

When thinking how to introduce this podcast, I returned to Toni Morrison's "The War on Error", a speech she delivered to Amnesty International – where she writes:

Isn't it reasonable to assume that, projecting early human life into the far-distant future may not be the disaster movie we have come to love, but a reconfiguration of what we are here for? To lessen suffering, to tell the truth, raise the bar?

To stand one remove from timeliness, like an artist encouraging reflection, stoking imagination, mindful of the long haul and putting his or her own life on the line, to imagine work in a world worthy of life?

I'm Janani Balasubramanian... and this is Encounters.

I am a Stanford alum and a conceptually driven, multidisciplinary artist and director. My practice is rooted in long-term collaboration with scientists.

Some of my current collaborations are with practitioners in astrophysics, in medicine, and in information theory.

I'm passionate about assembling interdisciplinary teams to tackle big human projects and questions and about making artwork that's accessible to audiences who've felt historically disinvited to both contemporary art and science.

This year, I returned to Stanford through the Denning Visiting Artist program, and in my residency, I've endeavored to assemble practitioners across disciplinary boundaries to explore fundamental human questions with imagination and audacity.

Across this four-part series, we'll dive into questions spanning astrophysics, human memory, grief, healing, care, and the radical possibilities that emerge when we truly co-create across disciplinary boundaries.

What Toni Morrison lays out – to lessen suffering, to tell the truth, raise the bar – that's the work.

The first exchange you'll hear is with Ellen Oh, Director of Interdisciplinary Artist Programs at Stanford Arts. Ellen and I have worked together so much over the years, but till now we've never had the chance to take a breath and simply express our practices to one another.

**I'm hopeful that you'll enjoy this conversation as much as I did.**

## ACT 1

**Ellen Oh:** Hello.

**Janani:** Hello. It's fun to have the opportunity to chat because I feel like we have variously schemed and conspired on all sorts of art science, co-creation endeavors, and I'm happy to be here for a longer stretch where we've gotten to spend more time really in the dirt and the weeds making things happen.

**Janani:** I think Ellen, it would be amazing if you could speak a little bit about your institutional role and your practice within that institutional role.

**Ellen Oh:** Yeah. Well, um, first of all, I'm just really happy to be here. I don't even remember the first time I met you, but I love the fact that you are on campus this year for an extended period of time, and we can really dive into your projects more deeply and find you other co-conspirators in this work.

**Ellen Oh:** So in my role as the director of Interdisciplinary Arts programs at Stanford Arts, I do interdisciplinary arts initiatives which can look like a number of different things. One big part of what I do is oversee visiting artist programs, and some of that is managing the Denning Visiting Artist program, which is an endowed program that allows faculty members to bring in an artist to collaborate with on their work or research for an extended period of time. Really, we're trying to get artists embedded throughout campus, often in places where you wouldn't expect an artist to be working, to really demonstrate the value of an artist's perspective and approach to different types of research and practice and different fields of thought and inquiry... just to see what they bring to the equation and understand how they're able to imagine new and better worlds.

**Ellen Oh:** They all look different, but that's the fun of it. It's kind of the magic. You never know what's going to happen when you bring people together in this way.

**Janani:** I'm curious if there are components... pieces of your personal background and history that led you to this kind of practice. Because it's a very unique practice. It's not a role that exists kind of cross-institutionally that often. There are people who serve as connectors and activation points at different institutions. But I'm curious for you, what motivated you to move into this kind of work?

**Ellen Oh:** I've seen the benefits of collaborating with other people, getting different ideas and perspectives together, and I think it makes things better. So when I came to Stanford, I was doing the same kind of work at the Institute for Diversity in the Arts and bringing artists to campus and collaborating with students and all people from across campus. And I found that I was one of the only people trying to do that, really bridging the silos that existed here, which struck me as very strange.

**Ellen Oh:** We were having that conversation the other day about how I think that often women and people of color gravitate towards collaborating and this kind of work.

**Janani:** Totally.

**Ellen Oh:** Maybe because we feel it's necessary in order to get our voices heard, but it's something that has just always been a natural part of what I do and a way of working that is more comfortable for me. It's fun to create new structures and systems or shift structures and systems, and now I'm interweaving artists into the systems that exist here in creative ways. And that is my challenge. And in a way, I feel like that is my creative practice.

**Janani:** That to me is a deeply creative practice to build new kinds of containers and sort of resorting to continuing to grind and tinker in the status quo containers, which especially at places that have long history, are not going to then do something they haven't done already, which is why we need new systems.

**Ellen Oh:** And which is why we have always understood each other.

**Janani:** Yes. (laughs)

**Ellen Oh:** Because you are connecting different fields, and you are living in these in-between spaces and existing. You are doing so much bridging in your work.

**Janani:** Yes.

**Ellen Oh:** I'm wondering how you started doing that and how you approach your practice in that way because you really have to be able to speak multiple languages.

**Janani:** Many years ago, I think almost a decade ago, there was this light bulb that went off for me. And I was tinkering with work that was kind of about science and ideas, particularly about physics that were really exciting to me artistically. And because my undergraduate education had been in both the sciences and humanities, I knew and understood very deeply that science is not some objective closed box... a bag of facts that we then pull out and relate to. But that actually science is an ongoing dynamic and unfinished conversation between practitioners.

So I had this sense that, okay, if I want to make work that is engaging with science in a way that is authentic for me, then I need to be engaging with scientists because these are the practitioners who live and breathe this work every day in a sustained and passionate and in a sense, really loving way. Like the kinds of scientists I work with, I think approach their work from a really, a spirit of generosity. What they're aiming to do is expand human understanding and imagination. And that is actually also what I seek to do. And I didn't have a specific idea of how I could accomplish this.

My artwork itself takes all kinds of different forms but tends to be in the kind of immersive and experiential space. And I like thinking about the process of building something that really envelops an audience member as an iterative research process. You iterate, you prototype, you build, you ask good questions. So I didn't feel scared or daunted by engaging with another research process that felt very natural to me.

As an artist, I was very interested in figuring out, 'Okay, how can I tinker in that space, in the space at the edges of science, where those influences are happening?' and invite ways of asking new questions.

I actually think along this journey of encountering and building relationships, there have been so many key people who are in these roles as producers or dramaturgs or administrators, these other kinds of co-conspirators. And I think, Ellen, you are among them... whose excitement about systems-shifting with me, I think is just as important to making all this stuff possible as the creative vision that myself and my scientist colleagues are coming with.

**Ellen Oh:** So that's the fun of being at Stanford that I have found because it is its own unique ecosystem and there are so many people here doing such amazing work that I'm discovering every day, and I've been here for 12 years.

**Janani:** Right

**Ellen Oh:** And it never gets old because you can always learn more. There's always new people to meet and connect with. And what I've been really excited about lately is the more I've done this interdisciplinary work and people have seen the outcomes, people have seen their colleagues work with artists, more and more people are raising their hands and saying, 'I want an artist. I want to do that kind of work too. I see how that works. Oh, let's try something.' And so yeah, a lot of it is showing people how to do it and the people will come.

**Janani:** Many people have commented to me that it seems like I'm accomplishing things quickly or efficiently and things that they didn't think were necessarily possible in the kinds of work and campus unit connecting all this stuff that I'm aiming to do. And I think I want to continue to emphasize the importance of giving practitioners time to develop competency and relationships in this area. Cause I think part of the reason, actually probably the major reason, that I've seen success in being able to accomplish things with some level of speed or efficiency is having spent almost a decade basically doing cross-disciplinary communication and then particularly in astrophysics, having built enough relationships that many people vouch for me and the kind of practice that I have.

**Janani:** I'm really excited and happy to be encountering Stanford at this moment in my career because I can take everything that I've built up to this point and say, now I want to do it really big. (laughs) Now I want to scale it in conversation with this institution. Now I want to lean into some of my Stanford alumni instincts, which is to do things with audacity and ambition and passion and think about how do they have big, exciting, interesting, rigorous impact. That's the excitement for me, that's the energy I feel in encountering this place right now for me.

**Ellen Oh:** So your long-term collaboration with Natalie resulted in a beautiful book and installation that I've been hearing about for a long time, and I'm so excited that we're bringing it to campus, but can you talk about what this iteration of the installation will look like and who you're excited to work with in making that happen?

**Janani:** Absolutely. So *The Gift* is this work that I co-created with Natalie Gosnell, my colleague, who's a professor of physics at Colorado College, and our colleague Andrew Kircher, who's the Director of Research and Public Humanities at Bard Graduate Center. And we made this work, *The Gift*, that takes up Natalie's research on transfer of material between companion stars and subverts the often quite violent metaphors through which this and other astrophysical phenomena are typically narrated and tries to create a different metaphorical framework around this work. So we called this particular phenomena "the gift."

I'm really moved to do some bridging work also between religion and science, that actually these two things can live and breathe with each other. Feels exciting to me. I think a lot of the work that I do in working with scientists to kind of surface these stories from the edges of their research to me also feels like it engages with many of the same questions as people of faith, as practitioners of religious studies or folks who are priests or pastors.

**Ellen Oh:** I also love that while you came to Stanford through the Denning Visiting Artist program to work on new projects with Electrical Engineering and KAVLI Astrophysics, but yet, it is opening up potentially another phase of The Gift. We thought you would present this work because it is finished and it's something that's presentable on campus. But now with some of the new connections that you've made through the medical humanities, Jacqueline Geneve and Brian Lynn, you've been able to make some connections at the hospitals and embark on something else.

**Janani:** I have nursed this desire for the longest time, for years, for The Gift to be brought into healthcare contexts and us to actually produce proper, rigorous and ambitious at-scale scholarship about this. And I've been really excited about the conversations, these just early conversations that we've had with folks in the medical school and also in the social sciences about setting up a proper study where we examine how The Gift in healthcare settings impacts patients, caregivers, and or clinicians as a work that deals so directly with grief, loss, transition, many of the relevant experiences of human life generally and healthcare in particular.

I think there's a broader goal embedded in that for me, which is that I want every work of art and every work of art-science that I ever labor on to have success and meaning and impact not only within the art world, but also within many other contexts. A lot of human beings simply do not enter contemporary arts contexts. And if we want to make work that reaches people who live life in that way and is making meaning for those people too, then we have to get more creative about how we present and share the work.

**Ellen Oh:** To me, that is the beauty of interdisciplinary practice because it makes it, art, accessible to different audiences and more people, and not only ask new questions and all of that. Where else could you do all of these different things and spark some new... spark a new research study within a hospital except at a research university?

**Janani:** People ask me questions all the time about what my process actually looks like and what a process of these kinds of cross-disciplinary encounters and co-creative practices. And I am excited to do more communication around that so people get a more palpable sense of what those things are, and to have an excuse to spend time

talking with people I really enjoy collaborating with and dreaming and scheming with from different sectors of my life.

I'm also, I think, hoping to explore the curiosities that the people I'm talking to have as well. It's an opportunity to get to know more about my colleagues, some of whom I've known for a very long time, but we get to talk to each other from a different perspective.

**I want to thank Ellen Oh again for coming on as our first guest on Encounters.**

**In our next episode, we'll explore Art as a Meeting Place. I'll be sitting down with a friend, Srinija Srinivasan. Srinija is a visionary and practitioner at the intersection of art commerce and technology.**

**We'll also be bringing you into the public presentation of The Gift at Stanford's Memorial Church.**

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## **CREDITS**

**From Stanford Arts, this is Encounters.**

**Janani Balasubramanian is our host. The show is created, produced and edited by me, Taylor Jones, with additional production support by Edi Dai.**

**Chase Everett is our sound designer and mix engineer. Our theme song and music is composed by Juana Everett.**

**Executive Producers are Anne Shulock and Ellen Oh.**

**Artwork is by Connie Ko.**

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