

XR Women Global Honors 3 Leading Women in 2026 Awards Ceremony

6th Annual XR Women Awards recognize innovation, trailblazing leadership, and real-world impact at 2026 Augmented World Expo

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At its [6th Annual XR Women Awards](#), held during Augmented World Expo (AWE) in Long Beach, XR Women Global recognized three women whose work is advancing immersive technology — as a field of invention, as a creative industry, and as a force for social good.

Presented in the categories of Innovation, Trailblazer, and Real World Impact, the awards celebrate women making meaningful and lasting contributions to the XR community worldwide.



2026 XR Women Award Winners Wadooah Wali (Trailblazer) and Carolina Cruz-Neira (Innovation)

“

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Dr. Carolina Cruz-Neira, 2026 XR Women Innovation Award Honoree

[Innovation Award: Dr. Carolina Cruz-Neira](#). A pioneer of virtual reality and creator of the CAVE (Cave Automatic Virtual Environment), Cruz-Neira helped invent the room-scale immersive computing that the field still builds on today. Her technologies are used worldwide in scientific research, engineering, and training for NASA, the U.S. military, and national laboratories. Across nearly four decades, she has secured more than \$200 million in research funding, authored over 100 publications, and mentored students now leading at companies such as Google, Microsoft, and Boeing. A member of the National Academy of Engineering, an IEEE Fellow, an inaugural inductee into the AWE XR Hall of Fame, and a 2025 Forbes 50 Over 50 honoree, she serves as Agere Chair Professor

and Director of the Institute for Simulation and Training at the University of Central Florida.

Trailblazer Award: Wadooah Wali. As Co-Founder, Chief Strategy Officer, and Executive Producer of New Canvas, an award-winning XR studio, Wali has shown that an independent studio can compete at the highest level — building partnerships with companies including Meta and Google, and earning a place as one of just thirteen companies selected for Warner Bros. Discovery and Acme Innovation's Collider On The Lot accelerator. She is a producer and executive producer of *When Brooklyn Was Queer*, a first-of-its-kind LGBTQ+-led VR narrative executive produced by Elliot Page and PAGEBOY Productions and selected for the Venice Gap-Financing Market at the Venice International Film Festival. Most recently, New Canvas's *The Obscura Society* earned a 2026 Webby Award nomination.

Real World Impact Award: Nonny de la Peña. Widely credited with establishing the field of immersive journalism, de la Peña reconstructs real events using authentic data, spatial audio, and immersive environments, placing audiences inside stories of food insecurity, conflict, and human crisis. Her experiences, including *Hunger in Los Angeles* and *Project Syria*, have reached audiences at the Sundance Film Festival, the World Economic Forum, and leading museums. A Peabody Award winner and founder of Emblematic Group, she directs Arizona State University's Narrative and Emerging Media program.

"Through their vision, leadership, and unflagging persistence, each of these women brilliantly expands what XR can be," said Dr. Karen Alexander, Co-Founder and President of XR Women Global. "It is a privilege to honor them, and doing so reflects what our community stands for: advancing the field while making room for more people to lead it."

"I am honored to be recognized by XR Women Global," remarked Dr. Carolina Cruz-Neira. "All throughout my career I have been surrounded by female trailblazers, unconventional thinkers, and disruptive innovators. Their courage to challenge assumptions, push boundaries, and redefine what is possible has been my compass. I am beyond grateful to be recognized by this extraordinary community whose determination, fearlessness, and innovation continue to redefine what is possible and shape the future of XR."

This year's ceremony also spotlighted XR Women's student programs. Yuxuan "Linda" He, Ringling College of Art & Design Class of 2026 graduate and former officer of the XR Women Student Chapter at Ringling, spoke about the opportunities she found through XR Women to showcase her work and build connections across the industry.

"XR Women turns connection into community and strengthens the shared leadership shaping the future of XR & AI," said Julie Smithson, Vice President of the XR Women Board of Directors.

Founded in 2020, XR Women Global is a nonprofit network of 1,600 members from over 60 countries. Offering weekly programs in virtual worlds where members gather to share knowledge, showcase projects, and build professional networks, [XR Women hosts a blog](#) and

virtual art museum. XR Women fosters opportunities for students and produces in-person gatherings. Membership is open to anyone who supports the growth of an inclusive XR ecosystem. XR Women welcomes partnerships and collaboration.

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