Once Upon a Tomorrow

In July 1939, the *National Geographic* magazine commissioned American artist Charles Bittinger to create a series of paintings for a story called "News of the Universe." The brief was simple: help readers visualise outer space. And though no satellite had been launched, and it would be another 30 years before man would set foot on the moon, Bittinger rose to the task admirably. His paintings (third on the page) were "technically correct," according to present-day scientists, who remain awed by the way information and imagination came together in Bittinger's series. He joined a long line of people across history — from unnamed Islamic astronomers to Galileo Galilei; from French filmmaker Georges Méliès to artists Lucien Rudaux (who preceded Bittinger) and Pablo Picasso — who set their gaze towards the sky and dared to bring it a little closer to earth.

When *Once Upon a Tomorrow* began, one of the first discussions was about the ways in which stories create worlds, and while there is immense joy in building them, those worlds cannot simply be tethered to the past and the present — they must seek out a future world to exist in. And those who engage in that exercise are now responsible for the kind the world it will be. In an interview with the project lead, Dr. Nishant Shah, he explains the ethical responsibilities associated with storytelling and why we can't ignore them.

Interview with Dr. Nishant Shah

In the past year, you have worked on multiple projects that explore the politics of storytelling and narrative practices. What draws you to this subject?

SHAH: I think there are intellectual as well as political stakes in the work that we're doing. My commitment has been to thinking through narrative change practices. Not particularly storytelling, but narrative change. As a scholar of digital and new media cultures, I've tracked the proliferation of devices, platforms, bodies, and communities. We were always told that if only enough people told enough stories, a lot of the social justice questions would be resolved.

But if you look at the state of the internet right now, the more diverse, resistant, and non-dominant voices appear on the internet, the more we seem to find backlash, anger, violence, intimidation and so on. So, the idea of narrative change, and particularly for *Once Upon a Tomorrow*, is that diversity and inclusion are not going to be addressed merely by producing more diverse and inclusive content — it is going to require conditions within which these stories are being told and really re-thinking what are the kinds of tropes that often get replayed, even with the best of intentions in many of these projects. So, it's really re-thinking the habits of storytelling and how so many of the everyday acts of aggression are coded in our habits — becoming aware of it and re-engineering it in some ways. This is the more political stake, particularly the new media stake.

As someone who organises communities, it was also very clear to me that while there are indeed a lot of stories, so many of them are what I call a 'rehearsal of doom, gloom and despair.' These actually lead to apathy instead of action. We don't want stories about exclusion and discrimination to offer a paranoid reading of the world where we show everybody how broken the world is — because that's not new. We need to tell these stories in ways that are oriented towards hope, which leads to collective action as opposed to polarised action.

You mentioned that certain tropes get repeated in narrative practices. What would you say they are?

SHAH: Well, one of them is what I mentioned: the rehearsal of the brokenness of the world, for example. The idea that the content is more important than the context of circulation — what this does is that you bring in more and more people and tell them that 'Your voice is important.' But when those voices are brought into the online spaces of storytelling, we find that there are no protections or safeguards are thought through. Who will protect them? How will we keep them safe? How will we ensure that they are not being targeted, bullied or attacked?

Or the fact that we think that just because a story has been told now, enough has been done. We don't think about the afterlife of a story, or what are the new materialities or infrastructures that need to be produced for that story. So, it's really those kinds of tropes which are about the condition of what happens to stories, which is what narrative practice is. The narrative is not just about content — it is about the intention, the arc, the circulation of stories — and till we don't change that, no matter how many stories we produce, all the stories are only going to reinforce the narrative intention and power.

One of the things that was new to many of the participants of this project was the concept of a 'safe space.' How would you define that? What is the goal there and how sometimes, the space can be misunderstood?

SHAH: 'Safe space' has a specific genealogy to it. They were created, particularly, for women who were battered, abused, disenfranchised and struggling for survival. It is a space of healing, and without judgement. The concept of the safe space came from the second wave of feminism, which was a very radical wave of feminism. It isn't really the accepted norm anywhere because it leaned into biological determinism of women with uteruses who reproduce, and excluded everybody else from it. So, I don't use the term 'safe space', I think it's a very flawed concept. In addition, it doesn't apply to *Once Upon a Tomorrow*, because the stakeholders come from a fair amount of privilege.

What we should be talking about is the concept of 'brave space.'

Let's move to that then. What is a 'brave space'?

SHAH: Brave Spaces are self-selected spaces where we allow ourselves to break who we are on the axis of power. Most of the professional world doesn't allow you to perform or even analyse the idea that you can be vulnerable, that you can be weak, that you can fail. So, whenever we are in any kind of collective environment, it requires a lot of bravery for people to actually perform vulnerability. And that if they do it, the repercussions might be negative.

Brave spaces are specific collectives where we say that 'You don't need to be brave to be vulnerable. You don't need to be brave to acknowledge that despite our different powers, we are still broken and affected.' It is a non-performative space and that's the reason why the deep dives in Once Upon a Tomorrow may appear to be exclusive. They aren't — they simply had no spectators.
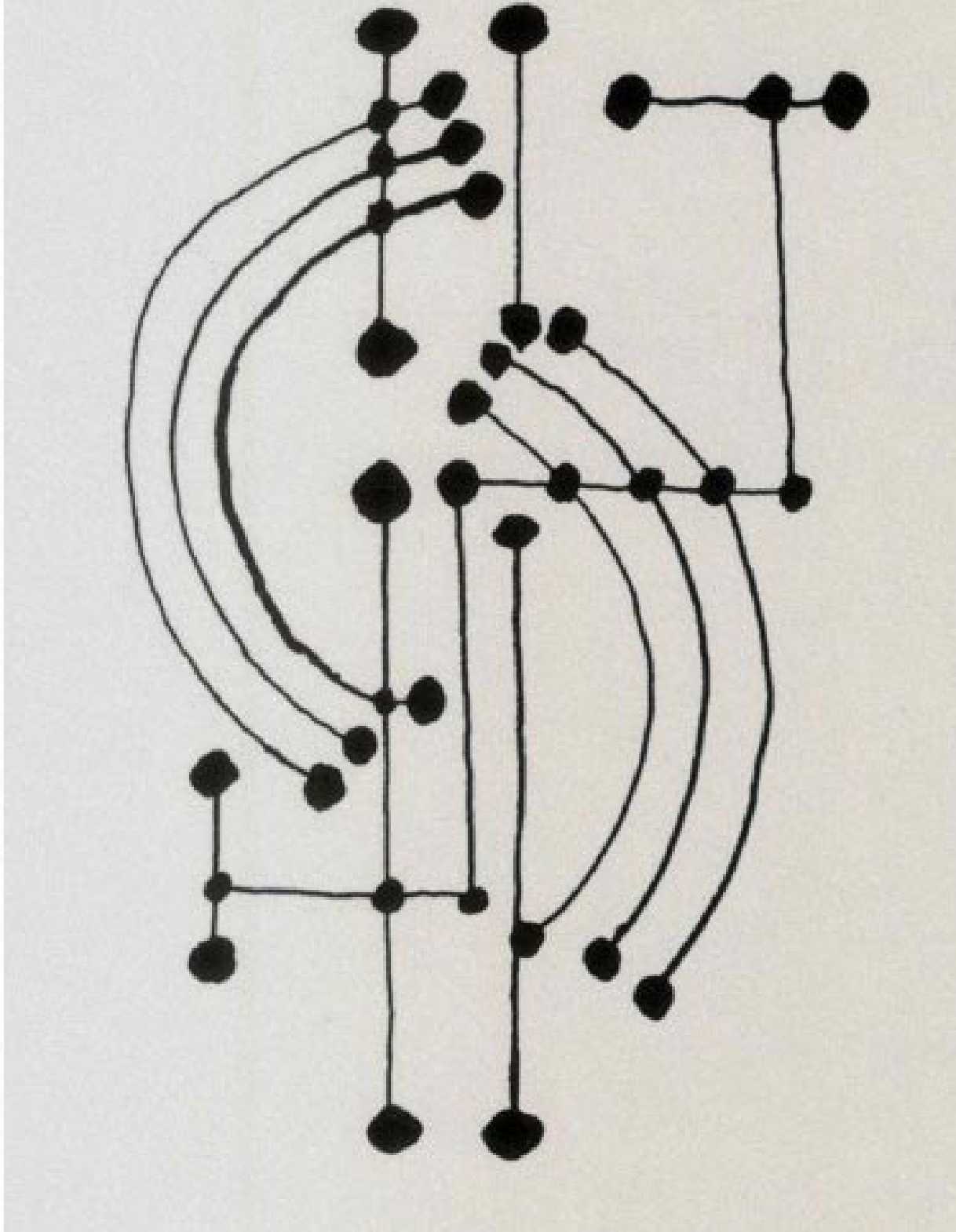
Why is vulnerability so important for collective action?

SHAH: If one is working on questions of diversity and exclusion, and we're talking about expressions of power that break people…if we aren't able to establish your relationship with that power, then how will we form any sense of understanding of each other's politics and positionality? I've said it before: To talk about power is to break yourself on the same axis of power.

As project lead, what would you say was the main challenge you faced while facilitating *Once Upon a Tomorrow*?

SHAH: Projects such as these require co-creation and collaboration from the very beginning. Who gets to come in, how do we make connections between collaborators. How do we engineer something like trust, how do you offer it, and not take it for granted? As much as I didn't know any of the participants, they didn't know me either. Both intellectually and as a feminist practioner, it was an interesting challenge.

On a personal front, I'd say it is a question of vocabulary. While dealing with such a diverse range of practioners, it's always a challenge to understand what do we mean when we say different things. As an educator, I have to tell myself that I don't have to teach; instead, I have to learn with other people.
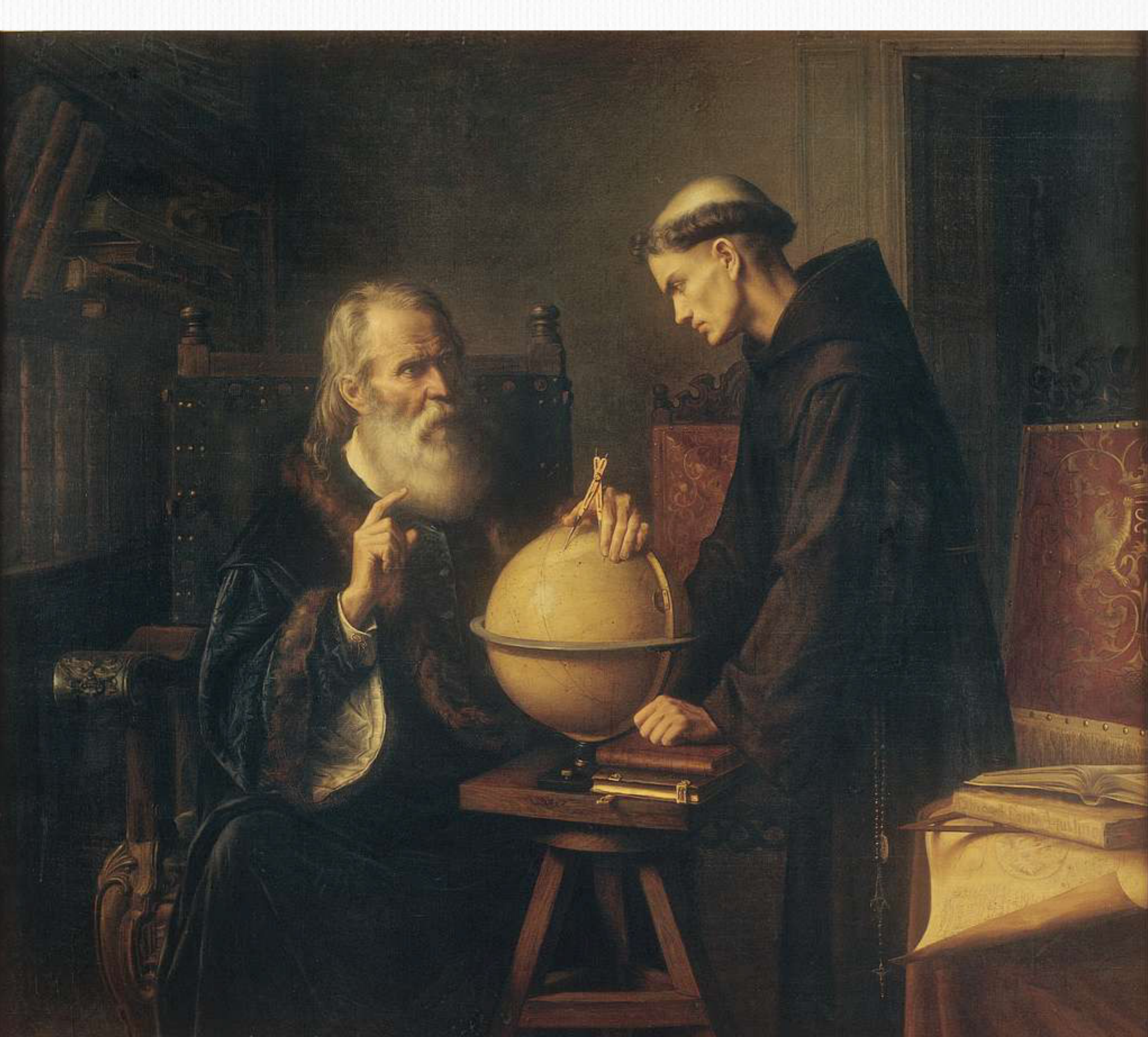
What have you learned the most from this project?

SHAH: I think what I've learned the most, and all of us need to remind ourselves, is that we have to stop thinking of this as a project. We have very big ambitions, we started with great ideas. So, the first milestone has been achieved. But if we think everything has been achieved and we stop, then everything we gained, the energy and the knowledge we had as a collective, will be dissipated and lost.

Organising *Once Upon a Tomorrow* as a narrative change practice is necessarily to think of movement. To think of ourselves as a community that is coming into shape. That requires a vision and infrastructure that moves beyond just a project. It's important to realise that the problems of social justice are not resolved by projects — they require a much larger programming across multiple years, with different people involved in them.

Lastly, you came up with the name *Once Upon a Tomorrow*. Why did you choose it?

SHAH: We need to think of stories not as reflecting worlds but as creating worlds. There has always been 'Once upon a time…' which always gives that sense that stories are about things that have already happened. I really think, irrespective of genre, stories create worlds. So, when we want to begin a story, let's think about the world that we're creating for the future rather than narrating what has already happened. The moment we do that, what we are saying now is building the world we want to live in; with that intentionality, storytelling becomes an ethical responsibility. *Once Upon a Tomorrow* was hoping to gesture towards this question of ethics, about what do we do with stories and how do we make them create impact around questions of social justice.