Kyriaki Goni, 'The mountain-islands shall mourn us eternally', CGI video essay, simulation 00:10:42, AI voice over.

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Kyriaki Goni: Data Garden

Leeds Arts University, Leeds
by Alasdair Milne

Kyriaki Goni, 'The mountain-islands shall mourn us eternally', CGI video essay, simulation 00:10:42, AI voice over.

Every garden is episodic, shaped by its local environs alongside the will of human stewards. A different plot of ground might yield different results, even with the same seed and planting scheme. Climatic patterns, weather, soil composition and neighbouring organisms influence different iterations whenever a seed is planted in a new place, or at a new time. Despite this, some information in that seed will remain semi-stable, evolving gradually through mutation and resulting in the colour of a flower or the fruit of a squash.

In *Data Garden* at Blenheim Walk Gallery, artist Kyriaki Goni constructs two such episodic gardens. Amongst various media and themes, the core subject matter is fictional genomics. Goni creates a fictional proposition for

a world in which plants have been genetically engineered to store data within their DNA, a technology already tested in our world. These are not just storage artefacts but self-perpetuating data carriers that reproduce themselves and their encoded information via the plant's life cycle. It is into these helictical strands that several stories are encoded.

The exhibition is composed of multiple works in video, sound and print that can be pieced together to form a narrative. Two installations explore two different data gardens, positioned across from each other on opposite walls. The video in the first installation titled 'The mountain islands shall mourn us eternally (Dolomites Data Garden)' (2022), appears as if decoded from one of the plants. The plant speaks, as a representative of its species, of a mountain community in northeastern Italy, with an automated reader voicing a postanthropic manifesto for human-biome relationships. This synthetic voice describes plants as 'the oldest and most resilient storage unit of them all'. The voice hints at genetic intervention in the plant genome as a clandestine activity perhaps practised by a premodern community, with the technique closely guarded by its contemporary inheritors. The video features a three-dimensional rendering of the plant itself, which is fabricated as a painted wooden sculpture directly adjacent to the screen. Vitrined under glass like an archival specimen, this is a static exemplar that can be examined closely.
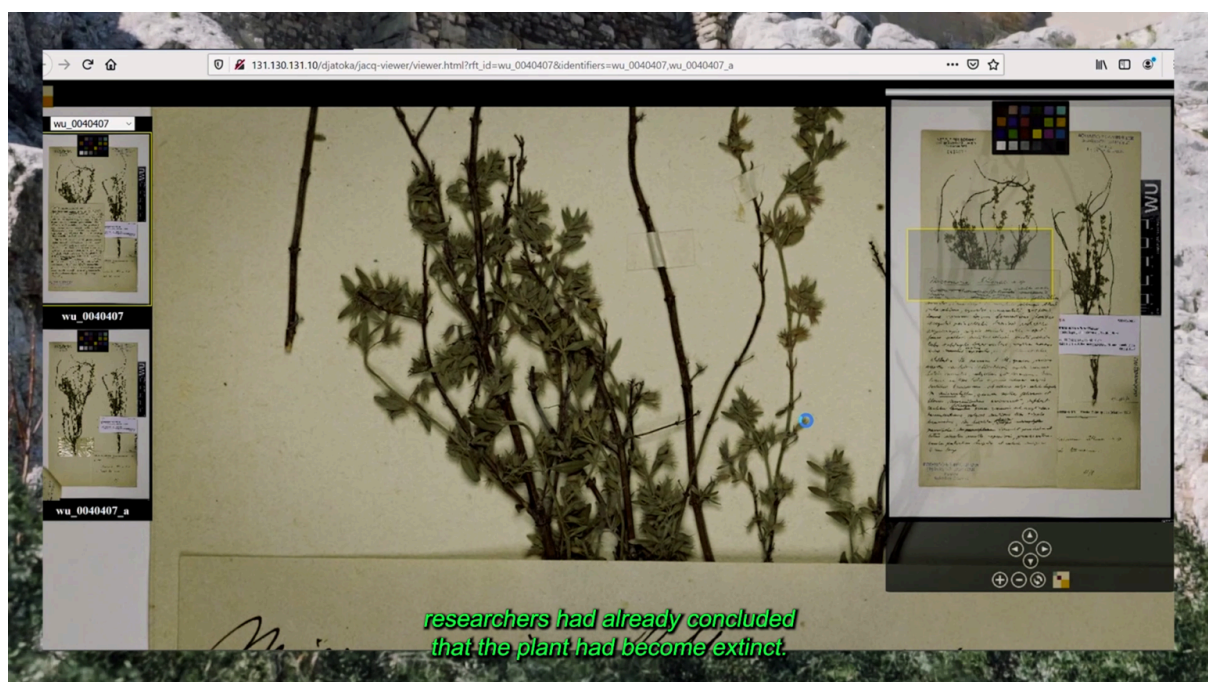
Kyriaki Goni, 'A way of resisting', video essay, 00:11:33.

In the second installation 'A way of resisting (Athens Data Garden)' (2020), an unnamed protagonist discovers a mysterious symbol beneath the Acropolis in Athens. After investigating online, it turns out to be a code of communication for a secretive shadow community who guard all knowledge of its existence. The group slowly bring the narrator into the fold to divulge the tale of the edited plant. As the story unfolds, their account feels

increasingly mythical, immersing the viewer in Goni's fictional world. The narrator's delivery drifts in and out of coherence as their research leads them deeper into the esoteric realm. Although the narrative seems initially beyond belief, Goni's works operate together across the gallery, enriching the overarching fiction for the viewer.

In the centre of the exhibition, between the two videos, is a plywood arch encasing a polyphonic sound installation. Printed visual works complete the wraparound adornment of this epicentral sonic arch. Through each work, or artefact, it appears that Goni is trying to build a case for this uncanny mythos. Perhaps strangest is a drawing presented as a cypher for translating from English and Greek into binary code and onward to the A-C-G-T code of DNA. The diagrammatic appearance of this drawing suggests it is a functional key to be referenced during encoding.

Kyriaki Goni, Installation view of Data Garden, (2022). Photography by Jules Lister.

In our world, plants already hold data. They carry encoded information enfolded into twisted genetic helixes, packaged up and exported in their seed. When the seed drops it is folded into the soil. When the soil conditions are right the seed germinates, replicating its genetic material according to its internal data. Environmental conditions will influence its growth, but when this plant once more produces new seed, that data is perpetuated and thrust forward into some unknown future. Each time, this data is recombined through the reproduction process, remixing genomic data from across a new generation's ancestors.

Gardens are not just landscaped territories but are repositories for seeds, autonomous plots that demand respect if we are to expect their reciprocal

support of our crops. The seed stores and reproduces data, but it needs the garden as a substrate to perpetuate itself. At the end of the exhibition, four panelled screens each show an interview with a different expert in the field of genomics or plant studies, in which they provide their own assessments of Goni's proposal. This component of the exhibition imports the core idea from fiction back into our reality, and although this disrupts the narrative, it is compelling that Goni is willing to submit her proposal to the scrutiny of scientific experts.

With *Data Garden* Goni proposes an imagined counter-narrative to our real and damaging reliance on server farms for data storage. This power-hungry infrastructure is where our non-local data is stored. This vision is not presented as a design proposal or schematic but is encased, like a seed head, in a fictional world. Presenting an idea in this way shows the viewer what such a technology might look like, whilst drawing attention to infrastructures that exist below the surface and out of sight. Goni's alt-narrative that such technical knowledge might be held by someone other than the most powerful actors diverges from the assumptions made about technological development in a period of conglomerate monopolisation. *Data Garden* accelerates the proximity that natural entities hold to algorithmic systems. It goes beyond an acknowledgement of interdependence between the organic and the technological to speculate a specific hypothetical alternative.

Data Garden *curated by Dr Marianna Tsionki continues at Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds Arts University, until 1 April 2023.*

This review is supported by Leeds Arts University.

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