

What Just Happened? Kyriaki Goni Weaves Counter-Narratives to Colonial Cosmologies and Space Expansionism



Kyriaki Goni is a Greek artist based in Athens. She holds a BA in Fine Arts, an MA in Digital Arts, and a BA and MSc in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Manifesting through websites, drawing, videos, sound, and text, her practice explores the political, affective and environmental aspects of technology. Her installations build alternative ecosystems and shared experiences by connecting the local with the planetary, the fictional with the scientific. Recent solo and group shows include exhibitions at Aksioma, Ars Electronica, Gherdeina Biennale, Onassis Stegi, Shanghai Biennale, and Transmediale. Photo: Thanos Danilof

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Questions:
Alexander Scholz

What just happened? From June 3rd to July 17th, Kyriaki Goni premiered a new multimedia installation, *The Future Light Cone*, at the 2nd Warsaw Biennale. Commissioned especially for the exhibition by Biennale curators Galas-Kosil, Bartosz Frąckowiak, and Paweł Wodziński, Goni stages six large-scale tapestries alongside drawings, video, and a rare metal object that imagine more-than-human cosmologies.

Q: A central theme of the work is the rise of expansionist, colonial rhetoric around (private) space exploration. What does this shift in language say about where power is concentrating, and why do narratives about other worlds matter for how we relate to our own?

A: In July 2020, when NASA astronauts first used a SpaceX craft to get to the International Space Station, the Trump White House's Twitter account cheered Americans as those "who pursued our *Manifest Destiny* into the stars." I remember reading this and cringing: there's a direct line between these words and the westward expansion of white settlers into Indigenous lands in the 19th century that had such dramatic consequences for the native population. Space exploration narratives are rife with problematic language, especially since major tech companies got involved. Words like *colonizing*, *pioneering*, and *frontier* perpetuate the same old patriarchal, anthropocentric imaginaries that brought harm to the planet and so many people. It's a language of conquest and entitlement: after extracting everything we could from the Earth's crust, asteroids and other planets become targets.

Narratives about other worlds and near futures matter because they influence how we perceive, act upon, and engage the present. Space exploration may seem like far-off fiction, but the infrastructures built, resources extracted, and words used in its service are very real and so are the impacts on marginalized people. The SpaceX facilities in South Texas, for example, operate in the middle of a major wildlife habitat and close to several racialized, low-income communities. Residents report pollution, shattered windows due to rocket launches, and falling space debris but are ignored. SpaceX has plans to develop the entire area under the new name 'Starbase' and treats the land as *terra nullius*—a problematic legal term for 'territory without a master'—by erasing local histories and buying people off.

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Q: The installation's centrepiece comprises six ornate tapestries depicting Martian landscapes, as captured by the cameras of NASA's Perseverance rover. Tapestries, of course, have told stories throughout history and, as a medium, invoke questions about materiality, truth, and human labour. What drew you to this form of textile art, and what was the process of its making?

A: It wasn't my intention to produce tapestries, initially; the idea formed during my early research and experimentation. For this work, I spent countless hours looking at images of Martian landscapes on the NASA website, reading the rovers' Twitter feeds, and listening to sound recordings of the Martian wind. This immersion into the landscapes of another world inspired a strong desire to create something tangible and tactile. Textiles are this ancient, intimate, and slow form of telling stories and passing knowledge—for this project, the medium made total sense to me.

In addition to their long history as religious, illustrative, and decorative objects textiles also carry a notion of femininity. Introducing gender into a conversation dominated by privileged white men is my way of invoking ideas of care and resilience, which to me are crucial considerations for any journey or exploration, be it out in space or here on Earth. As Donna Haraway put it: instead of taming that which we seek to understand, we “must learn to converse” with it.

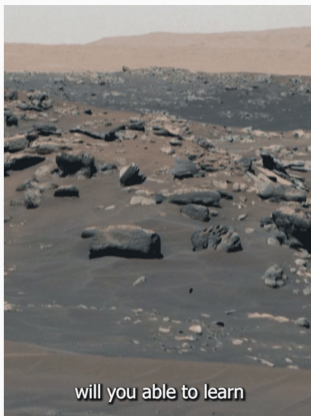


Q: Following traditional tapestry patterns, you framed each landscape with geometric designs, figurative motives, and short texts. What can you tell us about their significance and the relationships woven into these compositions?

A: I designed a basic grid for all six tapestries that, while seemingly decorative, allowed me to contextualize the landscapes with tools, technologies, and narrative fragments related to the rover missions. There are camera calibration patterns, colour calibration tools, and inscriptions from the rovers' hulls and wheels. I also used mission-relevant scientific imagery such as depictions of Mars' moons Phobos and Deimos, as well as visualizations of the different stages of terraforming the red planet, a common trope in conversations around space expansionism.

The top of each tapestry features a text fragment referring to human hubris—our perceived entitlement to objectify everything around us. They are drawn from articles, news headlines, and tweets I read during my research. The texts are echoed visually at the bottom, with imagery directly linked to colonial extraction practices.

Each composition weaves together stories of our past, present, and possible future. At the centre of *Martian Landscape I*, for example, is an image the Curiosity rover captured of its own tracks on Martian soil. Embedded in the frame of camera calibration patterns, is a depiction of a geodesic dome (often used to present ideal settlement structures in games and films), an illustration from Colonel Frank Triplitt's 1895 *Conquering the Wilderness*, and a citation from Donna Haraway's 1988 feminist essay "Situated Knowledges," where she writes about science, vision, and the gaze.



Situated Knowledges

Featuring sounds and images recorded by NASA's Perseverance rover, Kyriaki Goni's video poem *Signal from Mars* (2022, 05:28 min) imagines an alien message. The work draws on Donna Haraway's 1988 essay "Situation Knowledges," in which the American ecofeminist argues that what is known, and how it is known, reflects the situation and perspective of the knower (historically male, white, heterosexual, human). Goni removes the bias built into the rover instruments and, instead, gives voice to Mars' landscape, its rocks, and ancient ocean to engage future human visitors—us—in conversation. "Are you coming to tame?" the red planet asks, wary of our intentions. "Are you coming in peace?"

Q: The tapestries are presented together with a video poem (featuring imagery and sound recordings from Mars' surface), a series of crude diagrammatic drawings, and a suspended Tungsten cube (a rare metal used in rocket nozzles that crypto enthusiasts are weirdly enamoured with). How do these pieces figure into the larger narrative of the work?

A: In my installations, I craft larger narratives from smaller parts or perspectives, if you will. The viewer is invited to follow the non-linear narrative threads and put the pieces together. With *The Future Light Cone*, it felt like the Martian wind and landscapes, the rovers, the rare metal, and myself were collaborating in weaving the stories presented in this installation. The video poem, for example, draws on a signal captured by the Perseverance rover, supposedly transmitted by the Martian landscape and wind. In the piece, landscape and wind become protagonists addressing future human visitors. They share the ancient history of the planet's waters and sediments, and ask about our intentions. The 12 drawings are a collection of notes, feelings, thoughts, and facts that I gathered while making this work. The Tungsten cube serves as a tangible sample of the precious resources mined not only for space exploration, but seemingly immaterial innovations from data clouds to cryptocurrencies. The cube hangs from the ceiling, to be touched and lifted by the viewer, as a reminder that our stories are intertwined with geological processes, and that there's a weight to everything we—as a species—do.

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Q: In astrophysics, the 'future light cone' defines the unfolding possibility spaces, i.e. the region of spacetime that is theoretically accessible to us. In referencing it, your work suggests an inflection point: Rather than perpetuating anthropocentric ideologies, what writings, philosophies, and knowledge systems should we look for guidance as humanity ventures into space?

A: I became interested in the 'future light cone' because it is a popular reference in long-termism, an ideology embraced (and funded) by tech billionaires including the main players in the space race. Long-termism celebrates 'space expansionism' and emphasizes the need to 'colonize our future light cone' in order to 'escape the existential risks on Earth.' According to its proponents, humanity's future light cone contains infinite exploitable resources just waiting to be harnessed. They argue: don't worry about the destruction of this planet; there are other worlds out there for us to mine.

By citing the 'future light cone,' I'm drawing attention to the need to shift focus back to the here and now. Instead of perpetuating anthropocentric practices, and exporting them to other worlds, we should, perhaps, tune into Indigenous and deeply local knowledge systems that have a tradition of acknowledging, respecting, and caring for human and non-human life. For example, traditional fire management techniques from forest communities might teach us valuable lessons as weather conditions worsen and wildfires, once again, rage across the globe.

The Future Light Cone



The Future Light Cone
(2022), Warsaw Biennale
installation view



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installation view

What Just Happened?

In this serial interview format, HOLO checks in with artists, designers, curators, and researchers to get the lowdown on a timely topic—be it a new project, exhibition, or current event that 'just happened.'

What else 'just happened?'

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Alexander Scholz

Alex is a Berlin-based writer, artistic director, and cultural worker. As the founder and creative director of HOLO, he helps produce and disseminate knowledge on disciplinary interstices, artistic research, and cultural transformations in the digital age. Over the years, he curated exhibitions, conferences, and educational programmes for organizations and festivals including A.C.C. (KR), Mapping (CH), MUTEK (CA), and NODE Forum for Digital Arts (DE).