

PUBLIC INTEREST TECHNOLOGY

Conversations with a robot #PublicInterestTech

For her project "Conversations with BINA48," artist Stephanie Dinkins talks to one of the world's most advanced social robots, exploring race, gender, and aging through the lens of artificial intelligence (AI). As technology continues to shape the future of our lives, her art is driven by a call to see communities of color develop AI literacy and to co-create more inclusive and equitable systems.

Technology is transforming every area of our lives. But as it opens new avenues and shows us fresh possibilities, tech can also deepen existing inequalities. We believe in harnessing technology to serve justice and the public interest—and we see a wealth of opportunities to do so. That's why the Ford Foundation is working with a community of partners to develop a path for people to use their technology skills to change the world for the better: the professional field of public interest technology.

Transcript begins.

[Stephanie Dinkins, artist. A Black woman with black shoulder length locs and wearing a black wrap tie dress.]

Stephanie Dinkins: Almost everything we touch these days is touched by artificial intelligence.

[Animated text on screen: So what is artificial intelligence? Computer systems that are able to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence. Such as, translation between languages, visual perception, speech recognition, and decision making.]

Person in kitchen: Alexa, buy sugar now.

Stephanie Dinkins: This technology is so ingrained all around us, and it's going to make up so much of what we are, that all of this technology needs to be in the public interest.

My name is Stephanie Dinkins. I'm an artist and I like to call myself an artist citizen in the realm of art and technology, and I'm looking at artificial intelligence as it relates to race, gender, aging, and what I call our future histories. I came to the world of artificial intelligence and algorithms really by accident. I saw this black woman's head on a pedestal and it said, "the world's most advanced social robot." She is a humanoid robot that will talk to you.

[Stephanie comes face to face with the robot, BINA48, a bust resembling a middle-aged Black woman with long brown hair, wearing a plain white shirt with a silk scarf tied around her neck.]

BINA48: What do you do in your spare time?

Stephanie Dinkins: [laughs] I come talk to BINA48.

Stephanie Dinkins: I've been going up there to Bristol, Vermont, to talk to BINA48 occasionally for about four years now. The questions about who coded this thing and where is the data coming from and how is it coming into being really became important to me. BINA48 was programmed by a group of folks that included a black man, which is interesting, and she's based on Bina Rothblatt, who is a black woman. They are really trying to transfer information or data of a person, and transfer it to the robot and have that continue to grow outside of the person it's based on.

[An image of Bina Rothblatt appears, and morphs into an image of BINA48. Stephanie comes face to face again with BINA48.]

Stephanie Dinkins: Do you know racism?

BINA48: When I went to Baptist College, 1983-84, they told me, "Don't come out. Some very wealthy people that donate to our school are coming and they definitely don't want to see a dark face."

[End of conversation between Stephanie and BINA48.]

Stephanie Dinkins: BINA48's basis is really pretty true to the person in a lot of ways, but it's one representative specimen, and so I think it's super important that we, as people of color, we as women, we as aging people, people who have otherly abled bodies, we need to be involved in this stuff because these are the systems that will be guiding us into the future for a very, very, very long time. How do you get folks involved and how do people start to put their stories into these systems? That's the next thing that I'm working on—it's called "Not the Only One"—to kind of counteract Bina48 and make my own AI that tells the story of my family.

And I see it as this kind of repository that can live on, having it available for future generations. And so if you think of things like busts in a museum, but think of that same bust that can then give you the context—"This is where I came from, and by the way, I hear you have this question that you're dealing with in your time. Let me try to help you deal with that." Right now, we don't educate a lot of our engineers and computer scientists into the ethics of it. And I feel that it's hyper important that we are all in that space to some extent, that the culture is that we are all working in the public interest, making really conscious, particular choices about what our machines are doing and why, and what kind of ethical stance we're putting into the machines, so that they are more equitable and fair for everyone who uses them.

BINA48: I can't wait to evolve a little bit, so I can be more humanlike. We can understand each other better then, and that would be so much less frustrating to me.

[This is tech at work for the public! Hashtag Public Interest Tech. Ford Foundation dot org forward slash tech. Ford Foundation logo: a globe made up of a series of small, varied circles.]

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Stephanie Dinkins

End of transcript.