



The ISCIA Chair welcomes you to Visiting Professor Brian Castellani's

# Social Complexity Retreat

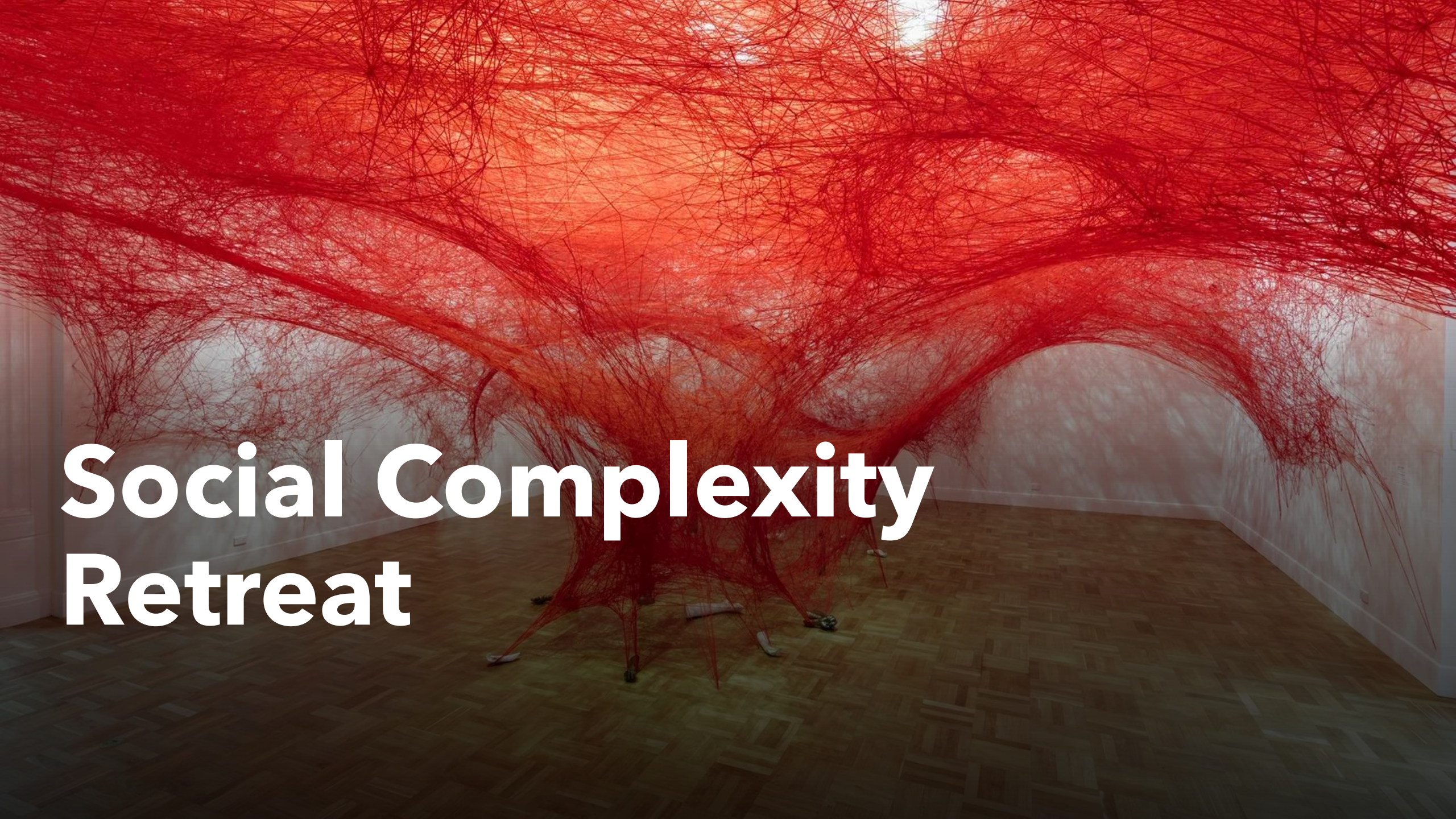


NELSON MANDELA  
UNIVERSITY

ISCIA Identities and Social  
Cohesion in Africa







# **Social Complexity Retreat**





The ISCIA Chair invites Nelson Mandela University faculty of Humanities members and senior postgraduates to join us for a

# Social Complexity Retreat

*With Visiting Professor Brian Castellani*

This is a half-day retreat exploring how the complexity sciences – and, more broadly, a social complexity imagination – can support your own creative, scholarly, or professional practice. Open to faculty and senior postgraduates across all disciplines, this retreat is especially welcoming of those working at the intersection of the arts, philosophy, environmental studies, health, the social sciences, and community-based practice.

Led by ISCIA Visiting Professor Brian Castellani, co-author of *The Atlas of Social Complexity*, the retreat is designed not as a traditional workshop but as a reflective, generative space. Participants will have the opportunity to share and develop their own current projects – from publications and funding proposals to art installations or speculative ideas – while engaging with complexity as both a method and a mode of thinking. The work you do at this retreat is all in service of helping you clarify your own direction and leave the day with a realistic plan for moving your work forward. Artists, philosophers, and theorists are just as central to this conversation as policy researchers, scientists, and those working with communities.

## For the retreat you will need to:

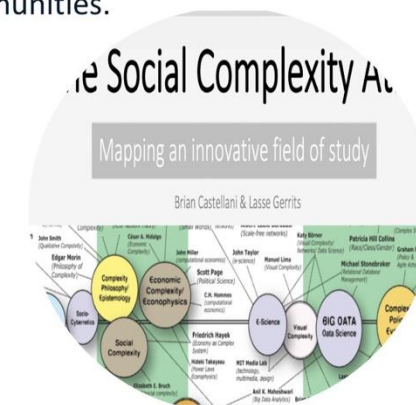
- Do a small amount of compulsory reading (to be supplied) and preparation ahead of time
- Offer a 5-minute presentation of your preparation work
- Take part in “café conversation” style engagements and other activities

**Date:** Wednesday, 17 September 2025

**Time:** 08:30 to 14:30

**Venue:** Drawing Room, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor, Bird Street Gallery, Bird Street Campus

**RSVP:** 01 September 2025 to [Harsheila.Riga@mandela.ac.za](mailto:Harsheila.Riga@mandela.ac.za) (Please note: spaces are limited!)



## Academic Retreats are not workshops or seminars

Academic Retreat	Workshop
Focus on your own work and intellectual growth	Focus on a shared task or deliverable
Time for reading, writing, reflection, and creativity	Time for structured activities and outputs
Minimal presentations; emphasis on dialogue, peer support, creative group activities	Heavier on lectures, training sessions, paper presentations
Encourages slowing down, unplugging, and creating space for deep thinking	Encourages networking, demonstrating your expertise, and skill acquisition
Goal: advance your project and develop ideas in a supportive environment	Goal: produce collective results or learn specific techniques

## The freedom of a Retreat Requires Clear Structure

- Introductions -- 15 minutes
- Exercise A: Drop the backpack -- 5 minutes
- Group introductions -- 45 minutes
- Overview of Complexity -- 20 minutes
- Coffee and Tea Break -- 10 minutes
- Exercise B: Soundtrack to your inquiry -- 30 minutes
- Group overview of key themes -- 45 minutes
- Lunch -- 45 minutes
- Exercise C: Complexity Compass -- 90 minutes
- Closing -- 10 minutes



**check-in**



- **Drop the backpack**



Let's take a moment to arrive.

Imagine you've been carrying a heavy backpack — filled with everything that's been on your mind:

Take a moment to review what is in that backpack — ideas, conversations, doubts, pressures, to-do lists, inboxes, family obligations, it just keeps going.

Now, in your mind's eye... gently set the backpack down. You're not throwing it away — just putting it down. You can pick it back up later, if you need to.

Now take one slow breath in... and a slow breath out.





# **Group introductions**



Participant	Discipline/Role	Key interests	Expectations / "Success means..."
Barbara Kritzinger	Cultural anthropology; eco-psych/ecofeminism	Mythic/eco narratives; holistic systems	New ways to imagine PhD; peers in eco-psych/mythology; concrete next steps.
Shashi Cullinan Cook	Creative research; sustainability transformation	Pluriversality; leverage points; CLA confusion; ethics of engagement	Quiet listening; guidance on politicised community dilemmas; feel less overwhelmed.
Thembelihle Ngece	Student leader; social enterprise	Youth unemployment; policy & partnerships	Practical complexity for micro-level entrepreneurship; bridge research ↔ lived experience.
Tessa McLeod Wattam	Visual arts; SD praxis	Policy-practice contradictions; emotional scaffolding	Clarity on SA/Gqeberha involvement; grounded, supported, clearer goals.
Alida Sandison	Psychology lecturer	Childhood emotional neglect; case work	Complexity angles beyond single-case; publishable designs; next research leg.
Lisa Currin	Counselling psychology lecturer	Broad curiosity; meta-learning	Learn anything new; strategies to avoid rabbit holes and gain traction.
Victoria Flowers	Visual arts; incoming design lecturer	Place/identity; transdisciplinarity in teaching	Classroom applications; collaboration and new ideas.
Taryn Jade	MA Visual Arts	Dereliction/nihilism; theory-art articulation	Language and structures to write complexity with "integrity/aim."
Subeshini Moodley	Video production & film studies	Creative-practice ethics/clearance; applied practice	Aerial view of connections; clarifying ideas/questions.
Alex Pennington	Prospective PhD (ISCIA)	Ethics/arete; writing arts; curiosity re: computation	Sound grasp of anti-silo stance; talk ethics & modelling blind spot.
Sharon Rudman	Linguistics / language studies	Discourse/ideology; aesthetics & cohesion	Decide if/ how to do complexity sans heavy digital; first practical steps.
Glenn Holtzman	Arts & higher-ed leadership	PRSM experience; management/leadership complexity	Actionable innovation for teaching, scholarship, admin & art.
S. Gandidsanwa (SG)	Chemistry PhD; social justice photography	Identity, cohesion, environmental justice	Practical designs for hybrid work; publishing pathways; peer network.
Erin Smith	Research assistant (arts)	Practice-based methods; embodied mindset	A crash course; a lexicon for discussing art as complexity.
Gary Koekemoer	ISCIA postdoc	Wicked problems; biosphere collapse; politics	Handles for grasping complexity; Atlas overview; peers "in the struggle."
Andrea Hurst	Philosophy (SARChI Chair)	Philosophy of complexity; heuristics for practice	Test a "pragmatics" toolkit (heuristics) for training complexity thinking.

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## **Complexity Terms (For 'Yes, and...' Improv Game)**

- Patterns
- Feedback loop
- Connection
- Change
- Growth
- Surprise
- Tipping point
- Adaptation
- Interaction

- Network
- Emergence
- Influence
- Flow
- System
- Stuckness
- Interdependence
- Domino effect
- Small causes, big effects

- Ripple
- Unintended consequences
- Self-organisation
- Diversity
- Shifting boundaries
- Phase shift
- What happens next?



## **Rules of the Game**

***Starting Point: An AI chatbot is elected mayor of Durham***

1. One person starts a story: 'In the year 2045, a change began...'
2. Each person adds to the story starting with: 'Yes, and...'
3. Include at least one complexity term in your sentence.
4. Let the story evolve. Embrace surprise, contradiction, and emergence.
5. End when the group feels the story has 'tipped' into something new.

BRIAN CASTELLANI  
LASSE GERRITS



# THE ATLAS OF SOCIAL COMPLEXITY



L'œil, comme un ballon bizarre se dirige vers L'INFINI.

## Biographical Summary

**Brian Castellani** (PhD, FAcSS) is Professor and Director of the *Durham Research Methods Centre* and *Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing*, Durham University (UK). He is also adjunct professor of psychiatry, Northeastern Ohio Medical University (USA).

**Lasse Gerrits** (Dr.Dr.) is Professor and Academic Director, *Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies*, Erasmus University Rotterdam





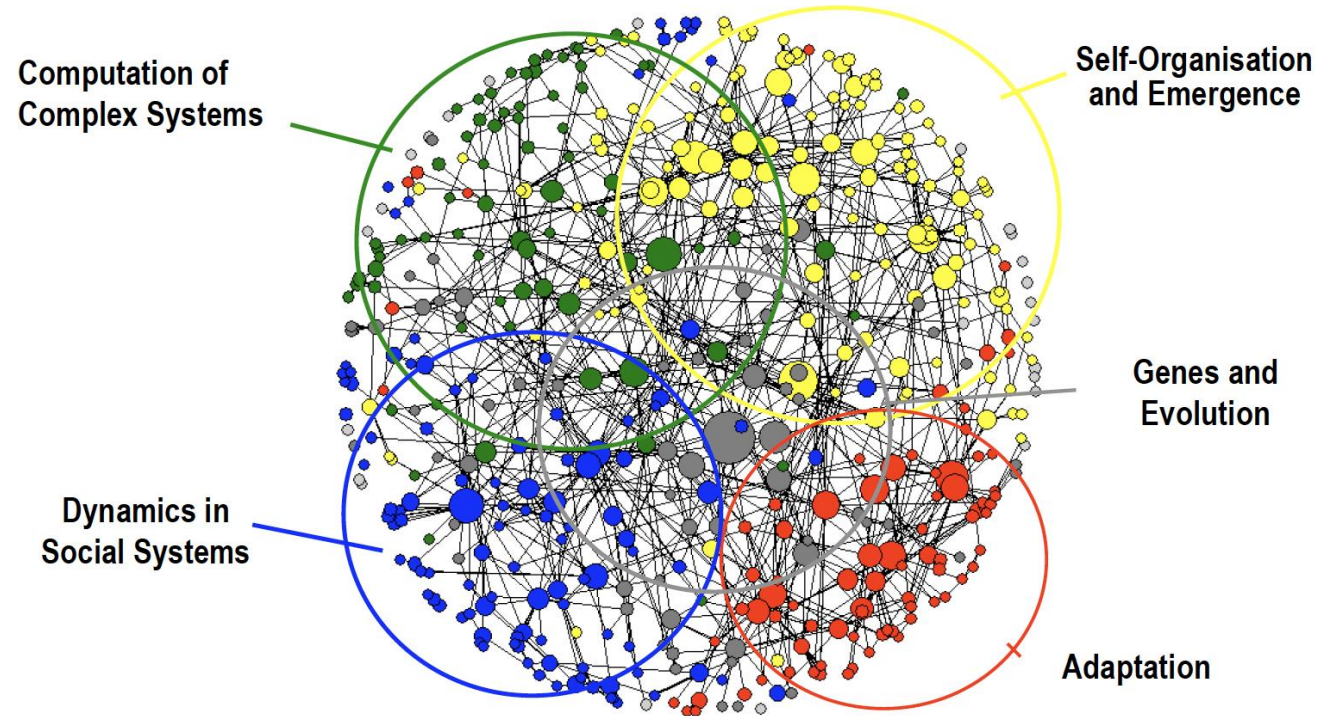


# A bit of history



# THEME 1: History of the Present

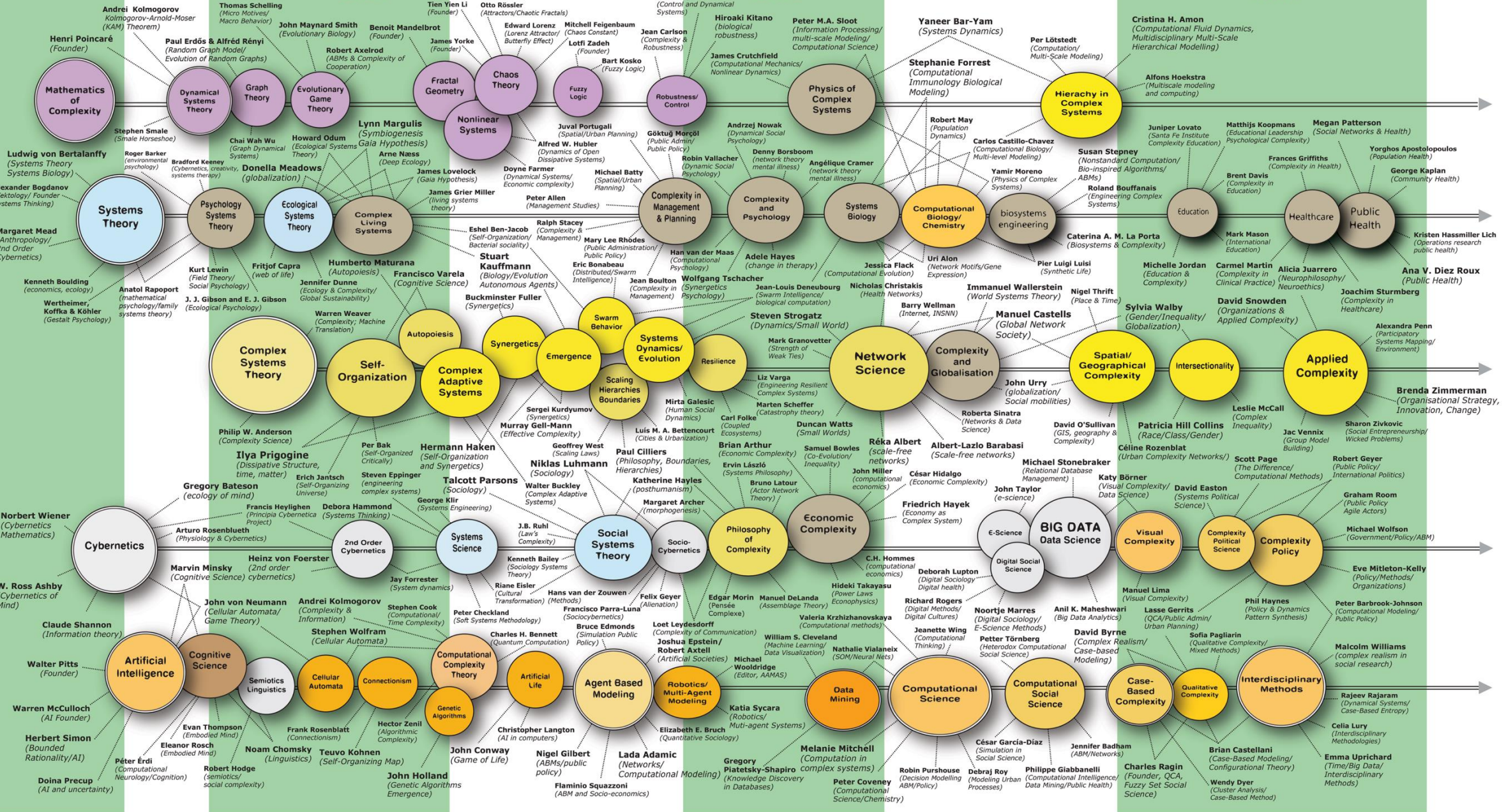
## The Knowledge Map of the SFI Database



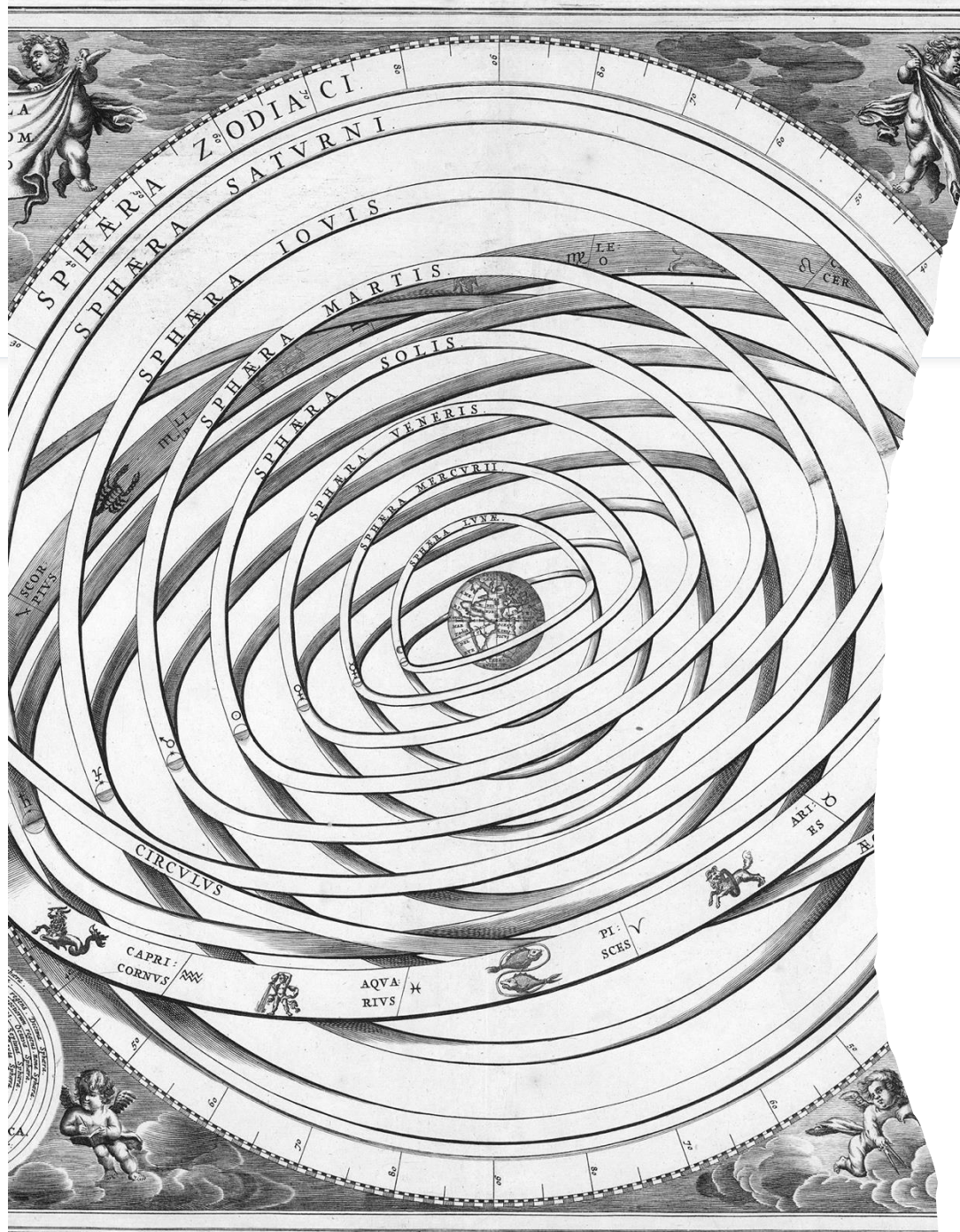
Johanna Bergmann, John Casti  
Torino Meeting, Nov. 11, 2002



1940-1950's 1960's 1970's 1980's 1990's 2000's 2010's 2020's







# Overview of book

- The Atlas of Social Complexity charts the future of the field.
- It is a history of the near future.
- It focuses on the avenues of research with the greatest promise for advancing social complexity as a truly disruptive, transdisciplinary science.
- These advances self-organise around six transdisciplinary themes.
- Together, they constitute a **social science turn** in complexity.



# The social complexity imagination

- **BACK TO THE FUTURE**

- In the spirit of C. Wright Mills, the best way for the study of social complexity to overcome its current limitations and to become truly transdisciplinary is to reembrace a **social complexity imagination**.
  - Imagination 1: Moving beyond the traps
  - Imagination 2. Observing the larger universe
  - Imagination 3. Accepting complexity psychologically
  - Imagination 4. Adopting a critical complexity
- This time, however, the inspiration comes from a different direction: it comes from a direct engagement with the social sciences, practice, policy and the arts, in particular those areas that don't associate themselves with the complexity sciences.
- This is part of what we call the **social science turn in complexity**.

## Soundtrack to Your Inquiry

**Goal:** Use music, movies or literature as metaphor to access creative intuition. Albums, plastic arts (painting) dance.

**Time:** 30 minutes

**How:**

- Prompt: "If your project were a song or genre, what would it be and why?"
- 5 minutes to think
- 25 minutes to share with the group

A black and white photograph showing a massive flock of birds, likely terns, in flight. The birds are seen from above, appearing as dark silhouettes against a light, hazy sky. They are densely packed in some areas, particularly in the upper right, and more sparse in others. In the bottom left corner, there is a dark, circular, textured area that appears to be a shadow or a body of water. The overall scene conveys a sense of intense natural activity and movement.

# Group overview

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## Cross-participant themes

**Transdisciplinarity as identity (and tension):** As a group, you sit between arts, social science, and practice; you want legitimate ways to do transdisciplinary work without getting swallowed by silos.

• **‘How-to,’ not just ‘what-is’:** You repeatedly asked for practical heuristics, methods, and step-by-step ways to do complexity—beyond conceptual admiration.

• **Embodied / psychological acceptance of complexity:** You resonated strongly with the idea of a ‘Complexity Imagination’—feeling overwhelmed, burnout, and the need for mindfulness, emotional scaffolding, and grounded practices to stay with chaos and emergence.

•**Method pluralism with legitimacy anxiety:** You want to mix case studies, practice-based arts, discourse analysis, systems mapping, and (maybe) computation—but you worry about journal norms, ethical clearance, and being ‘allowed’ to do non-orthodox work.

•**Power, place, inequality, and ethics front-and-centre:** You frame complexity as politically situated practice, not an abstract theory exercise—drawing on issues such as youth unemployment, social enterprise, coloured identity, cohesion, leadership, and environmental justice.

•**Computational ambivalence:** Some of you admire Meadows, systems maps, or PRSM; others are put off by diagrams/horrendograms and fear the ‘digital skills’ barrier. Many of you ask if it is possible to do social complexity without heavy computation.

•**Communication challenges:** You mentioned struggling with how to write or speak about complexity (and art) without flattening it, and how to present complex work to decision-makers who want 'simple narratives.'

•**Community, mentoring, and peer-to-peer support:** You want to meet collaborators, compare notes on transdisciplinary careers, and build an ongoing network after the retreat.



## Common methodological / theoretical struggles

- **Bridging theory ↔ practice:** Turning rich complexity concepts into applied research designs, curricula, and community interventions.
- **Legitimacy & publishing:** Making case studies and arts-based/practice-based work publishable under orthodox criteria; securing ethical clearance suited to creative research.
- **Overwhelmed & struggling with methods:** Too many methods; uncertainty about where to start; desire for a concise 'first bite of the elephant.'

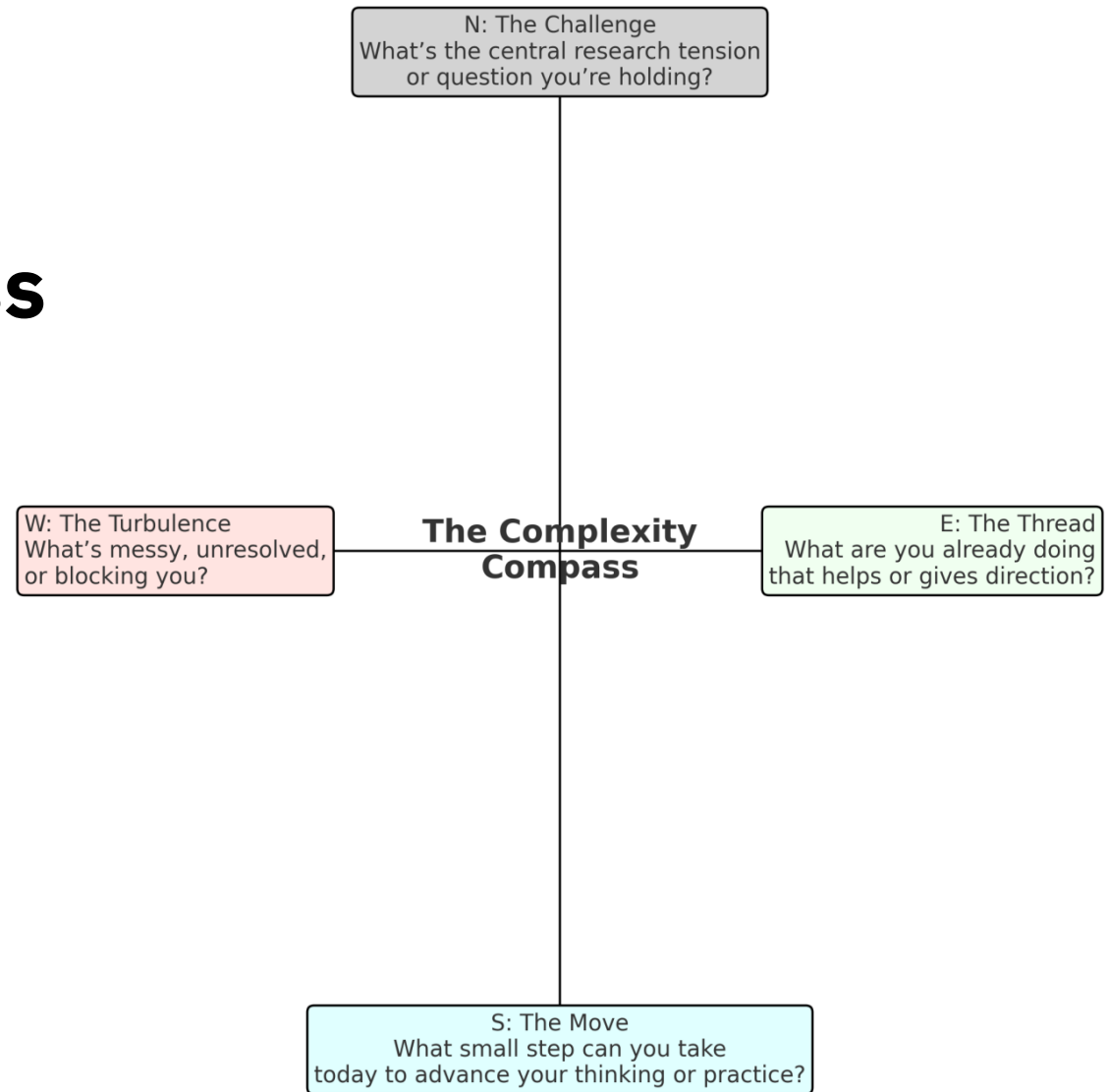
- **Computational threshold:** Unsure whether computation is mandatory; anxiety about skills and the meaning/usefulness of complex visualisations.
- **Researcher positionality:** Working as insider/participant; aligning creative practice with personal values, religion, or politics; navigating ethically compromised funding ecologies.
- **Narrative & translation:** How to communicate complex, non-linear work to stakeholders without reducing it to slogans.



## Retreat Goals - What We Leave With

- Legitimate ways to practice **transdisciplinarity** without being swallowed by silos
- Shared language for talking about **complexity** across disciplines
- **Practical heuristics and methods** for 'how-to', not just 'what-is'
- Time and space to reflect on the **embodied/psychological side** of doing complexity (overwhelm, burnout, mindfulness)
- Tangible **experiments and sketches** from creative exercises to carry forward
- A few agreed **GOAL POSTS AND MILESTONES** for each person's work as a next step

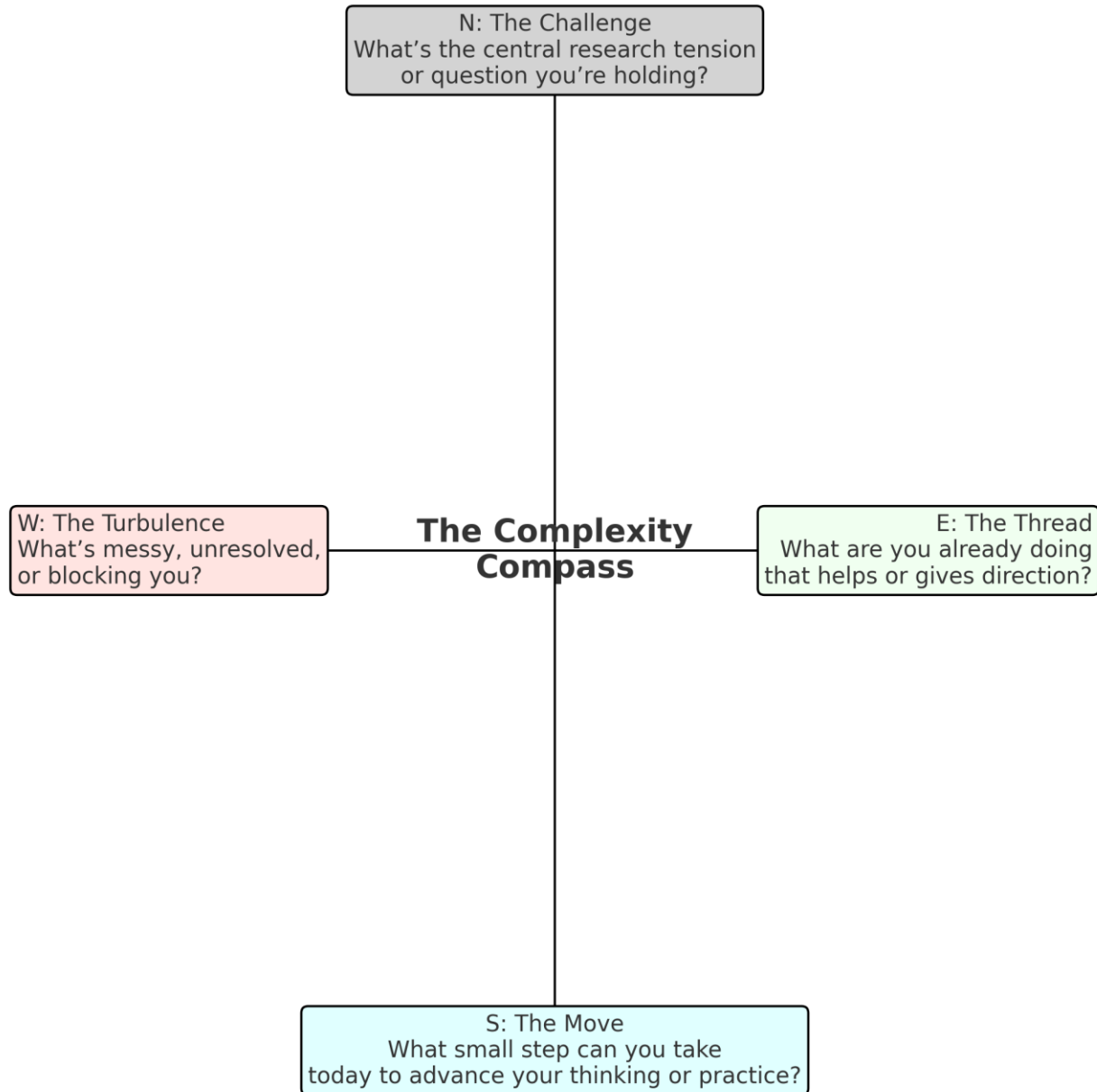
# The Complexity Compass



- The Challenge (North)
- **What question or issue sits at the heart of your current research tension?**
  - What does it mean to do philosophy of complexity in practice?
  - How do I integrate qualitative depth into simulation work?
- The Turbulence (West)
- **What's messy, unresolved, or blocking you?**
  - Internal doubts, disciplinary pressure, lack of methods, silence from collaborators.
  - Where do I publish this stuff?
  - I'm a musician, how do I make an impact in this field given its heavy science focus?



- **The Thread (East)**
- **What are you already doing that helps?**
  - A conversation, reading, writing, reflective habit, emerging idea.
    - I've started referencing complexity in my work.
    - I've been co-writing with someone from another tradition.
- **The Move (South)**
- **What small move can you make today to advance your thinking or practice?**
  - Write a page. Ask a question. Find an ally. Draft a model. Host a conversation. Take a walk and think.
  - Must be small, safe to fail, and complexity-conscious.
    - Ask someone to help sketch an epistemology of hybrid work.
    - Write a paragraph on relational public service.
    - Start a painting or sculpture.



### **Create your Complexity Compass (30 min)**

- Take a half hour to develop your complexity compass

### **Wall of Movement and Group Chat (15 min)**

- Each participant quickly shares their “South” move with the whole group.
- As each person finishes, they add it to a shared ‘Wall of Complexity Commitments.’
- As everyone goes around the room, they may place their SOUTH MOVE next to those of others where they see overlap.



# Breakout session – 20 minutes

- As a group, we now need to organise ourselves based on what people are going to do and how we will all be accountable for our “South” move.
- Does anyone want to have a chat? If so, tell us about what?
- Does anyone want to join that chat?
- Does anyone want to spend their time alone, thinking?
- Anybody want to talk to someone specifically?