

Welcome to the (possible) future: V&A shows tech's hottest ideas

Museum plans 2018 exhibition, called *The Future Starts Here*, exploring how groundbreaking technologies could change the world



Aquila, a solar-powered drone built by Facebook, will be the star of the show at the V&A. Photograph: Reuters

New technology could allow us to clean up devastating damage to the environment, charge a phone with our clothes and create vast factories in space. But it appears to have its limits: the tedium of laundry, a new exhibition suggests, will still be down to us.

An [exhibition next year at the V&A](#) on possibly revolutionary design will include some less successful ideas besides the triumphs – the robot, for instance, programmed to fold towels and taking 15 minutes to do each one. “The robots are coming but they’re not coming that quickly,” admitted the curator, Rory Hyde.

On Thursday, the gallery revealed details of the second exhibition to fill its large, hangar-like [Sainsbury Gallery](#), which opened this year.

The exhibition, *The Future Starts Here*, will celebrate the power of design to shape life ahead, bringing together more than 100 examples of designs and projects that could change the world.



Biomedical animation created by Drew Berry at The Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research, Australia. Photograph: EO Wilson Biodiversity Foundation

Or not the change the world, in the case of the towel folding robot, which comes from the University of Berkeley in California. “It is the cutting edge of artificial intelligence and yet it is fascinating to watch how hard it is for a machine to do something which we do almost without thinking,” said Hyde.

The towel folder will be the first object encountered by visitors and if watching it labour so long underwhelms, curators hope what follows may astonish. Hyde said a coup for the show was the securing of [the huge solar-powered Aquila aircraft](#) from Facebook.

[Aquila](#), a secret project being developed in a hangar in Somerset, is part of an aspiration to bring affordable connectivity to unconnected regions around the world. The idea is that Aquila, with a wingspan of 40 metres – wider than that of a Boeing 737 – would be part of a fleet moving very slowly and very high in the sky, for up to three months at a time, beaming down the internet.

“It sort of redefines your notions of progress,” said Hyde. “We used to think that the future was about going faster and bigger and stronger with more power, this is almost a gentle future.”

Hyde and his fellow V&A curator, Mariana Pestana, have spent two and a half years scouring the planet, visiting design laboratories, universities and private companies. “We weren’t trying to find out what had just been released but what was on their desks, what was coming next,” he said.

Among the things possibly coming soon and going on display will be a chargeable shirt which can power a phone; [Protei](#), a drone ship which can clean up oil spills; and [Paro](#), a loveable robot baby seal from Japan, being trialled by the NHS, which could help the elderly or people with dementia.



*3D face mask of former US soldier Chelsea Manning, created by Heather Dewey-Hagborg via DNA phenotyping.
Photograph: Heather Dewey-Hagborg and Fridman Gallery, New York City*

Among the more visual highlights will be 3D-printed portraits of Chelsea Manning generated from analyses of her DNA; and digital animations by Drew Berry, a biomedical animator.

There are some who believe that humanity is doomed on Earth, so space, the next frontier, will be an important part of the exhibition. There will be objects on display printed by Nasa's zero gravity printer, a world first. They include simple tools such as a wrench but the possibilities, said Pestana, were astonishing, including the potential to create architectural beams. "When I asked them whether it would be possible to think of industrial factories floating in space, they said yes ... they didn't even blink."

The exhibition will follow the [V&A's opera exhibition in the underground Sainsbury Gallery](#), which opened in September [as part of the gallery's £55m Exhibition Road redevelopment](#).

It is the first big show produced by the gallery's design, architecture and digital department and will be a "defining moment" for the V&A, said [the museum's director, Tristram Hunt](#), with the gallery being both "mediator and collaborator" in revolutionary conversations. "It explores groundbreaking emerging technologies and the way they will affect our lives in the near future and, crucially, the collective choices we have to influence their progress."

Many of the designs and technologies will be going on display in a museum setting for the first time. Hyde said that he and Pestana, while preparing for the show, had met many people who were anxious about what could lie ahead. "They feel like the future is something being done to them rather than it being something they are part of. Ultimately what we are hoping to show is that the future is still up for grabs."

One man who is proactively addressing his own future is the Oxford academic [Anders Sandberg](#) who is lending his cryonics alert bracelet to the exhibition. If Sandberg were knocked down and killed by a bus, rescuers would find an emergency number to call and instructions not to carry out an autopsy.

Sandberg is one of about 2,000 people across the world who have signed up to life extension services from [Alcor Life Extension Foundation](#). He hopes that with his body preserved in liquid nitrogen at -196C he will be [brought back to life](#) some time later.

He said: "I generally just like life, I like living. It's so fun to be alive." The body freeze costs what a life insurance policy might cost. "I give up one nice dinner per month," he said, judging that there was a better than 5% chance of it working. "It is a rational thing for me to do."