S4:E3 AWE, WONDER, DELIGHT, MAGIC...
Jason Bruges in conversation with Hilary Knight

[00:00:00]
Jason Bruges: Things that are wonderful make us feel good. Things that add wonder to place, contribute to our quality of life.

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]THEME MUSIC]

[00:00:12]
Hilary Knight: Hello and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series brought to you by AEA Consulting for the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world on those busy and sometimes congested intersections of cultural and urban life. The series and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. If you like our content, please subscribe and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice.

My name is Hilary Knight, I'm a Senior Consultant at AEA Consulting. My guest today is multidisciplinary artist and designer, Jason Bruges. Although he's based in London, Jason's work can be seen all over the world.

His studio has become internationally renowned for producing innovative installations, interventions and ground breaking works that sit in a space between architecture, site specific installation art, and interaction design. Jason is passionate about creating site specific pieces that engage people with their environments. And you might have seen his works in places as diverse as hospitals, public concourses, airports, metro stations – and if like me, you're in the UK, as TV idents.

Hi, Jason. Welcome to The Three Bells podcast. Really great to have you here today.

[00:01:22]
Jason Bruges: Hi, Hilary. It's great to be here.

[00:01:25]
Hilary Knight: I'm starting with a big question:

I'm really curious about where you find your starting point for your work. Can you say a bit about what inspires you, and how you start to approach a new work?

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[00:01:35]
Jason Bruges: Every project starts with the site and starts with where it's located. It's locale, the environment in which it is in. That is always a starting point. I suppose this comes probably primarily from my training as an architect. So obviously buildings are incredibly site specific, generally speaking.

And they look to the kind of history, the socioeconomics, the climate, the culture, but then obviously, of course, you know, the conversations you have with a commissioner or a client. Those play into how you design a building, but also for me, play into how I develop in my head a site specific media artwork for a city or a place.

There's things that fascinate me and drive my curiosity. And it's pretty fair to say my kind of starting point is architecture, well, without the people, can be quite static. And I was always kind of inspired by the idea that you could animate architecture.

You could create architecture that almost performs. And it starts to think about, well, how something might animate and change. And then in order to do that, I kind of draw upon things around me that might animate, perform, have conversations, which means looking perhaps at natural systems, nature, people, things around me that have that same sort of ability to perform and change.

And so quite often you'll see, I suspect, you'll see things that are to do with you know, how something might perform, how it might camouflage itself, how an environment changes. And some of those things will crop up time and time again within the work. And really the work is obviously- really works well if the audience is somehow involved. So therefore that site specificness is also about the audience. You know, the audience is specific to that site and therefore is going to create a work that is different, even if – which I don't generally do, create a piece of work that is a, there's a carbon copy of another piece of work.

Even if I was to do that, I would say it would be a bit different because the audience would react to it differently.

[00:04:00]
Hilary Knight: Do you sort of work with audiences as part of the process?

[00:04:05]
Jason Bruges: Definitely, I mean, the finished end goal – I'd say 95 percent of my work, the studio's work, is generated with an audience in mind, is generated with a sort of public or semi-public audience in mind, i.e. an audience that is free to see the work and interact with it and take away what they want.

And that is sort of where I'm aiming to get. And therefore, along that journey of development of work is much prototyping and testing and sort of trying to understand and think about how an audience might respond to me. And I suppose when I'm talking about audience, an audience could just be the everyday passer-by rather than verily a structured- you know, theatre going audience or a kind of film watching audience.

[00:04:55]
Jason Bruges: This is very much the audience of the everyday, the audience that might be commuting somewhere, moving through a city, might live somewhere. They might be a tourist or a one-time visitor. But that's the audience I'm talking about. Generally speaking.

[00:05:11]
Hilary Knight: Yeah, and that's also a really different way of thinking about audiences to audiences in um, you know, in a museum or a theatre or a cinema who are sort of there intentionally and they've come there specifically to see something. Whereas people who are encountering your work are sometimes on their way to somewhere else. You're there as part of the journey.

[00:05:30]
Jason Bruges: Absolutely. They might be there, I mean, purely by accident or purely by the fact that they need to get to work, you know. You're creating work that is an intervention, is an interruption to, to their kind of daily commute, their daily life. And you know, for example, I've created works that sit within infrastructure, for example, in airports, railway stations, metro stations.

And that's an example where you have a captive audience. You have people waiting for something to happen. And, you know, subliminally, you can, put something out there that passes the time that, that will kind of entertain, but not in a way that's, you know, perhaps normally perceived as being entertainment.

[00:06:14]
Hilary Knight: No, and I think also quite an unexpected thing. You don't expect to see a, a piece of infrastructure interact with you when you're waiting for a train.

Jason Bruges: Not very often.

Hilary Knight: And when we first met, we started talking, it was for a GCDN panel last year about immersive experiences. And immersive is definitely having a moment. I think we can even put it in air quotes now. And we both agreed at the time it's been around for millennia, but it now has a brand name.

Do you see this as a trend? What's your take? Is it a bubble, you know, these immersive experiences? Do you see your work as part of it?

[00:06:48]
Jason Bruges: I think for the most, people use the word immersive to describe a experience, a media artwork or a media kind of rich-themed entertainment environment, shall we say?

Hilary Knight: Yeah. (laughs)

Jason Bruges: Or a moment of theatre. So it sort of ranges between, I'd say art for me, themed entertainment and theatre. And all of those things have existed.

[00:07:14]
Jason Bruges: They've existed in theme parks. We've talked about how they've existed, but I think that there seems to have been a real appetite to explore work that is media rich, that is crafted and manifested in this way. And it's definitely a trend, because you can track the number of attractions, interventions, artworks, exhibitions, you know, performances, whatever you'd like to call them.

And I'm sure at some point we're hitting that tipping point where they'll- everyone has seen one, and they won't necessarily want to see another one that's the same, or everyone will know that there's sort of five or six in their town or city.

And, you know, we'll reach that tipping point where there's a sort of fatigue around immersive and people won't want to see any more, or they'll want another layer of meaning. Or it just becomes part of our toolkit as creators. You know, the immersive environment – the theatrical immersive environment, the artistic immersive environment, the themed artistic environment will be something that, that, you know, people expect and, you know, won't be that out of the ordinary.

I didn't necessarily think that's a bad thing. It's probably helped some of the technologies mature a bit in terms of all that back end that drives, you know, a hundred, two hundred big exhibition projectors in a space.

But you know, I think now we've got to think about what do we do with this next? You know, how does this work? And how does it navigate its way out of the black box or the museum or the warehouse into the city, and also what other things can we do with it? You know, can we create environments like this that, that have positive role in our world?

Are there things, are there sort of multi-sensory media rich spaces that, that, you know, contribute to wellness, you know? Lots of anecdotal evidence around how being presented with certain sort of patterns, certain sort of environments can relax us. And, you know, it may well be that we can use that to our advantage.

[00:09:24]
Hilary Knight: Which makes me think of some of the works that you have been doing with hospitals. Is wellness something that you consider?

[00:09:31]
Jason Bruges: Absolutely. I mean, you were talking about the inspiration, creating work, and I think, you know, we know that being in the natural environment, being in nature is good for us. And whether it's forest bathing, the effects – there's the kind of blue effect, which is the effect water has on us. The effect of certain colours on us, you know, contributes to our wellbeing. And we know this and we know being next to the coast, being at the seaside, being next to water, all these things have an effect on us. If you can recreate that, some of those feelings, and certainly in a hospital or in a workplace or a place where we're perhaps, we're quite overstimulated, creating an environment that immerses you in that feeling of being in a natural place, I think is really interesting and something I love exploring and are continuing to explore.

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[00:10:25]
Hilary Knight: Yeah, I think that makes a lot of sense. And as you say, it feels like a lot of these technologies be really useful in exploring that kind of impact that some immersive experiences can have.

[00:10:38]
Jason Bruges: Yeah. And I suppose the thing is, the difference I see with my work is that this trend is going to come and go. And then my ambition is more around creating elegant and timeless pieces of work that, you know, that address this need for more welcoming, peaceful places. So therefore, I think expectations will shift around what we're creating and why we're creating it.

[00:11:03]
Hilary Knight: And you mentioned timelessness there, which also reminds me that, you know, some of your works – a lot of your works, because they're part of urban infrastructure, they're going to be there for decades, potentially.

How do you think about creating works that are going to have long lifespans, especially if you're incorporating technology? So from my digital background, I immediately start thinking about how that technology could become obsolete. How do you plan for things that go for a long way into the future?

[00:11:33]
Jason Bruges: I mean there's many, many, many layers of this.

Hilary Knight: Mm hmm.

Jason Bruges: I mean, first and foremost, you walk into our studio in East London and-let's talk about this year a little bit, I mean, there's nearly 30 practitioners in the studio of all different backgrounds. Very, very multidisciplinary from, you know, scientists to dancers to artists to engineers of different types, architects, 3D designers, product designers, people with job titles like computational designer and creative technologist. And this team and I, we worked together to, you know, create this work, but I need that team of absolutely amazing specialists to create this work because we are prototyping, we're making, we're testing.

So you walk into the studio and it perhaps feels a bit more like a lab, sometimes a physics lab, sometimes perhaps a horticultural space, we have plants growing. There's always rigs where we're testing things to destruction almost sometimes, because of that very reason, we need to be assessing and thinking about the life cycles of every component in a system we're creating.

Hilary Knight: Mm!

Jason Bruges: Obviously we're reusing certain materials and technologies and pieces of hardware, and therefore there is a tacit knowledge within the studio about how certain things work and what things will fail. And yeah, and I've always been interested and thinking very carefully about the life cycles of components.

[00:13:05]
Jason Bruges: And the kind of circularity around them that is always been then, as you say, working with media or technology that is prevalent in media artwork within new media, there's a tension there because there are materials that, as you say, have a built-in obsolescence sometimes, or systems or components. There are materials within those systems that are finite or rare. So, you know, immediately my environmental hat on – I looked at the natural world, I'm inspired by the natural world, I'm creating these metaphors for the natural world, but then at the same time, I'm using technologies that inherently are sort of harming it.

So, using very sparingly and carefully is very much part of my practice. And we have design lives for our pieces of work that range from 20 to 50 years. And, you know, that is very different, I believe, to work that sometimes is put out for exhibition that then, you know, potentially struggles beyond two or three years, given how software, firmware, hardware will update. We hand over a sort of embedded bespoke artwork that's very carefully crafted and tested, but we hand over spares to a commissioner, we hand over a manual, we train people, we also have an aftercare service within the studio, if required.

We're also looking at, well, how do we decommission this? And we exercise our moral rights to do so as an artist, you know, we, please give us right of refusal to come in and remove this work at any point, if that has to happen. And all of this, we were doing and building up anyway but now at the moment, we're just on the cusp of – hopefully, fingers crossed, getting our B Corp certification literally in the coming weeks.

So, which, basically has gone through every aspect of the practice – what happens in the studio, who we supplied by, you know, how do we look after people and then it crosses over all sort of ESG tenants throughout the studio, but yeah we're kind of formalising that process.

[00:15:15]
Hilary Knight: Jason, that is so inspiring. I completely agree with you.

It's one of the really difficult things about technology and one of the things I struggle with when you sort of read about technological solutions to climate change. And if you think about how much of an impact technology has had in bringing about climate change in the first place.

To hear you talk about your practice and thinking about the end of life of a project as well – which I think isn't part of a lot of consideration in digital projects and you know, some of these pieces that are big infrastructure, thinking about how they may ultimately or will ultimately be removed at the point when you're also still working out how you're going to make them, is that kind of long term thinking that I think we don't always see in the rush to innovate.

[00:15:57]
Jason Bruges: Absolutely. I mean, maintenance is a key part. It's a really potentially boring part of the work. (laughs)

[00:16:05]
Hilary Knight: (laughs) Nobody wants to think about it when they're commissioning an artwork, do they? How it's going to be maintained.

[00:16:10]
Jason Bruges: Typically people don't necessarily want to commission pieces of work in places that are necessarily easy to get at. And most rightly, a lot of our conversations are about what kind of clever lift or system we'll get around the piece to make sure we can completely access it now.

And certainly, I mean, typically I'll be talking about these, would be coming in like winches of different types so that we can lower things safely to the ground. That means the sort of thing that obviously is commonplace within a stage or a theatre, but not necessarily in your average atrium or in your public environment.

[00:16:47]
Hilary Knight: I'm going to move us on slightly, but I think we're still kind of in this zone of thinking about, if not, environmental regeneration, sort of urban regeneration. I've been thinking about different venues used for interactive spaces and what that might mean for high streets and main streets that are seeing shuttered shops and things post pandemic.

And you recently held a cultural lab in a shop front in Eastbourne. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

[00:17:10]
Jason Bruges: Yeah, I mean, the opportunity rose. I was talking to the team from Eastbourne ALIVE and um, this is that kind of really wonderful fringe cultural activity run by yeah, Sarah Dance and her team around the Turner Prize in Eastbourne.

Hilary Knight: Mm.

Jason Bruges: And we just started talking about opportunities and we just quickly turned to the kind of empty shops and an empty department store. And really, you know, it piqued my interest to think about, well, what considerations you have to make if you're going to actually experiment and create sort of pilots and tests in a space like that. Eastbourne ALIVE and the council in Eastbourne have been wonderful to collaborate with myself in the studio, to create a space where we'd be able to sort of start testing some ideas. They really are about both drawing the sort of local populace's attention to what they've got on their doorstep by the sea, and again, the quality of life that can give you – that people often miss.

And... but also sort of double pronged attack here is like, yeah, exactly, creating hopefully a prototype or a case study for, you know, how can you use these spaces that aren't being used in between other things – as a temporary studio, temporary testing space, and an exhibition, you know, space essentially. And so, it's the first time I've worked like this and create some sort of studio generated work in the context of this. It's ongoing. So it's very much work in progress and, and in the coming months, there'll be things to see in that environment.

[00:18:53]
Jason Bruges: And it has been fascinating. But it does make me think about the huge swathes of space that are empty, and actually, I mean, just giving people access to art.

And again, it's about seeing something where you don't expect to see it. Seeing something outside the gallery, seeing you know, what does an artist studio look like? What do, you know, especially if they're working with new media, working with robotics, media systems, artificial intelligence, computer science – what does that sort of space look like?

And this even spurred me on as my role as a visiting professor at Birmingham School of Art at BCU. I've equally set the students there a project where they've been looking at unused shopfronts around the UK and coming up with ideas for them. So it definitely become a little bit of a passion.

And, you know, obviously there's quite a few people thinking about this now, but I think rightly so, how do we re-energise the city and town centres, which were once obviously the kind of centres of everyone's life, but less so now.

[00:20:01]
Hilary Knight: Yeah, absolutely, as people's relationship with these urban centres has changed, it just, because the patterns of working life aren't quite what they were in 2019. It'd be so interesting to see how art can sort of occupy some of those spaces and, and provide access, you know, it also does incredible things like that, taking art out of the institutions that we become accustomed to seeing it in, as you say. And that you know, so many opportunities for kind of community building and co-creation and I guess training, you know.

[00:20:32]
Jason Bruges: Absolutely. It is funny, you mentioned the pandemic, this- actually, talking about the kind of immersive space. It's almost like this vacuum was left to be filled. And I suppose this is part of my interest: is what can we fill it with that isn't perhaps the obvious, you know, what else can you do with these spaces, as you say, engages communities, allows co-authorship that, that allows these sort of alternative experiences to sort of flourish, but not ones that we're expecting. Perhaps not the traditional immersive space, but what else can happen?

[00:21:08]
Hilary Knight: And also just thinking back to how you described your studio and all the incredible range of skills and expertise and experience that everybody in your studio possess, or between you or your studio possesses.

There's something in there about who gets to be an artist. And if you're a software developer or a data scientist, that you too can be involved in making art. And making that sort of visible to people walking past on the high street, I think it's quite a radical thing because we have an idea of what artists are and what architects are and who gets to do that. And then sort of being able to break that apart, but also at the same time showing all the different disciplines and things that can inform making work, is really quite exciting.

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[00:21:52]
Jason Bruges: What I think good about it, it opens it up to different sorts of people. So, I mean-

Hilary Knight: Yeah.

Jason Bruges: We talk about STEM or STEAM, you get technologists, engineers, scientists, equally as interested in practice of making and developing cultural, creative work and therefore also broadening your audience.

[00:22:14]
Hilary Knight: Yeah, absolutely. We've talked a little bit about what we, I guess what might come next. And you've just mentioned AI and computer science. So AI, is that something in particular you're exploring or is it something that's all, you know, large data sets or been part of your work for a long time?

[00:22:29]
Jason Bruges: I mean it's interesting, obviously the technology that supports- I mean, the billions, well, trillions of dollars and pounds on developing platforms, large language models, all the research that's sort of probably gone into the back end of developing both general artificial intelligence and artificial intelligence, it's extraordinary.

I mean, obviously, however, you know, this idea of or this goal of building systems that, that kind of think for themselves, that exhibit certain types of characteristics we see in ourselves, has been obviously ongoing for 60, 70, 80 years, if not longer. And within my lifetime of practicing the kind of idea of, I mean, we were studying Turing, conversation theory, human machine interfaces, machine intelligence – I mean, this was all part of what we were researching and thinking about 30 years ago.

So it's great to see it coming of age. It's great to see it maturing. The technology is obviously perhaps ubiquitous in, in more of the tools and things we look at. So yes, it's something I've obviously worked with, been interested in. And obviously it has a different label now, I suppose, or the AI label is sort of much, much better known and ubiquitous. So you can't ignore it. But really, it's sort of part of a toolkit.

And, it's something that we'll carry on using and we will use it to develop, speed up processes, automate things, improve our tools. But equally at the same time you still need very careful quality control, you still need a knowledge of work that's happened before, in terms of developing unique, innovative, interesting work in whatever kind of field you're working in.

So the human intervention is not going anywhere anytime soon.

[00:24:40]
Hilary Knight: I think we're also- there's also something in there, there's the note of caution that, where we started earlier in the conversation about humanness and connecting to environment and the need for nature in our lives and in our encounters, it can't- we can't always be looking to technology to solve our problems, you know.

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[00:24:58]
Jason Bruges: Exactly. I mean, I'm quite often, as I said, we're creating systems that creates something that evokes a response in the same way we get a response to some phenomena in the natural world – whether it's like rippling water or light playing through a tree canopy, or whether it's some kind of other biological kind of system or mechanism.

We recently co-authored an AI working with Google DeepMind at their headquarters in Kings Cross, UK. And it was interesting.

People look at the piece and try and imbue it with characteristics that they recognise. And I think someone even mentioned the type of patterns you'll see playing on different types species of squid, for example, as they are perceived to think or move around their environment. You get this quite elaborate change in the sort of camouflage in the pigmentation in their skin. And someone sort of spoke of the sculpture and said, it's a bit like a squid in terms of how fluid and kind of living it seems.

So it's interesting, people do love to imbue installations and systems with these kind of living characteristics. So it is kind of fascinating, but yeah, we can't move away from the fact that, you know, we're trying to relink more to our natural world and I think that should be a kind of really key goal for us.

[00:26:26]
MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:26:34]
Hilary Knight: And so what's next for you, Jason? What are you working on? What's on your horizon?

[00:26:39]
Jason Bruges: Well, I mean, the studio, myself, and we've been looking at the applications of different sorts of technologies. And a lot of them are actually quite old. You look at things and it may well be that their integration into everyday life is something that's just unusual, where they're placed and how they're used.

And whether you've heard sort of terminology like technology transfer or different types of disruption being used as sort of things. So, you know, you take, for example, an industrial robot arm that sits usually in a manufacturing plant or foundry, packing environment or some kind of fabrication environment. And you take that and put that into a public space to enable choreography, recalibration of that space, and that obviously, in itself, is in a way first in class research and development, because you're looking at how, how do you turn this industrial robotic technology into a spatial "cobot" – is the sort of terminology for a robot that sort of coexists in a space.

And, you know, the technologies of new, it's just a context, it's the use, just that kind of tweak or that intervention to create something different. So that is certainly something we're playing with, is how can we transform and configure space. They're quite large scale, using technology like large scale robotics.

[00:28:07]
Jason Bruges: So we're actually working on some robotic landscapes at the moment, for example. The palette we're using and the scale using- it's kind of fascinating. And I'm kind of personally really excited and interested to see where that goes.

And you know, we're obviously working with technologies that allow us to explore those environments before we built them. So obviously, like in the construction world, we're using digital twins. We're using uh, gaming technology. So game engines allow us to predetermine what new environments will look like, but at the same time, we're then using that same environment to control and animate and choreograph the things we're building.

And we're building, I think three of the biggest projects we've ever built this year.

And it's not really, it's not about the scale, but it's about the amount of people we're able to interact with and the kind of, hopefully, the effect that we'll be able to have on people. And it comes back to really creating, I suppose for me, kind of man-made wonder and interestingly, you know, wonder is, is an interesting word because it actually, it features in a few places where people are describing things that actually make us feel good. And back to the sort of this wellness idea – things that are wonderful make us feel good. Things that add wonder to place, contribute to our quality of life.

[00:29:32]
Hilary Knight: I think that's a wonderful place to wrap up. I completely agree. And something I've been reading about and thinking about at the end of the last year and the start of this one has been awe, which is essentially a, a sibling to wonder.

[00:29:49]
Jason Bruges: Yeah, awe, wonder, delight. Yeah, another word that, I mean, I like people when they talk about the work we create in this way, but the word sort of magic as well for me, is a really lovely one. And I think that, you know, definitely, you know, is talking about what we're trying to do and, you know, things that are coming up. Definitely.

[00:30:10]
Hilary Knight: Any projects coming up that you are especially excited about?

[00:30:14]
Jason Bruges: So there's a few things that are certainly happening. There's a project we're doing at the moment, which is this extraordinary- it's like a dashboard. It's a stylised map. If you imagine you walk into a power station, you sort of see this grid that shows this sort of electrical circuit. It shows where the power is being distributed within the power station. We've just created a version of that, which tells the story about how power is flowing around the Ukraine.

Hilary Knight: Wow.

Jason Bruges: And we just finished that for a Ukrainian energy company for their headquarters in London. And I would say it's not a public project, but it is actually in the top of the Leadenhall Building – The Cheesegrater, as it's popularly known.

[00:31:00]
Jason Bruges: So you probably will be able to see it from around the city. And to that, that's something we're very excited about. And it's a live representation of power generation and distribution in the Ukraine for a company called DTEK, who are one of the larger public energy companies in the Ukraine. And it was commissioned to tell the story, the transformation from fossil fuels to renewables in the Ukraine before the war started. So that is extremely exciting.

Another up and coming project in Ottawa for the light railway system. We've got a series of artworks on stations that bring concourses and waiting rooms and underpasses to life. Ottawa is a bit of a hotspot. We're also working on national library of Canada, in the Canadian archives, we're creating a big suspended sculpture that talks to the community of Ottawa and the community of the library.

And probably not forgetting Tampa, Florida. We're working on the international airport and the convention centre there currently. So it's interesting to see whether these little cultural hotspots are and where we're about to launch works.

[00:32:07]
Hilary Knight: Yeah, absolutely. And um, GCDN being a global cultural network, there'll be no doubt people who are listening who will be going to see those works and encountering them as part of their lives around their cities.

Jason Bruges: Indeed.

Hilary Knight: Thank you so much, Jason. This has been really fascinating and what an enjoyable conversation.

Jason Bruges: No, well, thank you very much, Hilary. It's been a delight to talk to you. And uh, I kind of, well, I look forward to hearing the edited, uh, version online. (laughs)

Hilary Knight: (laughs)

[00:32:34]
MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:32:37]
Hilary Knight: My thanks again to Jason Bruges for joining me today.

At the end of 2023, I spent a lot of time thinking, writing and talking about immersive experiences. Immersive has always been integral to art and culture. From all the way back in 17,000 BCE when the Lascaux caves paintings were lit by lamps and firelight to create a flickering, moving effect. We can trace a line forward through time, taking in religious frescoes, stagecraft, music, art, and the many developments of cinema, all the way to games, VR, AR, MR, and the projection mapping of today.

So, immersive is nothing new.

[00:33:13]
Hilary Knight: But now, "immersive" – you'll have to imagine the air quotes, have become a kind of format name for a type of experience that sits at an intersection between theatre, film, art, games, and tech. These experiences are having something of a moment right now, and some of them are attracting audiences at significant scale. And I've been thinking about why that is.

While I was thinking, I started reading Awe by Dacher Keltner. He's a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and the faculty director of the Greater Good Science Center.

Across a couple of hundred pages, he writes about the evolutionary, neurological, and psychological purposes that the sense of awe has for humans and our collective being.

He defines awe as the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world. He describes the purpose of awe as integrating us into the systems of life, our communities, our cultures, and the natural environment, and helps us to understand that we're part of something bigger than ourselves.

What then does this have to do with large commercial projection mapped cultural experiences around the world? Well, one explanation is that they invoke a kind of awe because they involve being part of something physically vast and visually arresting as a communal experience. But I had an aha moment when I was talking to a friend recently about the divisive nature of social media these days.

Bear with me, I'll explain.

When we consider how we live now, at a time of global upheaval, conflict, suffering, social division and climate catastrophe – all available to us 24/7 on our personal screens, we shouldn't be surprised when people describe feeling a sense of social disconnection, pessimism, and alienation.

Keltner tells us that, etymologically, the word awe comes from Middle English and Old Norse words for fear, dread, horror, and terror. It used to relate much more closely to ancient fears about gods and the forces of nature. It's just that over time our understanding of the term has shifted to be more about transcendence, peace, and a feeling of intrinsic goodness. So if that's how we're feeling, then it's no wonder that we're seeking out experiences that help us to feel the positive aspects of awe again, to give us comfort and reconnect us to each other.

In his book, Keltner tells us that a function of awe is to give us a visceral sense that our current knowledge is not able to make sense of what we're encountering, and to inspire us to seek out new ways of understanding. This flags up both a challenge and an opportunity for producers looking to create impactful, immersive projects, to create awe-inspiring experiences that do more than offer temporary relief via big visuals in large spaces.

[00:35:52]
Hilary Knight: It's what Jason and I were talking about earlier. Like Jason, there are many artists and producers doing this already.

So I guess what I'm expressing here is a hope that as the immersive sector continues to grow, we'll see more and more experiences that give us that sense of something that transcends our understanding of the world, that inspire us to seek out new ways of understanding, and that help us to reconnect with our communities, our societies, and our environment.

[00:36:16]
THEME MUSIC

[00:36:23]
Hilary Knight: The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting for the Global Cultural Districts Network. Our theme music was created by Artwave Studio, who also sound mix our episodes. The podcast and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net.

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For The Three Bells, my name is Hilary Knight.

Thank you for listening, and until next time, take care.

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