

FALLING WALLS FOUNDATION

09 SEPTEMBER 2026

FALLING WALLS FOUNDATION ANNOUNCES SCIENCE BREAKTHROUGHS OF THE YEAR 2026 IN 6 CATEGORIES

- Georg Schett of FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg is Science Breakthrough of the Year in the category "Life Sciences" for **Breaking the Wall of Autoimmune Diseases**.
- David Awschalom of the University of Chicago is Science Breakthrough of the Year in the category "Physical Sciences" for **Breaking the Wall of Quantum with Molecules & Proteins**.
- Yu Huang of the University of California, Los Angeles, is Science Breakthrough of the Year in the category "Engineering & Technology" for **Breaking the Wall of Cost-Effective Hydrogen Fuel Cells**.
- Jessica Jewell of Chalmers University of Technology is Science Breakthrough of the Year in the category "Social Sciences & Humanities" for **Breaking the Wall of Apolitical Climate Futures**.
- Isidora Correa of the Catholic University of Portugal is Science Breakthrough of the Year in the category "Art & Science" for **Breaking the Wall of Lithium Recovery with Bacteria**.
- Manali Mukherjee of McMaster University is Science Breakthrough of the Year in the category "Women's Impact Award" for **Breaking the Wall of Long COVID Denial**.

Berlin, Germany, 09 September 2026. The **Falling Walls Foundation** announces the Falling Walls Science Breakthroughs of the Year in the categories Life Sciences, Physical Sciences, Engineering & Technology, Social Sciences & Humanities, Art & Science, and the Women's Impact Award. The groundbreaking projects were selected from 2000 submissions nominated by 474 academic institutions and universities worldwide as the most promising scientific achievements of the year.

Selected by six distinguished international juries, these Falling Walls Science Breakthroughs have one thing in common: Each represents something that was never done before. They promise real impact because their research work opens entirely new possibilities not only within their respective fields, but for the advancement of society.

The Falling Walls Science Breakthroughs of the Year will present their work live on stage on 9 November, the final day of the Falling Walls Science Summit 2026. Breakthrough speakers of the past include 21 Nobel Laureates such as Katalin Karikó, Benjamin List, Alain Aspect and Emmanuelle Charpentier.

The Falling Walls Science Breakthroughs of the Year are:

LIFE SCIENCES



Georg Schett

FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg, DE

Breaking the Wall of Autoimmune Diseases

Georg Schett pioneered a curative approach for autoimmune diseases by creating "living drugs" from the body's own immune cells, known as T-cells. By adapting a cell-based treatment originally developed for cancer, Schett demonstrated that CD19 CAR T-cells can remove the immune cells that drive autoimmune disease. This can effectively reset the immune system, enabling patients to achieve long-lasting remission without ongoing medication.

"This strategy moves beyond symptom control to target the root cause and enables sustained, drug-free remission instead of temporary symptom control and long-term treatment burden." – *Georg Schett*

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Read the full interview with Georg Schett [here](#). | [Official Website](#)

Jury: Michael Schuetz, Queensland University of Technology Brisbane (Jury Chair) | Ricarda Gaentzsch, IQVIA | Ahmet Sinan Yavuz, ZS Discovery | Alicia Kowaltowski, University of Sao Paulo | Amy Bernard, The Kavli Foundation | Christian Hackenberger, Leibniz-Research Institute for Molecular Pharmacology | Jack Szostak, University of Chicago | Nicole Rinehart, Monash University | Ralph Müller, ETH Zurich | Rob Knight, University of California, San Diego | Sirpa Jalkanen, University of Turku | Yik Ying Teo, National University of Singapore

PHYSICAL SCIENCES



David Awschalom
University of Chicago, US

Breaking the Wall of Quantum with Molecules & Proteins

David Awschalom demonstrated for the first time that we can take proteins and turn them into qubits—the basic building blocks of quantum technology—with remarkable stability. Because these proteins can be genetically encoded into living cells, this breakthrough opens a new way to observe and study what is happening inside cells at the quantum level.

“These discoveries may offer health diagnostics at the single-cell level, providing levels of detection and preventative care orders of magnitude beyond what is available today.” – *David Awschalom*

Read the full interview with David Awschalom [here](#). | [Official Website](#)

Jury: Cather Simpson, University of Auckland (Jury Chair) | Halina Rubinsztein-Dunlop, The University of Queensland | Erna Frins, Universidad de la República Uruguay | Tammy Ma, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory | Miho Janvier, European Space Agency | Jian Wei Pan, University of Science and Technology Of China | Suzana Nunes, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology | Stefan Jorda, Wilhelm und Else Heraeus-Stiftung | Joanne Hewett, Stony Brook University | Saw Wai Hla, Ohio University and Argonne National Laboratory | Ricky L. K. Ang, Singapore University of Technology and Design | Jennifer Barton, University of Arizona | Thomas Elsaesser, Max-Born-Institut für Nichtlineare Optik und Kurzzeitspektroskopie

ENGINEERING & TECHNOLOGY



Yu Huang
University of California, Los Angeles, US

Breaking the Wall of Cost-Effective Hydrogen Fuel Cells

Yu Huang developed a way to make hydrogen fuel cells last much longer while using far less platinum, a costly material needed to power them. Rather than altering platinum chemically, Huang protects it structurally through innovations such as as graphene nanopockets and embedded oxide clusters.

“These discoveries overcome the conventional tradeoffs among performance, durability, and precious-metal loading, enabling catalyst lifetimes exceeding 200,000 hours under heavy-duty operating conditions.” – *Yu Huang*

Read the full interview with Yu Huang [here](#). | [Official Website](#)

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Jury: Rokia Raslan, University College London (Jury Chair) | Guihua Yu, The University of Texas at Austin | Lu Fang, Tsinghua University | Gerhard Fettweis, TU Dresden University of Technology | Vasilis Ntziachristos, Technical University Munich; Helmholtz Munich | Hui-Ming Cheng, Shenyang National Laboratory for Materials Science | Cao Thang Dinh, Queen's University | Tamlyn Sasha Naidu, University of Copenhagen | Jinxing Li, Michigan State University | Michael Johanning, Eleqtron | Young-Kee Kim, University Of Chicago | Stéphanie Lacour, Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne (EPFL) | Ka Yee Lee, University of Chicago

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES



Jessica Jewell

Chalmers University of Technology, SE

Breaking the Wall of Apolitical Climate Futures

Using data on how energy technologies have been adopted over time, Jessica Jewell developed a framework that helps explain and predict how low-carbon technologies grow. The framework identifies four distinct phases, providing a way to understand where a technology is in its development and what may help it scale further.

"My research gives decision-makers a clearer picture of which energy transitions are not only techno-economically feasible but also which are most socio-politically feasible too." – Jessica Jewell

Read the full interview with Jessica Jewell [here](#). | [Official Website](#)

Jury: Nicola Fuchs-Schündeln, WZB Social Sciences Center (Jury Chair) | Louise McNally Seifert, Universitat Pompeu Fabra | Alexandros Kentikelenis, Bocconi University | Anu Realo, University Of Warwick | Douglas Gollin, Tufts University | Emily Caspar, Ghent University | Friederike Mengel, University of Essex | Jeremy Adelman, University of Cambridge | Myriam Denov, McGill University | Nora Kottmann, Volkswagen Foundation | Pablo Boczkowski, Northwestern University | Stefan Gosepath, Freie Universität Berlin | Rosita Henry, James Cook University | Yacob Mulugetta, University College London

ART & SCIENCE



Isidora Correa

Catholic University of Portugal, PT

Breaking the Wall of Lithium Recovery with Bacteria

At the intersection of art and science, Isidora Correa's project raises awareness of the impact of lithium extraction on the largely invisible microbial ecologies inhabiting the lagoon systems of Chile's largest salt flat, the Salar de Atacama. Combining sculpture, video, and sound, Correa explores new forms of ecological responsibility and more-than-human coexistence.

"By working with a bacterial strain from the Atacama Desert, the project explores how microbial metabolism can help recover lithium and other critical minerals from discarded lithium-ion batteries through bioleaching, demonstrating how biological processes can contribute to more circular material cycles and planetary health." – Isidora Correa

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Read the full interview with Isidora Correa [here](#). | [Official Website](#)

Jury: Christina Landbrecht, Schering Stiftung (Jury Chair) | Yuko Hasegawa, Tokyo University of the Arts | Carsten Hucho, Paul-Drude Institut Berlin | Daniel Jay, Tufts University | Elaine Chew, Kings College London | Marcus Lobbes, Academy for Theatre and Digitality | Tiange Wang, Ideo | Bettina Kames, Las Art Foundation | Claudia Schnugg, Universe Pavilion Venice | Marco Barotti, Marco Barotti Studio | Jahnavi Phalkey, Science Gallery Bengaluru | Rosa Ferré, Tba21 Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary | Tomás Saraceno, Studio Tomás Saraceno | Honor Harger, Futures Imagined Ltd

WOMEN'S IMPACT AWARD



Manali Mukherjee
McMaster University, CA

Breaking the Wall of Long COVID Denial

Manali Mukherjee investigates autoantibodies and persistent inflammation in Long COVID, generating biological evidence for symptoms too often dismissed, particularly in women, as anxiety rather than illness. By doing so, she closes a critical diagnostic gap and advances equitable, precision-based care.

“The societal impact [of the research] is earlier recognition, fewer missed opportunities for care, and a more equitable pathway for patients whose symptoms have too often been minimised, particularly women. It may also improve use of health-care resources by supporting risk-based follow-up rather than a one-size-fits-all response.” – *Manali Mukherjee*

Read the full interview with Manali Mukherjee [here](#). | [Official Website](#)

Jury: Omneya Attallah, Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport (AASTMT) | Domiziana Francescon, Elsevier Foundation | Ylann Schemm, Elsevier Foundation | Fiona Moejes, The Mawazo Institute | Rana Dajani, Hashemite University

Interviews with the awardees and accreditation for the Falling Walls Science Summit can be requested at press@falling-walls.com.

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Falling Walls Science Summit 2026

6–9 November 2026

Falling Walls Science House, Karl-Marx-Allee 34, 10178 Berlin

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About the Falling Walls Science Summit

Founded in 2009, the Falling Walls Science Summit has become the leading international forum for scientific breakthroughs and interdisciplinary dialogue. Held annually in Berlin from 6–9 November, the Summit commemorates the fall of the Berlin Wall by bringing together global leaders to explore how science and innovation can advance humanity utilizing breakthrough ideas. With its core formats – Falling Walls Pitches, Falling Walls Circle and Falling Walls Science Breakthroughs – the Summit fosters collaboration across academia, industry, politics, and civil society to drive transformative change. The event is organised by the non-profit Falling Walls Foundation. More information: falling-walls.com.

About the Falling Walls Foundation

The Falling Walls Foundation gGmbH is a Berlin-based non-profit organisation dedicated to strengthening science communication and public engagement with research. Its initiatives bring together international experts to develop breakthrough solutions for global challenges. In addition to the Falling Walls Science Summit, the Foundation runs the Berlin Science Week and programmes such as Falling Walls Lab, Falling Walls Engage, Falling Walls Venture and Female Science Talents. Since 2020, the Foundation has also hosted the Creative Bureaucracy Festival, an international platform for innovation in the public sector. The Foundation is supported by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space, the Berlin Senate, the Hannover Re Foundation, the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, PD – Public Sector Advisory, Volkswagen Foundation, and more than 100 additional international philanthropies, academic institutions, companies and NGOs. Learn more: falling-walls.com/foundation.