*

There were also sections where members of the audience could talk to one another.

[low rumbling sound with two voices playfully processed by audio effects]

It was a hidden feature — when two people stood inside two cones, hidden microphones allowed them to speak to each other. They were about 20 metres apart *[sound stops]*, so it created an audio bridge between these two points.

It was a very playful experience that explored sharing a space — sharing a kind of shared reality — while not really knowing where the other person is or what they're experiencing. It's very much about your own experience and your connection to others.

And that's about it. If you're interested in seeing more of our work or more about ZiMMT, you'll find everything on the website. I hope the QR codes are working — I didn't check — but yes.

Thank you. *[sound of a microphone being set down]*

Ulrich:
Wonderful. Thank you so much for that intro, guys. So now we know a little bit more about your practice and what you do.

Coming back to the first part of our panel — looking at where we are in 2025 with XR and immersive. OK, it's 2025. XR is no longer 'the future.' It's part of the present cultural landscape, I would say. But the question is: has it really evolved from promise to actual practice? Are we building a resilient sector, or still a sort of patchwork of different isolated experiments?

I would like to look at this from three different angles.

First of all, artistic practice. Where are we? Have we moved from experimentation to legitimacy?

Secondly, funding models — and Max already started talking about this. What are the funding models in Germany and in the UK? Are they building resilience, or do we still see silos across different genres? We want to look at that.

And thirdly, how do we measure long-term impact? How do we actually know when an immersive work lasts?

Again — small questions *[lightly joking tone]* — we're throwing them out there, and we're going to move around slowly.

First of all, May, I'd like to ask you: your work really merges technology with very human themes. You look at empathy, mental health, perception. From your perspective, do you think that XR as an art form has matured? Are we at a point where immersive art stands alongside cinema, theatre, visual arts as its own cultural form — or would you say it's still fighting for legitimacy?

May:
[starts speaking before the microphone reaches her]

I think that — yeah — luckily, it definitely is its own form. It's one of those things where you can't… I'm trying to think of something that isn't a cultural form right now, just to understand what wouldn't count… sport? No.

So yeah — in a way, it takes people believing that it is a cultural form for it to become one. And I think the industry is so passionate about it that it has kind of created its own existence.

I think I would just question whether it's the right name and the right signpost for audiences, because it's too broad…

Ulrich: Exactly. *[soft agreement from the panel]*

May:
That's what I think. I'd say it probably is its own form, but unfortunately the term still centres the technology. And that has a branding problem — an even worse branding problem now that Samsung has released its headset. It doesn't speak to artfulness.

It's fine if you want to tell a story about the future — because that's the narrative the advertising world speaks to — but how would you put the work Max does and the work I do into the same bucket? People aren't going to know what they're in for.

Ulrich:
Actually, it's very interesting that you say that, because that's exactly where my question was geared towards. I had a look at my research — at the websites of the British Council, the Goethe-Institut, et cetera. You have all these silos: you have cinema, you have visual arts, you have literature — but there's no distinct form for this.

And we see the same with funding. I mean, there are a few exceptions, but you don't recognise this within the cultural canon — in terms of what it's geared towards.

And I love what you just said: that the ecosystem and the industry, and all of us who are working in this field, are very passionate about this — so we create our own kind of art form.

But is that even what we want to do? That we have this little silo? And you just said it. Maybe you can elaborate on that. Where would you position your work?

May:
It's kind of like telling people they love films by talking to them about screens and pixels. Nobody's interested in the game engines that filmmakers are using to create virtual production studios — it's the wrong focus.

I kind of don't want to talk about 2025. I want to talk about 2030. I want us all to have a little moment and just imagine what it's going to be like.

And for me — culturally — I gravitate not as an artist, but as an individual, right? I know who I am as a person. I know I'm a fan of certain kinds of things. I'm a diehard fan of certain documentary filmmakers, and I'll follow them to the ends of the earth. And what I want is to be able to find my tribe within this ecosystem.

Unfortunately, the way that curation has happened so far — not everywhere, obviously not with the wonderful Neuland, and certainly nothing Ulrich has ever done — but in many cases, people get lost. They don't know what the feeling is they're looking for. And an artistic, cultural experience is really about a feeling.

So the reason we haven't done that is because it's kind of too small — or we think it's too small. I don't know if it's really small. I don't know. The barriers… I don't have to programme anything, so you could talk about that challenge.

I think you should answer some questions, by the way.

[laughter from the audience and panellists]

Ulrich:
I hope you will. I mean, it's an inherently interdisciplinary art form. I think what you're also referring to is that it's really difficult to put it into boxes — which I like, if you ask me as a curator.

But coming back to your pirate ship *[turning to Sarah]* — you've steered a very big ship. You've brought XR to one of the most prestigious institutions, the Royal Shakespeare Company. And you've talked a little bit about this already, but I'd like to elaborate a bit more.

How do you see the evolution of immersive storytelling from the perspective of a major cultural institution or organisation? What's changed?

On the one hand, of course, technically — and I think this is also really interesting for the audience – we don't want to talk about technology all day – but we do want to think about how it changes the way audiences perceive the work, and how it changes the way art is created.

But also: audience expectations and organisational mindset.
Maybe you can talk a little bit about that.

Sarah: Just a few things… very small.

Ulrich: Yeah. No problem.

Sarah:
One of the things I wanted to pick up on is that the XR industry has emerged through people who have had a sense of curiosity — coming from all these different art forms that have come together. And that's why it's quite hard to explain what XR is, because it's actually a very diverse cottage industry — or a series of cottage industries — if that makes any sense.

You've got pioneers of documentary, pioneers of theatre, pioneers of visual art all saying: 'This is interesting to me. I want to be in it. It extends my practice. I can see something emerging.' So it's those people who have that elasticity in their practice.

I think where XR is at the moment is that it doesn't quite know where to go. It's like: Do we all become one thing? Or do I actually like the freedom of experimentation – do you know what I mean? It's still emerging, and persistently hard to define because it hasn't got those silos.

And on the other side, traditional art forms are very siloed. It's like: Well, that's not theatre, that's not film. So there's a branding issue there.

If you pull back a bit and look at it from an audience perspective, the big shifts we've seen are around convergence – cultural spaces are changing. The way people consume culture has changed.

I think we're in a moment of big nostalgia and sentimentality. Whenever we have financial crises, audiences tend to say: 'Don't make me think about the realism of the world — make me feel nice,' or 'Let me think about these things in a different historical context.' But before that — in the last 10, 20 years — audiences wanted: 'Show me the future. Let me glimpse what's coming.'

So we've got a lot of different parts of our ecosystem in flux. And the biggest danger is that we look inward and say, 'Well, that must be wrong,' or 'That must be wrong.' Contextually, we're in a moment of convergence and confusion, and some things will stay the course and some things won't.

And so obsolescence becomes really interesting. When do you no longer need these terminologies?

In the traditional context — institutions are in crisis too — in ways they never expected. They're shocked. They're like: 'But we've always been around!' Actually… you may not be around in the next 10 or 15 years. So you've got this clinging on of

traditional culture, where institutions can't imagine a different world because it feels like a threat rather than an invitation to curiosity.

So if we take ourselves out of the first person for a moment, I think we can be kinder — kinder to ourselves — and recognize that the XR community has achieved extraordinary things in the last 10, 15 or 20 years. Let's sit with that. Let's just sit with that for a bit. We're all working really hard, doing the same thing all the time.

And we said this before: How do you start thinking more strategically?
What are you good at? What are you good at? What do I bring to the table? How could I do this?

And I think that's the key.

And in terms of traditional institutions — you kind of need to let them deal with their own crisis. *[Sarah laughs quietly at her own remark]*

Ulrich: I kind of like that. *[smiling]*

Sarah:
You can't solve it all. The big shifts include a generation coming through with much less hope than we had. We will be — and already are — the institutions to that generation. And those things will look and feel very different.

One of the things in the XR industry is that I feel quite middle-aged, if that makes sense. So how I get out of that?

[laughter from Sarah and low background remarks from the panel]

It's true, I am old. But you know what I mean.

My point is: how do you create a culture of generosity and curiosity? Because that's what the XR industry has evolved from. But it has also seen opportunity through technology — and through the money that technology has brought in. And that's a very big truism too. Is that alright to say?

Ulrich:
I mean, I love what you just said about championing what we're good at, because we always keep talking about what we're not good at…

Sarah *(in the background):* I know.

Ulrich:
…and what's not happening. That's a really interesting answer on the institutional side — and on the overall view.

One other thing you mentioned briefly, and something I wanted to talk to you both *[addressing Sarah and May]* about, is audiences. You just mentioned escapism, right? *[Sarah murmurs in agreement].* People are really looking to escape from the reality around them.

But what I'd be interested in — from both May and Sarah, and I'll come to you in a second *[addressing Max and Paul]* — is this: Would you say that audiences are hardest to surprise, or are they actually waiting to be surprised?

Do you see a shift in audience demographics through that escapism, especially in this XR and immersive world?

Sarah:
Never underestimate an audience. It's not about surprising them — it's about them surprising you. *[Sarah and Ulrich laugh softly]*

I think the relationship with audiences, in any art form — it doesn't matter whether it's XR, theatre, film, whatever — is that we often don't create enough space or gaps for their own agency, for their own sense of imagination.

Sometimes the photo-realism of the technology we're using limits that. I remember some really lovely conversations when we were doing The Tempest. We were working with Imaginarium, who were doing the game-engine work, and we said: 'Could you turn off gravity?' And they said: 'No. Absolutely not.'

We said: 'We just want to turn off gravity because we think it will do something to the character.' 'Nope. Nope.' It took a week — and it did. And then we didn't give the character any feet.

My point is: audiences' capacity for imagining is far greater than we as makers often give them credit for.

So really, you've got to meet them halfway and anticipate where they're at.

And half the time — when you talk about cultural values — the work just isn't at the right moment. And it doesn't mean it's bad work. It just means if it came out 18 months later, it would have had a different reception.

Musicals are a classic example. They come out in the wrong season or aren't

positioned in the right way, and they fail at the box office. But if you release them five years later, it's a different story.

So it's: hold on to your scrapbook. Hold on to the pieces that aren't quite there yet or aren't at the right time. It doesn't mean audiences won't get it — it just means it's not the right time. And that's a different thing.

Ulrich:
May, what does your scrapbook say about audiences? Do you see a shift?

[sudden laughter from May in the background]

No, honestly — do you see a shift in how audiences react, especially with the trilogy now? You've probably tested that.

May:
Yeah, I do a lot of audience research, so I can bring some insights — more general ones, maybe some truisms, which I'm just going to make up on the spot.

One thing I'd say is: you can take anybody on a journey, but you have to meet them where they are first. And I think we have really good instincts as humans in a room — about the etiquette that's necessary to help someone feel interested, involved, or safe.

Somebody was talking about a project here — their first VR project, made in film school — and they mentioned 'breathing warmth' into something. And I think there was a moment when we had lots of panels about why there were so many women in XR.

I started fantasising that maybe women naturally, often, are in the position of hosting — understanding space, welcoming someone into a space, taking them on a journey. So I'd echo that: don't underestimate audiences, but greet people and meet them.

There's also a lot of scepticism. Someone mentioned yesterday that one bad roller-coaster ride can put people off forever. There are lots of things we can do — more around access — like having a screen where people can see what's being cast.

There's genuine anxiety, especially among neurodivergent audiences. There's often a correlation between anxiety and entering VR. There's a lot of interesting work that could be done around comfort — not the usual thinking about motion sickness, but thinking about safety.

And there's also, I'd say, a connection between anything game-related and a fear of

failure.

The reason I really — well, because Anagram was supposed to be just an experiment and then I was going to go back to making films — what I loved was realising that everything has to be calibrated to humans.

There are often six or seven wildly different iterations of an interaction, and it's like: 'Well, this was too boring… this is too challenging…'

Something we did at the Tower of London — where we wanted people to think about Edward Snowden in a complicated way — we asked… oh, that's my cue. *[laughter]*

Anyway — that's my summary.

Ulrich:
That was a really good summary of the state of XR, I feel. I'd love to move a little bit towards funding and sustainability.

Max, from your vantage point at FilmFernsehFonds Bayern, you're shaping the foundation of immersive work in Germany in terms of finance.

Could you elaborate a little bit — and you touched on this in your presentation — but go a bit further:
What XR projects are being supported at the moment?
What shifts are you seeing?
And within your organisation's values, what makes a project sustainable?
How do you measure that, basically?

Max: Yes, that's not that easy to answer because it's shifting all the time.

Ulrich: Yeah, that's also part of the answer, right?

Max:
Yeah. When I began working at the Film Fund about three years ago, we had a lot of smaller regional projects where people were experimenting with XR — projects that were more educational or historical.

But then, last year — in fact, it was last year — we decided that we wanted more projects that could generate revenue, that could actually make money back. We decided that we wanted to support more co-productions, and to have more projects that could create visibility for the region and for the fund — and, in fact, for the creators living in the region.

So yes, it's not that easy to answer.

For creative projects, we are looking for greater visibility.

For economic XR projects, we are looking for the right partners — hospitals, for example, or schools — institutions that are also investing.

And then it all comes down to how the financing is structured

Ulrich:
Do you also facilitate these conversations, or do you just tell the projects: 'Please do find a good partner'?
Do you really actively facilitate this?

Max:
Yes, yes. I'm doing this together with — in Bavaria we have the XR Hubs, which are led by Silke Schmidt. She's responsible for all the location-based work in Bavaria, and we work closely together to connect people with the right partners, in fact.

Ulrich:
Yeah, great. And Paul — ZiMMT is a hub for experimentation. You talked a little bit about the different strands that you're looking at.

What models of collaboration, or what kinds of institutional support, do you see working for your own organisation?
And how does that also help advance the practice of the artists?

Paul:
What I would say is that we definitely need more institutional funding — not just for us as an institution, but in the sense of long-lasting, three- or four-year projects for XR.

If we say that we really want to facilitate artists working in our space with certain XR technologies, then yes — we have a lot they can work with. We have the audience-tracking system, we have iPads, and so on. But we need to find a position — a way to translate these possibilities to the artists we invite.

We do a lot of residencies for artists, but to be able to run a sustainable art programme around XR in our space, we would need funding that isn't just project-based — not funding for one specific thing — but funding that actually allows us to have a dedicated position, a person in our institution who can handle these technologies and the fast changes within them.

So yes, for me, as a curator in this venue, what would be really amazing is a funding

situation where we're not funded for a single project, but funded for what we do: enabling artists to develop and present interesting new approaches to XR, and this over the course of a couple years.

Ulrich: But are you institutionally funded by the government here, or by the city?

Paul:
No, I think that's our problem. At the moment we are 100% based on project funding. So every year it's a new process of applying for money. And of course, we need sustainability in order to survive in the long run.

Ulirich: Of course.

Paul:
But I think this is true not only for us as an institution — it also reflects the development of XR, which moves so fast. If we want it to be sustainable, we need to keep working continuously. I mean, if I do a project and then pause for two years, I have to learn so many new things again.

Ulirich: Yes, for sure.

Paul:
And another thing I'd like to add — also going a bit back to the question before, about where we are now: as we've discussed, XR is such a multidisciplinary art form. And today, perhaps what has changed is that we can, in a sense, argue from a post-digital perspective.

When I think about how we might present an XR project in our venue, or how I personally deal with XR projects, it's not necessarily have to be framed as XR. We learn from XR — we integrate these technologies, but also the approaches, the concepts: how do we shift perspectives for the audience?

And when we think about what XR can do — it is an immersive art form, it is an interactive art form, it can be playful if you want — and all of these qualities can be integrated into any type of artistic performance, production, installation, whatsoever.

And this, I would say, is also where we are now: it doesn't have to be so strictly distinguished as its own art form. It's something that exists, that we can integrate. But at the same time, it requires very specific knowledge that is still growing and developing so fast, and we need people who can maintain it if we are talking about institutions. We need people who have the ability to work on this continuously.

Ulrich:

That kind of comes back to the question of how we talk about this as an industry — or about ourselves, right? How do we frame these things?

I'd like to move on a little bit to the third subject I want to touch upon: ethics, inclusion, accessibility.

And the first question is directed again to Sarah and May, in the context of the UK environment. We now have this initiative called Immersive Arts, the UK Immersive Arts Programme, launched in 2024. For those of you who don't know, quite a lot of money has been put into the market.

There are a few people leading this initiative, and they give out grants to different projects, so people can apply within different strands. I think the second funding round has just closed. It's funded by the Arts Council and various government organisations.

And I would say it's one answer to many of the questions we've just discussed.

I'd love to hear a bit about it — because they've been very vocal about inclusive practice, diversity, accessibility.

Do you feel — and you may or may not want to answer this, it really is an open question — do you feel that this has advanced how we in the UK speak about XR and immersive practice in terms of accessibility, diversity, inclusion?
Have you seen these practices evolve from such programmes?
Or are there other initiatives you'd like to mention that are fostering this in the UK?

[mic pick-up sound]

May:
I think it's probably a bit too early to see the impact of Immersive Arts. It's fantastic — they've really centred the language… Well, they've done two things that I really love.

First, they've defined 'immersive as interactive', which I think is genuinely helpful for audiences: 'What's different about this? I have to do something.' It's simple, but it works.

And second, they're doing a lot of work to find new people who don't already have a practice in another art form — people who might be trying something out for the first time. So yes, it's a huge amount of money, but it's being distributed as lots of £5,000 grants, and £15,000, and £3,000 – £50,000. So it's an interesting strategy.

In a way, what we're talking about here doesn't feel directly connected to that —

that's more the groundswell. It's closer to what you said earlier about: how do we stop this feeling like a big middle-aged industry?

[referring back to Sarah]

May:
Well, you bring lots of kids along.

But in terms of access, it's great to have people coming in with their own prejudices, let's say — about what inclusion is or isn't. Up until now, speaking only from virtual reality, there have been very minimal practices around inclusion. It's often 'features first, access second.' And there's a whole movement arguing for 'access first, features second.'

Sarah:
I mean, I think access and inclusion are much more pervasive in this, like impact. And one of the things I worry about is when you use an art form to appear more inclusive and accessible — because the XR industry does have some quite problematic accessibility issues, simply because of the technologies it uses, and so on.

But I think the intentions — bringing this into the conversation at the design of it, rather than the thing that comes later. If you say, 'Oh, and now we'll tag on access and inclusion,' it's already too late. If it changes who makes the work and who it's for, then you need a much more pervasive conversation about that.

It's not a tick-box exercise you solve once. It's a perpetual conversation about why we make the work we make…

Ulrich: And for whom.

Sarah: …and for whom. It's a very expansive conversation. Whenever we talk about these things, I'm more interested in listening — if that makes sense — and who is in the room and who isn't.

Immersive Arts is one thing; it's one cog. And sometimes, with a programme you think 'Well, that's the solution — we've done that'. Great. Was it a success or not? And as May pointed out, it's far too early to say whether this will have the impact it needs. We might need to judge it in 10, 15, 20 years. Some of this work takes that long.

And that's where festival models become problematic, because you think, 'I've got a festival — I'll put some work out there; it's a first; it's new.' But I kind of want the

industry to get to a point where it stops skimming its text messages and emails, and goes a lot deeper. I want to see the ideas come back. I want to see the scrapbooks of artistic ideas come back. It can't always be about the first — it has to be, do you know what I mean, *iterative* work.

And I hope the Immersive Arts programme can start that — give people time and space to create work. And then what the sector needs to ask is: What happens if you give artists £100k? What happens if you give artists more? Do you know what I mean — how do you scale up?

May:
But there's also the other side of immersive. Immersive Arts is really run by the very best, good people in England — their hearts and minds are in the right place, and they're some of the best organisations there are. And in a way, it's almost a response to things like Black Lives Matter, and to so many institutions being, frankly, quite appalling — mainly London-based institutions repeatedly not getting it, over and over again, and nothing really changing.

There's this other thing I was thinking about when we were talking about your fund — which is that funds are really political things.

Famously, the challenge with Immersive Arts is that they've had so many applications.
And you could read that as: 'Loads of people want to make immersive art.' Or you could say: 'Artists will apply for anything that has money attached to it.'

So what are we doing, if we're saying: 'Apply for this,' when I've had so many people call me saying, 'I want to apply — can you talk me through it?' And it's like… well, with £5k, you're not going to get very far. Are we bringing earnest, naïve, hopeful cannon-fodder into a world where they'll make a prototype and then no one will support them afterwards?

I know Immersive Arts is going to work really hard to unlock the next layer of funding, but there's another massive pot of money that dropped into the UK immersive industry called Co-Star — which is very different. It's meant to support the industry, but it involved building some virtual production studios, and I would say… a lot of people had questions about that.

[glancing towards Ulrich]

Does this go out on YouTube? *[light laughter]*
Lots of questions about whether that was actually the right approach.

And there's a gap, isn't there? What £5k might introduce someone to… and then… I mean, I'm still here 12 years later because I have a very… I'm very bad at giving up. I've never dumped anybody — I've only ever been dumped. I'm as tenacious as a pit bull terrier. That's just my personality. But not everyone is going to be like that.

And for so many people, following this path may end in real disappointment — because it leads to a dead end.

Ulirich:
But as you said, it's one specific initiative — more of a trial — where we can see what might actually stick and what might be there in the long run.

Max and Paul, how do you see this in Germany? What public funding structures do you feel integrate ethical or social responsibilities? Is that a conversation we're actually having? Do you see that happening, perhaps also in your…

[towards both panellists]

Max:
Yeah. First, I have to say that the grant you mentioned — even if people receive only £5,000 or so — is a very good start. It opens up partnerships for co-productions, because otherwise they would lose all their shares from the project. So even if you only bring, say, €50,000 to a project, it's a great start — it opens the door to co-productions with countries like Luxembourg, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium.

And I think we will see a lot more great projects coming from the UK because of this fund.

As for your question — it's not something that we actively discuss at the fund. We focus more on infrastructure, and we try to build the infrastructure for Bavaria. And I guess all these other questions come second there, because first we need the infrastructure,we need the market, we need distribution — and then we will talk about diversity.

Ulrich:
That's a very interesting take on this. And I'd love to hear your thoughts as a maker, specifically.

[light smile in his voice]

I also want this to be a bit controversial — I have a very different view, but I'm just the moderator.

[brief laughter from the panel]

So I'd love to hear your thoughts on accessibility and on looking at audiences from a different perspective. Is that something you'd want to see in a funding application — something you'd have to put in?

Paul: You mean to have specific, like, findings that are specifically for...

Ulrich:
Either that — or should this be a criterion that's built into a funding structure? Because we look at different demographics, we look at different people who should have access to this kind of work, and we're excluding them simply because we don't have the means to consider these aspects when looking at grants.

Paul:
Yeah, of course. I mean, I always think you definitely have to consider these things — and hopefully the juries already do, when they select art projects.

[quiet sound of hesitation from panel]

Maybe. I don't know.

[laught]

But for me it's a bit difficult to answer these questions, because I don't know that much about how these different funding organisations distinguish themselves from one another.

I definitely think it's a big and important topic for XR. Accessibility has so many different layers. One area — maybe one way we try to approach it in XR — is through the idea of 'democratising' XR experiences. All these kinds of public interventions the XR community was doing really early on — people doing interventions in MoMA, saying, 'Okay, we can create an art exhibition in MoMA even if it's not officially part of MoMA,' or doing interventions in Venice… all these kinds of things.

These approaches exist, but until now they never really worked, because of multi-platform issues and other limitations. So I think one direction we could move towards is XR becoming accessible to anyone with a smartphone — for example, projects in public spaces.

And then there's the other side — inclusion, diversity in these art forms — and I think there's a lot of potential there as well.

How this should be reflected in funding applications… I'm not sure I can answer that.

Ulirich: We're going to move away from this because also it's a topic on its own.

Max:
I just want to add something, because accessibility in the sense of bringing projects into museums, cinemas, and cultural institutions — places where people can actually see them — this is very, very important. And I think it's something we really have to work on.

I know that in the Netherlands there's a programme where they bring these projects into cinemas. We tried this — we proposed it to a big cinema multiplex company. At first they were interested, but then, when they realised what it actually involves, they didn't want to do it anymore.

So there's a lot of work to be done in Germany on that front.

Ulrich:
Yeah, that's really about giving audiences the chance to see the work.
I think the point I was also very interested in — because working between the UK and Germany, I see a very different sensibility around accessibility and inclusion, especially for audiences with special needs or different needs. You touched upon this briefly.

And I find it so interesting how differently these two countries talk about it. I've worked with the BFI Film Fund, but also with the MOIN Film Fund in Hamburg, and just looking at funding applications and the language used — it's very different. And I think it's something we can really learn from each other. That's why I wanted to bring this topic up.

But we're going to move on to collaboration and co-production.
We've already talked a bit about this, but I feel that XR is inherently interdisciplinary — it sits between film, theatre, design, gaming, code. Collaboration is really at the core of what we're doing: as makers, but also as curators, as producers.

But co-production, especially across borders, can be super messy. I think we all know this. We have different funding systems, different languages, legal frameworks, and artistic cultures. How do we collaborate sustainably — not just for one project, but within a whole ecosystem?

We're not going to solve this in this panel — I'm sorry about that — but I'd love to open the conversation.

This is really a question to all of you:

Why do you feel that co-production matters for XR right now?
Why does international collaboration actually offer something that a purely national ecosystem can't?

Max, you started this earlier — maybe you want to touch on it a little bit. You're really the expert in collaborations and co-funding.

Max:
Well, yes — I think it comes down to two things.

First, the budgets.
We're now seeing projects with budgets of up to 1.5 million euros, and they're very difficult to produce. You need funding from multiple countries.

For example, Pola [referring to Pola Weiss] from the Berlin Film Fund and I supported a project — Mouse VR from Reynard Films — which involved three regional funds in Germany and two international co-production partners.
The producer said it was hell — incredibly difficult to manage.
But XR producers have to take on that challenge; otherwise, they simply cannot create these large, mainstream projects.

Secondly, it's about knowledge-sharing.
As you mentioned, it's not just institutions learning from each other — it's also the people. It's the way they see the medium, the technology, and what's possible with it.

When I started in XR, I was quite shocked to discover how much the community lived in its own bubble. Everything was digital, yet they only ever met with a handful of people.

Coming from filmmaking — where we have so many networking events globally. We travel, we meet people, we start co-productions.
This is essential for XR creators: to come to these events that we organise. We will bring you there — we'll pay for food, for drinks — you just have to go and meet new people.

What's also really important is attending the markets: Venice, Paris to NewImages…
It's vital to go, meet the people and the projects,and also think about what you want
to do in this business.
.
Ulrich:
Looking at the core of what we've tried to establish today — the collaborations
between the UK and Germany, and all the differences we've discussed — do you
have thoughts on this?

Or maybe practical examples of UK–Germany collaborations that have worked?
Or areas where you feel there's more potential for cross-border collaboration?
Any reflections?

[quiet murmur from the panel in the background]

Max:
We haven't funded a project yet that has been a strong German–UK co-production.
But that was the problem — there was no funding coming from the UK.

[Ulrich laughs softly and says 'yeah' while nodding]

So nobody really looked there for co-production, because why would you co-produce
with a country that isn't able to bring any money to the table?

Ulrich: That is fair.

[May starts speaking off-mic and then takes the microphone]

May:
I recently — sorry — I recently did have my interview with the BFI Doc Fund, and
they said, 'Why do you need this money?'
I said, 'So I can go get co-production money.'
[*soft laughter from the panel]*
And they said, 'Why do you need co-production money?'
And you're like, 'This is clearly not on your radar. It's good to know.'

What I think is that co-production takes things out of prototyping and into working at
the scale that you need to be at in order to manage your co-production. You need to
be thinking about a project you're going to do in a year and a half. You need to know
that you're still going to be in this industry in a year and a half.
It's a very different timescale.

[Ulrich murmurs in agreement]

I kind of fell into a pretty nice co-production relationship in Goliath and Impulse, and I have to say it's more and more challenging now, because everything's more challenging when people are under pressure.

But I think there are some really simple things that it feels like you could do. I'd like a spreadsheet with the country, the fund. I'd like to know about the tax-credit benefits in each country.

[Ulrich murmurs in agreement]

I had a good meeting with someone from Bayern in Venice who spoke only about tax credits, and I was really happy to hear that information.

And also, it would be really helpful for there to be templates for contracts for XR. We kind of reuse film ones, and then we spend quite a lot of money on legal fees as each of us deals with stuff.

And right now we're in a sticky place where we just want to talk about prototyping — but you would never enter a co-production with somebody who doesn't want to make a full feature and only wants to prototype.

So there are really practical legal reasons — it's not just about funding or meeting over coffee.

Which is… yeah. A guidebook.

Ulrich:
That's a really practical idea, and I really love that — really having a spreadsheet to better understand the different funding structures.

And I feel that in the EU there's more happening in that regard, and through Brexit — and I feel this also when working with the BFI — sometimes we've become so separated. Some funding schemes just don't apply to the UK anymore.

Looking at the time a little bit, I'd like to move away from financing and co-production. Let's look into the future a bit more — the future of the next generation.

Let's fast-forward a decade, to 2035.
We're all looking at these new tools — AI, spatial computing, brain–computer interfaces — and in many ways they reshape immersive creation.

I see this as a curator: artists are working very differently with the tools they have.

But how do we ensure that this field evolves with ethical, social, and environmental awareness?
And — as you said earlier, very beautifully — how do we bring new generations with us?

You talked about us being the 'middle-aged industry'.*[quiet laughter from the panel]*
No, no, no — it's totally right.

Because we always say, 'We're working with these new technologies, so we're going to attract new audiences.'
All the theatre companies, all the museums that come to me as a curator and say, 'Oh, we want new audiences, let's try something with AR.'
That's not going to work, obviously.

So what do we really need — in terms of creators, institutions, and support structures?

And Sarah, I want to ask you first — we talked about this briefly earlier.
You're working on a study called 'Future of Performance Institute'. It's funded by UKRI in the UK, and as I understand it, it looks at how we prepare the next generation of creators to think both creatively and critically about XR, immersive media, and AI.

What is the educational role you're exploring in this study?

Sarah:
Oh, goodness. It's a feasibility study, really — a think piece about what future institutions might look like.

In the 1960s in the UK, they were demolishing a stately home a week, which I find fascinating, because I think we're not far off that level of… let's say instability. The world is shifting very quickly.

What we've been trying to look at is: 'What are the things that matter?'
If you were going to build an institution from scratch today, what would it look like?
How would artists shape it?
A lot of what we're thinking about isn't the 'making' or the product, but what constitutes what you *need* in order to make work nowadays.

I mention the stately homes because those buildings became unfit for purpose: too expensive to run, and people weren't going to them.

I feel we're in a similar moment now that our funding is going into keeping the lights on in these buildings.

So you have a very different discourse here: institutions saying, 'We need funding to keep our buildings going — a new lift, a new automation system — to help us catch up.'
But we never get the time or space to step outside that cycle of saving the building and ask, 'Imagine, what if?'
What would our buildings look like now?

What would our buildings look like or what do we need to make our work now? So some of it is sincerely about what world we live in today. Do we need physical spaces in the same way?
Could they be more dispersed?

We're creating something at the moment that I'm proud of in how we've approached it.

It's a very equitable IP; it took us a year to draft the contract. It's not an institutional model at all — it's a genuinely collaborative agreement, shared fundraising.
But we're an institution, and the other company is a very small studio.
So how do you have equity in that?

These are the conversations we're having constantly.
And I think that's what the XR community does: it brings forward difficult, substantial questions that traditional art forms don't ask — because they're still trying to keep their existing model going.

If we had more conversation between traditional institutions and the XR community, and placed that conversation in the middle, that's exactly what this feasibility study is about.
And it does create tension — naturally, because change is tense.

But what we're finding is that we need community more than ever.
We need shared resources more than ever.
So when you talk about co-production — actually, that applies across the board.
We need distribution. We need infrastructure.
In ten years' time, are we still going to be building the car, the road, the scenery?
Or will we have finally landed on some shared foundations?

Honestly, it's easier for me to imagine 2035 than 2026.
Our budgets are very tight.

What I want in 2035 is not to still be in this moment of struggle — I want us to be celebrating real achievements, a functioning ecosystem, people who have had success.

One of the problems with 2025 is that for the last 10, 15, 20 years, people have been working incredibly hard — and by now, many hoped they'd see the payback.
We're not there yet, and we're deep in that despair of change.
I hope that by 2035 we reach a moment of convergence — where those 'stately homes' have either reimagined themselves or are no longer with us, and where the XR community has found its place.

The most successful projects we've had are when I've brought traditional audiences in through the Shakespeare, and out through the technology — and brought younger audiences in through the technology and out through the Shakespeare.
And when I ask younger audiences what their favourite part was, they say: 'The drinking scenes.'
Not the technology.

[soft laughter from the panel]

And that's the convergence.
A generation that grew up without the internet, and a generation that grew up only with the internet — and the tension between the two.
The question is: What are the convergence points that will really help?

Ulrich:
Paul, drawing on that — you're actually building a new institution here, with all of that in mind.
And, as far as I understand, it's also very much rooted in community.
We talked a little bit about what the scene here in Leipzig looks like.
I found what you said earlier in our preparation super interesting.

Looking ahead to 2035 — in the best possible scenario, where you have all the resources — what would you want your institution to look like?
And what kind of communities would it serve?

Paul:
Yeah, so first of all, I would say that ideally we are still here as a physical space — because I think a physical space will be super important to have in ten years.
Not just for us, but really for the community and for the art scene.

What I imagine for XR in ten years is that it will be, as I said before,so much integrated into different kinds of art forms.

We won't be looking at it as 'a technology' anymore.
We'll be asking: What do we want to achieve? What artistic experience do we want for audiences?
And then XR is simply integrated seamlessly into other art forms and works.

What kind of community we're doing this for — how I imagine it — it is already growing.
We want to be an open space where people can discover new art forms, discover amazing pieces, and also rediscover established art forms.
I don't think we always have to be 'new'.
We don't always need to show something new.

On the one hand, it's important for us as an institution to be a place where you can consume art — but also a place where you can produce art.
We want to keep developing. The development aspect is super important for us.
And knowledge sharing — but also a social way where people can exchange ideas about everything.

For us, the social space — having the bar — is really important.
Before, we didn't have a separate bar room; it was integrated into the main hall.

Since last year, we have a room in front with a bar and a kind of restaurant situation, and that is so important for a venue.
It was a big step for us, because now we have a space where you can actually stay afterwards — even in winter.
It's a big industrial building, so it's cold inside the exhibition halls in winter, but now we have a warm space where people can exchange after.
I think this is really important.

But also — what has always been super important for us as an institution, and really the starting point of why we did this — is that accessibility for artists in the immersive sector outside institutions is incredibly hard.

For example: I'm a composer. If I talk about immersive audio and playing on a 32-channel high-quality sound system — I had the opportunity because I studied at a music school and could use those facilities.
But so many amazing musicians who are not from an academic background never get that chance.
It's super difficult for them to enter institutions or get into a theatre where they can learn these tools.

So for us, this is — and will always remain — an important part of what we do:

to open the space, open the technology, open the knowledge we have, so we can support and enable new productions.

Ulrich:
Yeah, great. I'm a little bit mindful of the time, because I'd also like to open the floor for questions, if there are any.
But I'd love to do a very short round as a closing moment.

Each of you should answer this:

If you could choose one thing that should last from the XR community — or from the industry as we see it now — what would you still want to be here in 2035?
And what is one thing that you feel shouldn't be here anymore?

We'll start with you.

[gestures towards Max, inviting him to begin]

Max:
I think that the community should stay bold and curious. That's the most important thing to create good projects. And what should not stay is the fragmentation of the business, in fact.

May:
Well, I came into innovation because I'm allergic to institutions that can't change. So what I really value here is that XR remains a critical space — one where people question things, and where the kind of ethical conversations that documentary has always carried with it make me feel safe. I want that to still be here.

What I don't want to still be here is the necessity to work for… well… evil tech giants.
[soft laughter from the room]

Ulrich: Good. I like that. Sarah.

Sarah:
There are so many things I'd want to still be there. But what I'd really like to see is more people — a broadening-out, an expansiveness, a generosity, if that makes sense. What I don't want to see is the same tropes repeating themselves. I don't want to get us caught up. Those two things are always connected, aren't they?

I'd like to see an unlocking — a genuine openness, a sense of expansiveness — rather than this becoming a club. And what I don't want is for us to fall into the tropes of… you know what I mean.

[someone, joking from the side]: Award ceremonies.

Yes, exactly — yes, yes, yes.

I mean, I'm a pathological optimist, really. I'd love to see this industry truly shine, because of what everyone has put into it. One of the things I've learnt is that you stand on the shoulders of what has come before — so where you work is what you need to do now.

And if I think back ten years — to where I was in 2015 — and imagine where I hoped 2025 would be… in all frankness, I would have hoped to be much further. But a pandemic happened, a recession happened — a lot happened. And the biggest thing I've learnt is that innovation shifted for me. It wasn't about changing an organisation with shiny technology projects, going 'woo, brilliant'.

It was something much more fundamental. And that, for me, is the biggest insight into what 2035 could look like. I hope it becomes a more hopeful place

Ulrich: More hope, good.

Paul:
What I hope will last is that moment — when AR first emerged — where artists began working with this incredible sense of curiosity, this feeling that everything is possible. That idea that whatever we can imagine and envision, we can create. I think that is still the most exciting aspect of this field, and I hope it remains exciting in ten or fifteen years' time, because it is a thrilling thought.

And what I'd like to see disappear… well, there are many things — I completely agree with not having to work for big tech giants and so on. But if I had to pick one thing, I'd say: QR codes.

[laughter from the panel]

Yes — perhaps as a metaphor for all the things that are there out of necessity, but feel a bit clunky. They don't quite work; sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. I'd really like to see us move towards something more fluid — a more seamless integration.

Ulrich:
Beautiful, that gives us…

[indistinct remark from someone in the background, suggesting Ulrich should answer next]

I'm just the moderator, lucky.

['oooh' sound from the audience]

But I wanna talk about you guys. Do you have any questions for our panellists? here, the first question. Or maybe a statement. I think we have a mic here, wait. And please do introduce yourself quickly. Mic.

Mick: Well, you just did. I'm Mick.

[laughter from the room]

I live in Berlin with my partner, Harmke Hazen. We have a small studio called High Road Studios, and… whatever. But thank you for an amazing panel — all of you, even the moderator. Not 'just' a moderator.

I wanted to know: can XR actually be XR without the hardware or technology? At what point does it become something else? Will we always need headsets or phones…?

Sarah *[quiet interjection]*: Implants.

May *[echoing]*: Implants.

Mick:Right — implants! But we were talking about this yesterday — the idea of an experience without plastic, or without… yeah — Paul?

[Paul speaks faintly in the background; takes the microphone]

Paul:
So, yes — for me this is a really interesting question. The piece I showed from 2022 — I call it an augmented reality sound installation, but in fact it didn't use any augmented reality technology.

Originally, I was planning to make an AR piece for iPads. But then I entered the room and thought: Oh no — I really love this room. I loved its physicality, and I didn't want people to engage with it through a display. I wanted them to be free in space and move around naturally.

So I started thinking about how to remove the display entirely. I ended up creating these 'walls' of laser light — translucent visual cues that people could step through.

That became the spatial structure. And then I programmed my own system to generate the 3D audio renderings and interactions.

So in the end, of course there was still technology involved. But what I did was shift from: What can I quickly prototype with Unity and a smartphone? to: How can I take those conceptual ideas and transform them into a spatial, embodied artistic experience.

And that, for me, was the important thing.

Ulrich: Would you say it was more of an interface rather than a technology, or how did you approach it as an artistic exploration?

Paul: You mean the piece in the end?

Ulrich: Yeah, the piece in the end.

Paul:
Yeah, it was an experience, for sure. The only thing the audience had was headphones — that's it. They could walk around completely freely. And then it really becomes part of the experience, rather than… yeah, I think what I tried to do was to get rid of all those intermediaries.

Ulrich:
Is there another question, provocation, thought, or piece of feedback? One over here.

We have room for two more questions.

Susanne Jascho:
Thank you very much — a really interesting panel. I have a provocative question. In 2025, isn't it still a problem that many projects don't quite achieve the level of quality they ideally should? And how… How could this be changed?

What is the reason for some of the average quality we see in these works and productions? That's question number one.

And perhaps — should we have more knowledgeable creators and institutions commissioning work? And how can we achieve that — more knowledge, and more pushing of the boundaries of this kind of distinct production?

Sarah:
I don't know… there's terrible theatre out there, and that art form has been going for a long time. Terrible films too.

I think I'd like to pivot the question a bit. I understand what you're saying, but with every form, with every piece of work, there's always criticality and taste. As I said, I've sat through some terrible open-mic nights — but I've also seen some phenomenal work in that.

And I think that in this industry we sometimes judge it through the wrong lens, and we need to take a step back in terms of how critical we are. The foundations of how we make the work aren't always fully there yet. We're often making a way where we're testing things with an audience.

Sometimes you're testing the interactivity.
Sometimes technology lets you down.
Sometimes it's just not quite there yet.

When I look at work in this industry through a critical lens, I'm asking: What is it trying to say? Where is it? I'd be cautious about writing something off too quickly. I've seen amazing work that wasn't quite there yet — and that's normal. Particularly in theatre, you can see a show in preview and it's terrible, and then it shifts by press night, and then it really takes off.

It's also about where the work is placed. A show opening in Stratford and then coming to London can be a very different show, simply because of the audiences and the context.

So my point is: let's think more expansively about that question. How do you equip this work for success, and put it where it needs to be? Where does it need to be presented? Does it have enough time to get in? Does it have enough time to be set up the way it needs to be? Has it had enough testing time?

Ulrich: How's it framed?

Sarah:
How is it framed? How is it curated? How is it — do you know what I mean — placed in the right framework? So I'm saying that sometimes, with XR, you might be critical of a piece, but it hasn't been given the right framing, for example, and so on. So yes, I just wanted to push back on that line of thinking.

Ulrich *[soft laughter]*:
Great.

I have this thing blinking at me, so we really have to come to a close now — quite aggressively. Yes, we're already over time.
I want to thank the panellists very, very much for your insights, and thank you both as

well for putting this panel together *[referring to Weronika M. Lewandowska and Susanne Jaschko]*.

What I'm taking away now are really the hopes for the future. The world we don't want to live in — in XR — is a fragmented one, a world of silos; and I think you called it a 'club', something like that. And we definitely don't want to work for tech giants, and we don't want to use QR codes anymore.

But what we do want in this industry is bold and curious artists working at this intersection — people who give us a critical space, a critical reflection of the present, but also the past and the future. And we want a truly expansive industry, full of hope — which I loved.

A world where technology doesn't limit us, but where we can actually create everything we want. And I think that's a very beautiful way to end this panel.

Thank you so much.

[applause from the audience]

—— End of Panel Recording ——

Recording Notes – Closing Segment

Transcript Title: What Lasts? Building a Future for XR in Immersive Arts

Transcript Type: Cleaned for clarity

Event: DOK Exchange XR Conference

Format: Studio recording (scripted reading)

Recording Date: 20 November 2025

Location: Warsaw, Polska

Speakers: Weronika Lewandowska

[background dynamic music]

Weronika:
The panel echoed what Dr Susanne Jascho highlighted so clearly: that building a future for XR is not only about technology — it's about people, structures, and long-term responsibility.

We were reminded that the challenges facing cultural institutions are also openings: chances to rethink how we work, how we support artists, and how we build institutional models that can truly embrace immersive practices.

We also talked about how important it is to build international partnerships and to share resources across borders. XR becomes stronger and more sustainable when artists, museums, and cultural organisations collaborate rather than work in isolation.

Another key takeaway was the need for long-term funding — support that lasts several years, so artists and studios have the time they need to explore, develop, and refine immersive projects without rushing to produce quick results.

And we heard once again how essential artist-led spaces are: places full of curiosity, experimentation, and dedication, which continue to push the XR field forward when they receive the support they deserve.

A big thank-you to our partner, British Council Germany, for supporting this conversation and helping us create space for these important exchanges.

We hope to see you very soon — join us at DOK Leipzig from October 26th to November 1st.You're warmly invited.

[background dynamic music stops]

—— End of Studio Summary ——