

IMAGINATION ACTIVISM | Q&A

1. What is 'imagination activism'?

Imagination Activism is the practice of using the imagination itself – deliberately, collectively, and with rigour – as a lever for systemic change. It's a moral imagination in action. Traditional activism tends to organise around opposition: naming what's wrong, building power against it, winning concessions from existing systems. That work is necessary and vital: so many of the huge wins for social and environmental justice of the 20th century are rooted in movements driven by traditional activism. But it has a structural limit: it's very good at telling you what to tear down and much less equipped to tell you, in specific detail, what to build instead. Imagination Activism starts from the other end. It asks: what does the world we actually want to feel like, sound like, govern itself like – and then works backwards from that vision to build the coalitions, stories, and institutions that can get us there... Less fight the machine; and more “dream a different dream, and the machine’s replacement into being, together, and then build it.

It's a new kind of activism, that is powered by imagination, that gives people both the vision and the tools to build a better world. Three things sit underneath it: imagining differently, expanding who gets to imagine – not just artists, filmmakers or "creative types" – and moving activism beyond fighting the old, into building the new. An Imagination Activist works out their own imagination muscle, then equips others with tools, questions and exercises to do the same. The result is pockets of the future in the present, and an Overton Window that keeps stretching.

I coined the term in March 2022, and first presented it publicly to around 4,000 people at the Inner Development Goals summit in Stockholm that year. It's since become a term for a growing movement – people learning to exercise and stretch their imaginations in order to open new possibilities and new forms of action.

2. Why is it important to train our imagination?

Because imagination is a muscle, and like any muscle, it atrophies without use. Cognitive science points to two circuits in the brain: one linear, strategic, rational; the other creative, associative, active in daydreaming and unbounded exploration. The first

dampens the second. Almost everything about how we've built modern life – school, work, institutions – trains and rewards the first circuit and protects no space at all for the second. So, imagination doesn't just sit dormant. It actively weakens.

There's real evidence for this. The Torrance Creativity Test shows creativity scores declining since the 1990s, after rising steadily from the 1960s. Separately, research on published papers and patents shows they've become less "disruptive" since WWII, even as R&D investment has gone up. By some measures, we're in a genuine crisis of imagination – at precisely the moment we need genuinely new thinking to meet the scale of what's in front of us.

3. You talk about 'moral imagination' at the heart of Imagination Activism. Can you say more about that?

Moral imagination is the capacity to picture the world, and each other, differently – including beings who aren't human – and then feel enough moral clarity and courage from that picture to actually act on it. It's not imagination as pure creativity or blue-sky thinking for its own sake. It's imagination in service of what's right, oriented by care rather than by cleverness.

That's why the practice sits so close to Joanna Macy's *Work That Reconnects*, which shaped it directly. Grief, gratitude, interconnection – you can't get to genuinely new thinking about how to live differently without going through those first. Moral imagination asks people to sit with what's broken and what's at stake, and only then to imagine forward from there. It's also why more-than-human perspectives matter so much in this work: real moral imagination has to include the rivers, the soil, the species we've spent centuries imagining ourselves separate from.

4. Why do you identify as an activist rather than simply an advocate for change?

Imagining isn't the same as acting, and I care about the second part as much as the first. Moral imagination opens a different way of thinking, seeing and designing – but it's moral courage, and the connection and support we give each other, that carries it from imagination into action. That's the activist part: not just picturing a better world, but

doing the often uncomfortable, unglamorous work of bringing what's been imagined into being.

Imagination also sets the orientation for what gets done next. Most traditional activism organises around fighting the old system. Imagination Activism orients toward building the new – creating pockets of the future now, and expanding what people believe is achievable, rather than only resisting what's broken.

5. What was the turning point that led you to focus on this field?

I trained as a scientist – a first-class degree in Biological Natural Sciences from Cambridge – and went on to work in systems and complexity thinking, including research and teaching in biotechnology at Imperial College, trying to respond to the challenges of today's world through that lens. But I remember standing in a conventional lab at one point and realising, quite clearly, that science practised that way wasn't going to be how I made my contribution.

From there I co-founded a run of organisations from my early twenties onward – Future Farm Lab, Enspiral, Going Horizontal – each one an experiment in doing systems change differently. Along the way I trained as a Warm Data Lab host with Nora Bateson and studied Joanna Macy's *Work That Reconnects*. Joanna became a genuinely important mentor to me – she blessed and helped shape the development of Moral Imagination directly. Those lineages, combined with years of watching institutions fail to solve problems they had more than enough resources to solve, crystallised into the recognition at the heart of my work now: almost everything we call a resource problem is actually an imagination problem

6. Many people see imagination as abstract. How can it be used as a practical tool for systems change?

We've built it deliberately as a practice, not a concept. Imagination becomes practical through three ingredients: dedicated time and space, with real resources protecting it; permission, which performance culture usually withholds because people fear looking foolish; and scaffolding – structured prompts and exercises that unlock the rational brain and feeling together, not one at the expense of the other.

We've tested this on a real institutional scale. In the London Borough of Camden, we trained 32 council officers as "ambassadors of imagination" over roughly two years, designed to cascade out to the borough's 3,000 staff, with a published report on the

results. We've trained IKEA's leadership, built an immersive imagination lab with the London Marathon, and run an Interspecies Council bringing more-than-human perspectives directly into UK policymaking, including Defra's land-use consultation. The River Ouse Project – a governance charter – came out of the same approach. Across five years of this work now, we've trained over 2,500 people across more than 75 organisations in 40-plus countries. Each engagement turns "imagination" into something concrete: a trained cohort, a policy submission, a charter, a changed budget decision.

7. Can imagination activism be practiced by anyone, or does it come more naturally to people who are already trained to think creatively?

Anyone – though like any capacity, it needs training. We're all born able to imagine; it isn't a talent reserved for filmmakers, advertisers or "creative" professionals while the rest of us stay in our lane. What happens is that capacity gets shut down, colonised and narrowed by three things: an education system built on a winning-or-failing binary, where "the right answer" makes failure feel crippling; workplace performance culture, where people are afraid to look stupid or say the wrong thing; and the general conditions of 21st-century life – stress, overwork, phone addiction, burnout – which leave almost no unplanned, unproductive time for imagination to actually work in.

Give people permission, protected space and the right scaffolding, and it comes back. I've watched it happen with council officers, corporate leadership teams and lawyers just as readily as with artists.

8. You've said that we don't have a resource problem, but an imagination problem. Why do you think that is?

Most problems get framed as resource problems – not enough money, staff, time – when they're actually imagination problems. Huge amounts of budget and capacity sit unlocked simply because no one has joined the dots differently or looked for what's already possible within existing constraints.

I keep coming back to the image of a goldfish tank. Inside it, we believe the water is low on oxygen, there aren't enough nutrients, there's no room, it's all scarcity and competition. But there's a vast, endless sea outside the tank – and everything we actually need is already there. My work is about helping people get out of the tank. And the

biggest barrier to that isn't external at all. The single most profound thing we learned in Camden was that people's biggest constraint is their own internalised belief that they aren't imaginative.

9. How specific does a challenge need to be for imagination to become a truly effective tool for change?

Imagination has to work on every scale, or it doesn't work at all. Sometimes it's cooking a dish when you're missing an ingredient. Sometimes it's the legal rights of a specific river. Sometimes its citizens being called to reimagine society as a whole. The small adjustments need a bigger picture to guide them, and the bigger picture needs to be anchored in things small enough to actually be changed.

10. If you could direct the world's collective imagination toward solving one current issue, what would it be and why?

The structure of society itself – which also means relating to more-than-human beings much more presently than we currently do. We can't separate the major issues of today from each other: ecological breakdown intersects with how we deploy new technologies, and with serious questions of defence and security from local to international scales. Part of what imagination does is help us make the links between things that stay too often siloed – to think like an ecosystem, which is complex and holds many valid perspectives at once.

11. Where is the imagination activism movement today, and how do you see it evolving in the years ahead?

There's a real and growing interest in the field – I see it in the UK, and increasingly in places like Denmark too. It's emerging as we approach something of a social tipping point: there's mounting evidence that most people already think business as usual is running out of road (Liam Kavanagh's recent research on Mobilising Silent Majorities is worth a look here). Most people want serious action on climate, and want our systems and institutions guided by better, more intrinsic values. That's the moral reimagining this moment calls for, and more and more people – Imagination Activists, in my terms – are waking up to it.

One of the next big steps is for all those individual Imagination Activists to find each other and recognise themselves as part of a movement large and bold enough to actually make a difference.

12. You will be at a residency at Thoravej 29 in Soon – Lab for Possible Futures. How is imagination activism linked to artistic practice?

Moral Imaginations draws on post-rational approaches that hold imagination, science, rigour, art, truth and beauty together rather than as competitors. Artistic practice – narrative, story, speculative fiction, embodiment, image-making – is one of the most reliable ways to switch on that second brain circuit, the daydreaming, unbounded one, which rational, institutional culture keeps suppressed. Policy and strategy documents speak to the analytical mind. Art speaks to feeling, and to a sense of what's possible – which is exactly the register Imagination Activism needs people in before they can genuinely picture, and then build, a different future. A residency built around artists and imagination researchers working side by side is a working demonstration of that link, not just a metaphor for it.