



TANK x GAIA: Kyriaki Goni



Kyriaki Goni's film *The Mountain Islands Shall Mourn us Eternally* (2022), the second chapter in Goni's *Data Garden* series, imagines how, in a world stripped of its natural resources and corrupted by surveillance capitalism, plants may be used as a means of storage, operating outside of humanist paradigms of communication. Ahead of the screening of *The mountain islands shall mourn us eternally (Dolomites Data Garden)* (2022) and *A way of resisting (Athens Data Garden)* (2020) at *As Above, So Below*, a two-day programme hosted by the Science Gallery celebrating Gaia Theory and the life of biologist Lynn Margulis, TANK spoke to Goni about fighting extractive practices and the need for collaboration within process.

TANK How did your ideas come together, all at once or over a longer period of time, and what – if any – one work or text was key? When did you first come to research alternative data distribution networks?

Kyriaki Goni To start with your last question, the first work on these topics was *The Aegean Datahaven A cooperative platform in the Archipelago* in 2017, where a fictional cooperative, founded in 2092, hosts a series of sustainable safe data centres on some Aegean islands. After an extensive period of touristic exploitation, the multicultural communities on the islands seek alternatives to digital imperialism and control. In 2018 I started working on *Networks of Trust*, which is an ongoing installation accompanied by a series of activations. Drawing on the various networks in the Mediterranean Sea, and on palaeontology, archaeology, and anthropology, I created an offline network running on the IPFS protocol. On the nomadic nodes, the audience uploads stories on the possible futures in their respective areas regarding population movements, climate crisis and technological advancement. The *Data Garden* series was initiated in 2020 with the installation of *A way of resisting, Athens Data Garden* (2020).

The ideas evolve over a long period of time. I wouldn't mention one text or work as key to the development of the work but rather ideas, dreams, unconscious thoughts, feelings. *Data Garden* started actually from a personal experience. In 2018 my beloved grandfather passed away. He was a person of rare integrity and ethos, and one of the few people I have seen talking to and taking care of plants and animals as if they are friends. It was then that I first thought, what if I could store his poems, photos or videos of him in a plant instead of a disk or a cloud? While exploring this possibility, the work looks also into tech monopolies, data ownership, privacy. Part of the *Athens Data Garden* installation is actually an excerpt of one of his poems dedicated to me. I have followed the encoding scheme manually in order to transfer the verse into different systems to render it ready to be stored in plant DNA and I have produced a 10m long print on textile. This manual encoding process was long and tiring but it served both as a meditation on loss and connection and on the materiality of memory, digital or otherwise.

The second installation in this series, *The mountain islands shall mourn us eternally, Dolomites Data Garden* was commissioned by Gherdeina Biennale 8 and curators Lucia Pietroiusti and Filipa Ramos in 2022 and was the result of my research trip and interaction with scientists in the area of the Dolomites. The local geology and the species' upward migration due to rising temperatures currently observed in the area were the inspiration for this installation. In the video, a hybrid plant of two indigenous plants presents the situation to the humans. Both installations were presented as



between life, the cosmos, and technology, at Translating Movement curated by Sarah Hether and Inga Hether.

TANK The point of view in the video is the Data Garden - how did you make the decision to speak with a plant's voice?

KG In *Athens Data Garden*, the voice-over features my own voice, while I narrate the three meetings I have with the Athenian Data Garden community. In the *Dolomites Data Garden*, I wanted the narrator to be a non-human entity, a carrier of deep past knowledge and experience. When I was in the area for a research trip, I felt that I was listening to the stories carried in the huge rocks, so I decided to let them speak through the plants in a way. This is not the first time I have done this. In the *Networks of Trust* installation, the *Narrative Poem about the Origins of Networks of Trust* is transmitted through an assembly of fossil remains of a dwarf elephant and an artificial intelligence system. I did indeed encounter the fossil remains of the dwarf elephant on the island of Tilos, while I was hiking in 2018, where also the first nomadic node was activated.

TANK Two years separate the initial iteration, *Athens Data Garden*, from the second film in the series, *Dolomites Data Garden*. A lot changed between 2020 and 2022. How did this impact the work you were doing?

KG I think the most important change was the absolute realisation of the interdependence and the fragility of our systems that came with the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it painfully obvious that our lives are entwined. The impact of technology on the environment as well as the importance of understanding our connection to the deep past and present ecosystems are to be found in previous works of mine already, but in this specific work, the environment and the planetary ecosystem become the epicentre of the narration. The fragility as well as the anxiety of a rapidly escalating climate crisis I think are reflected in this work. Maybe a more intense example would be a video I created during the pandemic with the title *The Portal or Let's stand still for the whales* (2020), currently on view at the National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST) in Athens, where one can very clearly understand the impact this period had on me.

TANK The video uses the language of the techno sphere - how did 3D rendering and CGI contribute to your artistic process?

KG The media I use in each installation is dictated by the narrative itself. In this case, the narrative needed a video simulation in order to present on the one hand a part of a deep time evolution and on the other hand the prediction of the upward movement of plant species caused by the climbing temperatures. I wanted to use this aesthetics of weather prediction models, something that could make loose connections to the digital twin of Earth, earth 2; in this case, the digital twin of the Dolomites. The medium of 3D and computer graphics can support the different temporalities that are introduced in the video work, the deep past that evolves into a near future scenario. The corals slowly accumulated to build the islands that then become mountains, and then the upward species migration of the plants all presented on the orbiting model of the Dolomites, and more specifically of the Fermeda mountains. At the same time, these media were perfect for designing a hybrid plant combining *Ortiseia leonardi*, a conifer fossil 260 million years old and *Saxifraga depressa*, a contemporary endemic plant to be found in altitudes above 2000. The plant was also created in the physical space as a wooden sculpture with both material and craftsmanship sourced in the area of the Dolomites, and more specifically in Ortisei.

TANK In the fictional Data garden, secret techno-shamanistic communities store their collective myths within ancient indigenous plants. How does this relationship differ from usual human extractivist practices?

KG It is an act of imagination that challenges the norms and perception of digital technology and the only way we have come to experience it is through monopolies and extractivist practices. It is not a proposal of a solution but rather an exploration of ways to unlearn the imperialisms performed by digital technologies, and to imagine scenarios that could preexist. Having said that, the researchers and scholars I have been in conversation for the work (and some of them are interviewed as part of the installation) are quite certain that the impact of such a practice would be much more sustainable and respectful to nature compared with the one we have now - Mel Hogan says in the interview for example that the whole internet could actually be hosted in plants fitting in a car trunk. I also tend to approach this fictional practice in a more poetic or symbolic way. Sharing memory with the plants, these entities who already host the memory of the planet in their DNA, would change our perception of digital memory, of interspecies communication. I am not sure where this broader conversation with DNA (organic or non) storage will lead, but at least in the installation I want to play, challenge and push the boundaries of our thinking on these topics.

TANK In casting these plants as messengers, both from the future and deep time, did you look to human mythic examples of oracles or seers?



presence of the world that includes us.

TANK How does the video relate to Gaia Theory, and the legacy of Lynn Margulis?

KG The narrative in *The mountain islands shall mourn us eternally* brings to the fore the geological and biological processes that are interdependent and interlinked with each other. It presents different interacting ecosystems that survive because they collaborate, because they are part of a huge planetary ecosystem where symbiosis is the major driver of and the main reason for evolutionary change. At some point you listen to the plant say "Under the eternal sun we are part of the primordial kinship among all beings", and then a bit later, "You see, the urge to survive and thrive collectively, gave birth to these ancient atolls." Although the connection wasn't done on purpose, it is there and it was actually brought to the surface by Sarah Shin, who saw the video at the Gherdeina Biennale.

TANK While this work deals with serious tenets (surveillance capitalism, the Anthropocene), it also conjures a feeling of intense hope for interspecies care and solidarity. Are there any real-world instances of this plant-to-human nature culture, historical or contemporary, that you have come across?

KG There are indigenous traditions that view the world as a web of relationships that include humans. The notion of personhood emerges often in some of these traditions. Personhood was also the topic of the 8th Gherdeina Biennale I mentioned before. I haven't come across any real-world instances of this plant-to-human nature culture that I remember right now, but I am certain that there are. Lately, I have read about river-to-human relationships, which extend from historical to contemporary. Worldviews that bring together rivers, people and their ancestors, but also extend the river to its spiritual counterpart in the sky. Mapuche culture in Chile for example where rivers, lakes, and wetlands are experienced and approached as sacred places inhabited by a great diversity of not just animals and plants, but also spirits. This interspecies relationship based on care and solidarity is the indigenous view of rivers that already offers an innovative way of revisiting and informing the legal status and protection of bodies of water. Hopefully, this is something that will be embraced worldwide soon. ☺

As Above, So Below is curated by Ignota's Sarah Shin in collaboration with Gaia Art Foundation and Science Gallery London to coincide with the publication of *Gaia and Philosophy* by Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan (Ignota, 2023).

Photo taken from *Data Garden*, solo show at the Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds Art University, 2023, by Giles Lister. [Click here](#) for further information on the artist.

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