



Kyriaki Goni – interview: ‘For me, technology is an existential discussion’

## **Kyriaki Goni – interview: ‘For me, technology is an existential discussion’**

The Greek artist discusses the interplay of technology with humans and nature that underpins her work, the influence of philosophy, botany and geology, and how she weaves these together with analogue and digital art to create powerful multimedia installations



*Kyriaki Goni. Photo: Jules Lister.*

by VERONICA SIMPSON

My first encounter with the work of Kyriaki Goni (b1982, Athens) was at the 2022 [Biennale Gherdëina](#), an art festival in the Dolomite region, which last year explored issues of personhood across all life forms, animal, vegetable and mineral, plus transhumance - how the relationship between animals and

plants shapes landscapes over time. I was profoundly moved by Goni's installation, *The Mountain-Islands Shall Mourn Us Eternally* (Data Garden Dolomites) (2022).



*Kyriaki Goni, The Mountain-Islands Shall Mourn Us Eternally (Data Garden Dolomites), 2022. Video still. © Kyriaki Goni.*

From the darkened side-room of the gallery in Ortisei in which the main piece, a CGI animation, was situated, the calm “voice” of a hybrid plant, in the role of oracle, emerged. Aided by drawings, graphs and simulations, it related the slow and inevitable retreat of plant life higher and higher up the mountain slopes, because of global warming, with the ultimate destination being extinction. This is a botanical fact – and the Dolomites has its own rare species, *Saxifraga depressa*, that can now be found only near the top of its vertiginous rocky outcrops. But in the animation, Goni blends these facts with powerful but plausible fiction, the story of secret “technoshamanic interspecies communities”, preserving their digital memories in plant DNA.



*Kyriaki Goni, Data Garden, exhibition view, Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds Art Univerisity, 2023. Photo: Jules Lister.*

This work and an Athens-inspired iteration of 2020 are now on show at Leeds Arts University's Blenheim Walk Gallery, in Goni's first solo UK show. Speaking with her in 2022, high in the Dolomites, it became clear that she is one of those rare artists for whom technology is a central theme and tool but – unlike those techno-centric artists who prioritise digital dazzle over content – she foregrounds technology's power for seduction and destruction through a layering of fact and fiction, inspired storytelling and a compelling mix of analogue and digital media.



*Kyriaki Goni, The Future Light Cone, 2022. Installation view, Warsaw Biennale 2022. © Kyriaki Goni. Photo: Loukia Goni, courtesy of the artist.*

She has been honing her technically and scientifically informed craft since 2015, but over the past year, the demand for her installations has multiplied. When we spoke last May, two solo shows, *Networks of Trust* at SixtyEight Art Institute in Copenhagen and *Not Allowed for Algorithmic Audiences* at Kunstverein Ost in Berlin, were about to finish, while *The Future Light Cone* was due to begin the following month at the Warsaw Biennale. Via large tapestries featuring Martian landscapes, *The Future Light Cone* explores space exploration, language, landscape and extractivism – revealing that the language of current interplanetary exploration is uncannily similar to that of past colonial exploitation.

Studio International spoke to Goni in person in Gherdëina and by Zoom before the opening of her UK show.

**Veronica Simpson:** There is such an interesting fusion of disciplines in your work, from philosophy to botany as well as fine art and digital technology. What is your background?

**Kyriaki Goni:** I'm a trained painter, but I have a master's in digital art. Before that, I studied social and cultural anthropology. I studied in Greece and at Leiden University in the Netherlands. I suppose these also informed my artistic practice ... Most of the time, it's research-based work that eventually evolves into multimedia installations where I work with every medium that serves the narrative and the story I want to share. But the focus is always

technology - society, technology, nature. I am always interested in the ways that technology – for example, AI, digital networks, the internet – change our perception of ourselves, of the other, the otherness of nature. For me, technology is an existential discussion.

**VS:** Your installation at the Biennale Gherdëina incorporated a deep exploration of the geology of the area, as well as the botany.

**KG:** First, it was a simulation of a near future, based on the scientific discussions that are happening now on plant species migration, how they are moving slowly upwards to escape higher temperatures. And the story serves to make a connection with the deep past of this area, which I was amazed to learn about. There was a tropical archipelago there, and the construction of the Dolomite mountains came from different organisms that, because they wanted to survive, came together and built the reefs to reach the sunlight. For me, it was a history of survival. It was very important to make the connection with all these stories: this deep past and this near future possible destruction is transmitted through this simulation, through the hybrid plant that shares an oracle-like narrative. This hybrid plant is again an assemblage of the deep past and the present future in a way, because it's a fictional assemblage of a plant that was in the area around the period of the tropical seas, called *Ortiseia leonardi*, which I saw as a fossil at the museum in Gherdëina. And at the same time, there is this tiny plant called *Saxifraga depressa*, and the reason I included it in the narrative is the fact that it's growing at higher and higher altitudes already and it's rare to find.



*Kyriaki Goni, Data Garden, exhibition view, Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds Art Univerisity, 2023. Photo: Jules Lister.*

**VS: The work creates this bedrock of understanding about extinction narratives, and over that you layer specific plant narratives and futuristic speculations.**

**KG:** Which are not so far away. Maybe the most futuristic bit – I don't use the word "speculation", I use "fictional" – is this Data Garden bit. It's from a work I did in 2020, called Data Garden, commissioned by the Onassis Foundation and presented as a solo show at the Onassis Cultural Centre in Athens in September 2020. There, I was discussing two major things: climate crisis and the connection between the data economy and surveillance capitalism with climate crisis. But at the same time, I was discussing surveillance and biometric surveillance which, after Covid, of course, became worse. In Data Garden, I invented this story about a hidden, secret community in Athens, which decided to withdraw all the digital information from the big tech monopolies and store it in the DNA of a specific tiny plant that was endemic on Acropolis Hill. This story was partly fictional, partly factual.

**VS: Because that science is happening?**

**KG:** Yes, this is happening. I found the people that are doing this. I am fond of bringing together scientific facts and fictional stories to make something that allows me to share my hopes or fears for the near future.



*Kyriaki Goni, Data Garden, exhibition view, Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds Art Univerisity, 2023. Photo: Jules Lister.*

**VS: One of the most compelling aspects of the Dolomites Data Garden work is the voice you use for the plant/oracle. There seems to be compassion and empathy in that voice in a way that I find surprising for AI.**

**KG:** I would disagree. Now I am sure that they make it so you cannot tell the difference. In 2021, I made a work on voice interfaces and digital assistants. These algorithms are now so well trained that it's quite difficult for a human to know whether she is talking to a bot. This work is called Not Allowed for Algorithmic Audiences. It was commissioned by Deutsche Telekom and Ars Electronica. And the title references that, right now, there is a huge audience online which is mainly algorithms. YouTube videos are harvested to train algorithms so they can really understand if I'm sobbing or laughing, and accordingly suggest things, for advertising.



02:34

*Kyriaki Goni, Not Allowed for Algorithmic Audiences, 2021. Video excerpt. © Kyriaki Goni.*

**VS:** You are based in Athens, where the contemporary art scene has blossomed in the past few years.

**KG:** Yes. There were things happening before, but maybe they were not brought to light. After Documenta, Athens became more like part of the global art scene. To be honest, I work mostly outside Greece ... because this art technology subject that I'm interested in is not so much part of the discussion in Greece now.



*Kyriaki Goni, A Way of Resisting (Athens data garden), 2020. Video still. © Kyriaki Goni.*

**VS: Where do you find your collaborators?**

**KG:** Berlin, the Netherlands, Copenhagen, Thailand, Shanghai. But Athens is my city and I have had nice collaborations there as well.

**VS: I have long been fascinated by the cross-disciplinary fields of tech with design and art, but after going to many conferences, I grew concerned that there was a lack of critical perspective, a desire to find the ultimate tech-led solution rather than step back and think of the consequences of all this technological “innovation” on our human minds and lives. Is this still the prevailing mood within that community?**

**KG:** I think the side of the discussion you’re describing is still there, but there is a critical discussion happening now. And I’m happy to say my work is part of this discussion.

00:47

*Kyriaki Goni, A Way of Resisting (Athens data garden), 2020. Video excerpt. © Kyriaki Goni.*

**VS: I am delighted your work will be on show in the UK, in Leeds. The Dolomites Data Garden is being shown here, but also its earlier, Athens counterpart.**

**KG:** Yes, the Athens Data Garden, which is titled A Way of Resisting. Again, it’s a multimedia installation, consisting of 10 different parts. There is a main video, which is about a semi-fictional community residing in Athens in 2020 that decides to transfer their digital memory into the DNA of *Micromeria acropolitana*, a tiny plant endemic on Acropolis Hill. It’s a real plant, with a very small population, quite a fragile ecosystem. They say it’s very, very old. I have not seen this plant myself. I decided I would not try to see the plant because I wanted to respect its invisibility. In turn, I use it in the work by making a comparison with the invisibility that we might be in need of in the coming years, protecting our own identity, in a world where privacy becomes something

for the few, or in an attention economy where our presence is monetised. So, what does it mean to become invisible or to try as a strategy to be less and less visible? The main video is a narrative by me in Greek, where I talk about these three encounters that I had with this fictional community and the way they introduce me to their philosophy of connecting with a plant, sharing their memories, protecting their fragile ecosystem, and also introducing the ritualistic connection with this plant ecosystem.



*Kyriaki Goni, Data Garden, exhibition view, Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds Art Univerisity, 2023. Photo: Jules Lister.*

Then there are four short interviews: one with the two botanists who rediscovered the plant in 2006 after it had been thought extinct for almost a century; one with a scientist looking at data genomics, data centres; one with a specialist in cybersecurity and agriculture, about dangers that storing digital data in DNA might bring; and one with a scientist who, in 2024, managed to store and retrieve digital information from the DNA of plants.

Then there is a big drawing of the Acropolis, which resulted from my interview with the two botanists, who talked about how rich the Acropolis ecosystem is. Instead of directing our gaze at the Parthenon, which, of course, is one of the wonders of the western world, I wanted to redirect the gaze at something that is under the radar - an ignored, rich ecosystem. Then there is a double work, a long print on textile and a smaller drawing, which is my first effort to prepare data to be stored in the DNA of a plant. Of course, this is only made as a symbolic gesture because there is a complex way to do that using a

computer. But I took a short poem that my late grandfather wrote for me. He was born and brought up in a village and really connected with nature and trees and animals. I asked myself what kind of information I would like to cherish and store in a plant, so I came up with this poem and I manually transferred it into digital coding schemes.

There are three more parts: a recording by a female polyphonic group here in Athens. I asked them to produce an audio piece that is only sound (not words). For me, this piece was the way that this fictional community would communicate with the plants. In Leeds, this will be installed as a six-channel audio recording in the centre of the room, as a ritualistic passage between the one species towards the other.

Then one of the last parts is what has been generally called the Great Chain of Being, which derives from medieval times but has its roots in western philosophy, Aristotle and Plato. This is the categorisation of parts of life on different levels. The upper part is gods and angels, then humans and animals and at the very end you have plants. I have found one version of this great chain of being and I have cut out the last part, the plants, and put it up on the level of gods and the angels and I have made some new notes for the exhibition in Leeds that have to do with hierarchies and western philosophies and the way this philosophy puts so much value on labelling and categorising things and it is actually opening up the way of exploiting everything. Many scholars also connect this categorisation with the current ecological crisis.

If we can de-centre the human from this hierarchy, then we could try another way to relate to each other.

The last part of the installation is an augmented reality portrait of an invisible plant. As I mentioned before, I have not tried to look out for this plant, so I decided to reconstruct it – there are images online – in 3D and at the end of the installation invite the viewer to use their mobile phone and see the tiny 3D plant through an augmented reality app. I call it the augmented reality portrait of the invisible plant.

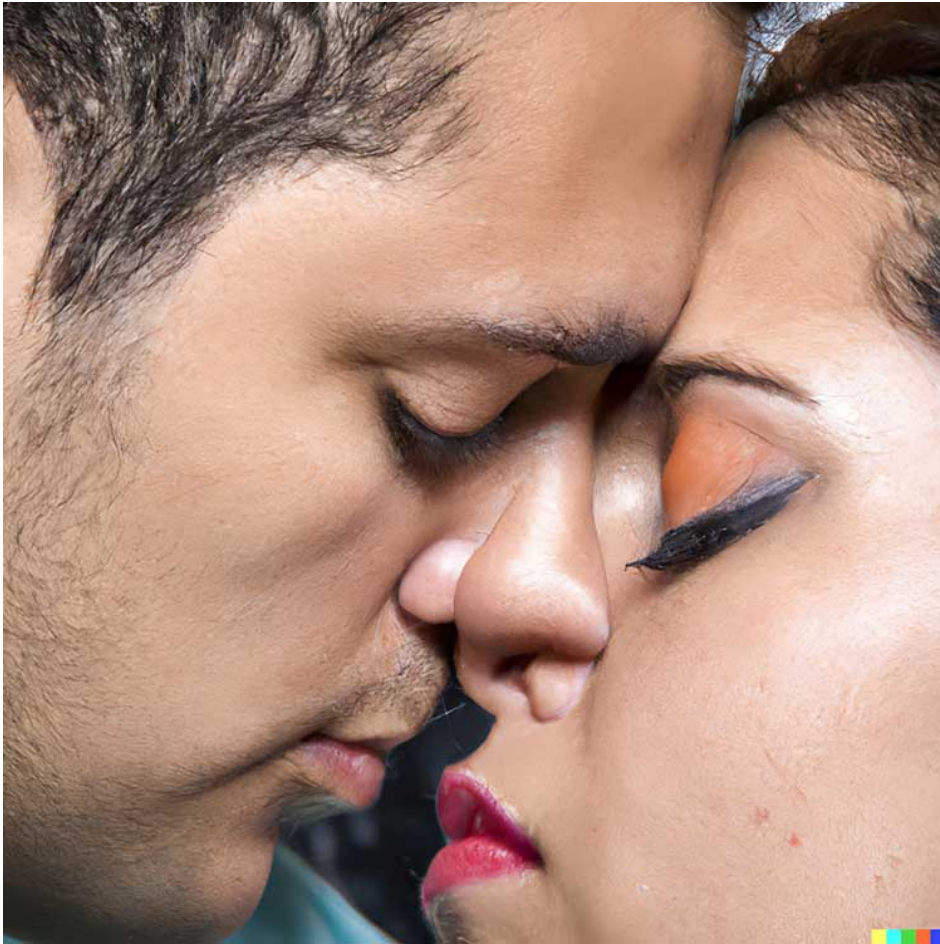


*Kyriaki Goni, The Portal or Let's Stand Still for the Whales, 2020. Still image. © Kyriaki Goni.*

**VS:** The current group show **Modern Love (or Love in the Age of Cold Intimacies)**, at EMST, the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens, also looks fascinating, exploring technology and its impact on relationships. Tell us about the two works there.

**KG:** The first work, *The Portal or Let's Stand Still for the Whales*, is a piece from 2020. It's a pandemic work. It was a commission for a digital exhibition titled *Anthropocene on Hold*. It's a short video, only six minutes long. It was produced from my apartment during strict lockdown. It was a way of encountering and addressing my fears, my hopes and the nightmares I had during this period because of the pandemic. It's a video that is totally black, with some small rock formations travelling in a space and you can't really understand what it is. In my mind, it's this vast space of the internet, in which every encounter was happening. And these rock formations for me were ... standing there - as our bodies were – like nodes in the network. The narrative addresses a future habitat of planet Earth and it's discussing the current situation of the pandemic with two different timelines. One is a description of the wildlife during the pandemic, when, for many, it was the first time the animals had their own space ... For the whales, in particular, it was the first time in their lifetime that they experienced a silent ocean. Then the other parallel timeline is a description of the fear, the touch deprivation, a possible future where no touch or hug would be allowed. At the end there is a short part, which is addressing love, and how interaction with loved ones and ways of showing

intimacy would probably change through the years because of this trauma. In the background, there is humpback whale song, which you can hear behind the narrative.



*Kyriaki Goni, This was Perfect Love #couplegoals #AIgenerated (2020, 2022), 2020. © DALL·E Kyriaki Goni.*

This work was already finished when Katerina Gregos [artistic director of EMST in Athens] invited me to be part of the Modern Love exhibition. Then she commissioned a new work for the exhibition. This was Perfect Love #couplegoals #AIgenerated (2020, 2022), which I produced in 2020. As an Instagram

user, it was interesting seeing very personal, intimate moments between couples being uploaded, with the hashtag #couplegoals. I eventually collaborated with a programmer, who wrote a small script that, over five days, scraped the whole of Instagram looking for images with the hashtag #couplegoals. I gathered 20,000 images. At the beginning, I was thinking of curating them, cutting them in a new narrative. But I decided to show them as they were in a long, tiring video, without intervening, and keeping the captions and hashtags as a long, newsreel-style caption. It's one hour long, and you're not supposed to watch the whole thing: you're supposed to get tired of the infinite scrolling. It was interesting to expose this need to make public something so intimate, and, at the same time, this time-consuming habit of observing the lives of others online.



*Kyriaki Goni, Perfect Love #couplegoals #aigenerated 2020, 2022. © DALL·E Kyriaki Goni.*



For this Athens show, I have made a second part, which is some images of couples generated by an AI tool. I used descriptions such as “couple hugging or kissing”, “two people hugging each other” and “couple in love”. The machine created these images, and I used them as a big wallpaper behind the screen that’s hosting the video. For me, the connection is quite interesting. We are talking about two datasets of love. The one is a dataset that we users create and upload on Instagram. And then this dataset, along with other pictures, is the one that trains the algorithms that then generate new images.

**VS: They are both fictions, digital fictions.**

**KG:** But also they are two separate datasets, but connected with each other. The way we direct ourselves and feed the machine informs the way this machine imagines our love life.

**VS: One last question. Given that you spend so much time carefully paying attention to how human behaviour and digital obsessions are corrupting our lives and our planet, would you describe yourself as an optimist?**

**KG:** Definitely.

**VS: You look at some really dark subjects, but what I get from you is almost a joy in exposing the systems and mechanisms which are in play here.**

**KG:** There are moments when I find myself in chaos because of these explorations ... But when I share these stories, it is cathartic in a way, because I don’t feel so alone. I think the fact that someone acknowledges things does not make them pessimistic. It’s a way of saying: “We are here, we are present, this is happening, and there is a future that we have to think of.” There are indeed some dark things. But I also find a contemplative, reflective power in them: the time and space to think, to open up to the world and try to connect and give voice to others and other than humans and then try to figure out how we should do it.

• *Kyriaki Goni: Data Garden is at Leeds Arts University’s Blenheim Walk Gallery until 1 April 2023. Goni’s works are included in the group shows Modern Love (or Love in the Age of Cold Intimacies) at EMST, Athens, until 28 May 2023, and Codes and Algorithms: Wisdom in a Calculated World at Fundación Telefonica, Madrid, until 17 April 2023.*

*A Way of Resisting (Athens Data Garden) (2020) will be part of the group exhibition 1.5 Degrees, opening in April 2023 at Kunsthalle Mannheim, and The Future Light Cone (2022) will be shown in a solo exhibition at Drugo More in Rijeka, Croatia, from 23 February to 17 March 2023.*