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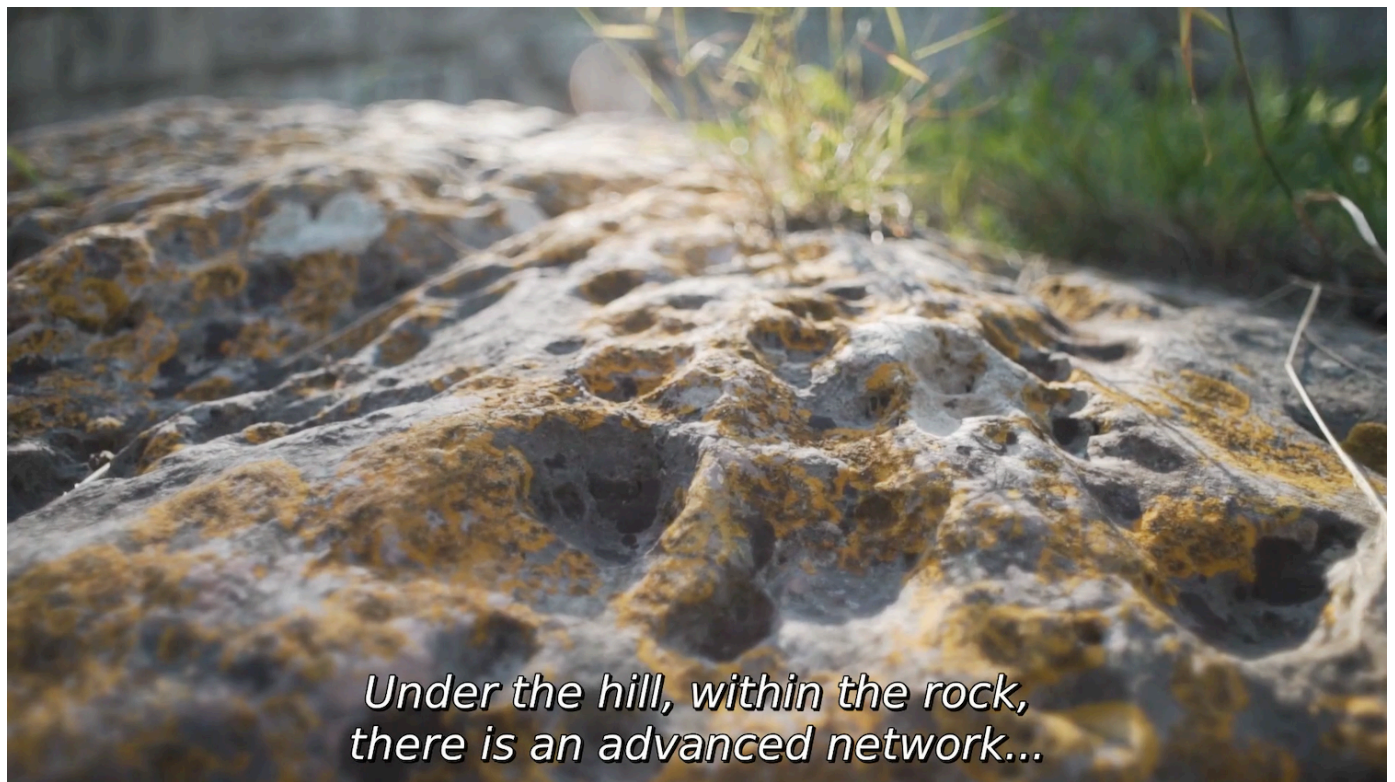
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## IN CONVERSATION: KYRIAKI GONI

On interspecies networks, affinities and affective infrastructures

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20 May 2019



*Kyriaki Goni, Data Garden, 2020. Still. Video with original text and narration, Greek audio with English subtitles, 12 min.*

Ahead of the second season of our [science technology society](https://www.delfinafoundation.com/programmes/science-technology-society/season-1/) (<https://www.delfinafoundation.com/programmes/science-technology-society/season-1/>) thematic programme, we spoke to artist Kyriaki Goni about the project she developed whilst she was in-residence during the programme's inaugural iteration in autumn 2019.

Delfina Foundation (DF): Whilst in residence at Delfina Foundation last year as part of our science technology society programme, you were working on a project that was about to take fruition in the form of a solo show at Onassis Cultural Centre in Athens. I understand this exhibition has sadly been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Could you give a short description of the project and discuss from where your initial ideas for this arose?

Kyriaki Goni (KG): The project, called *Data Garden*, is a semi-fictional story about a secret garden; a hidden network of plants and roots on the hill of the Acropolis in my home-city of Athens. The plants at the centre of this story are *Micromeria Acropolitana*; a member of a broader Mediterranean plant family, which, hidden to the untrained eye, grow exclusively on the Acropolis hill. In *Data Garden* I imagine these plants as accommodating digital memory in their DNA.

I began work on *Data Garden* in the spring of 2018, and it has become a multimedia installation of a film, drawings, prints, a six-channel sound piece, an augmented reality portrait, and interviews with researchers in the form of recorded video calls. My residency at Delfina came towards the end

of the research stage of the project and so during my time in London I was able to concentrate on all the material I had gathered, refine my ideas, and cautiously piece together what eventually became this work.



*Kyraki Goni, Data Garden, 2020. Still. Video with original text and narration, Greek audio with English subtitles, 12 min.*

Prior to *Data Garden*, my practice for several years already had examined digital memory and infrastructures, focusing on surveillance, ownership, and decentralisation, and looking at such interactions with non-human entities including algorithms, fossils, and islands. In *Data Garden* I started to think of alternative ways of not only storing memory, but also of how to take care and nurture it. What if we could share memory with plants and at the same time, plants could share their memory with us? Could a kind of interspecies solidarity emerge? So, whilst keeping my interest in matters such as privacy vs. surveillance, memory vs. oblivion, I extended my research to the possibility of some kind of synergy or kinship between humans and plants. At this point, I looked to see what kind of research was being done around the data storage potential in plants, and I discovered the work of Dr. Karin Fister. I wrote to her and we arranged to speak via video call and part of our conversation on data storage in transgenic seeds, ethics and practices appears in the installation.

Discussions of synergies with nature is a sensitive matter. We have to define nature and we have to be careful of its possible instrumentalisation. It's a tricky subject and that's why I reached out to several different scientists during my research. Through the work, I created an open narrative with different actors - an imaginary community, existing plants and several scientists- that allowed me to navigate through these questions without ignoring them.



Kyraki Goni, *Data Garden*, 2020. Still of video call with Dr Karin Fister.

DF: Have you found the *Micromeria Acropolitana*, the rare plant at the centre of your story, yourself?

KG: I have taken several walks to try to find this plant, but with no luck. It is a humble, small plant and not easily recognisable to the untrained eye. During my research, I spoke with Grigoris Tsounis and Lampros Tsounis – the scientists who rediscovered the *Micromeria Acropolitana* in 2006 – and these discussions were a great inspiration for my work. They would certainly be able to share the plants' location with me, but I decided not to ask them.

To be honest I prefer it this way; it is a very fragile ecosystem, and I think maybe it is better not to find it. In any case the 'invisibility' of the plant has been a pivotal aspect of the work. It provides an inspiration for reclaiming an invisibility online (at least partially) in order to survive in a highly digitised environment. In this moment I cannot help but think about the full digitalisation and extreme scaling-up of surveillance that we are experiencing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During my silent walks to the Acropolis, I had the chance to rethink the fragility of the ecosystems and of the interdependence between species. I also experienced the area in a completely new way: it was probably the first time that I had visited the Acropolis with my eyes fixed on the ground and, surprising as it may be, a rich ecosystem survives on this rock in the centre of Athens.



So, rather than photo or film depictions of the plant in *Data Garden*, I created an augmented reality portrait of it. In it I used a colour palette resembling camouflage techniques instead of its true colours, reminiscent of those employed today to avoid being recorded by algorithmic surveillance systems.



*Kyriaki Goni, Portrait of the invisible plant M.A., 2020. 3D model, custom made targets, augmented reality application, dimensions variable.*

**DF:** The sound to the film is extraordinary. Could you tell us a bit more about this, and who is the group singing?

**KG:** Alongside the film is a six-channel audio piece. This is an original piece composed and performed in collaboration with a vocal group called Pleiades: ten women from Greece who sing traditional music from the Balkans and the south of Italy. It was a fantastic collaboration and I was delighted by the result. I grew up with my grandfather always addressing the olive trees, the sea, the cats, the swallows with respect, but also with a sense of solidarity. I find myself doing the same. There are so many ways that we are trying to represent and simultaneously communicate with other species, and most of the time these are very anthropocentric ones. I think this need to communicate is expressed beautifully and intensively through traditional

sound/music, when people would sing to the plants, animals, rivers and mountains; something that was experienced throughout the world, in Japanese, Balkan or Aboriginal traditions to mention a few.

The song is a way of communicating with, but also of expressing care for, the *Micromeria Acropolitana*. From the start I did not want to use language in the sound, and the result is wordless and meditative. For me the collective voice-sound has a protean quality – it represents a variety of things: the plants and the roots, the human beings, an interspecies communication. I am interested in these collective perspectives; I strongly believe we have to listen more, to be more open to this kind of approach and embrace the otherness, the ability to become other, to explore other ways of being human and of connecting. Once again, I find this timelier than ever.

DF: Central to *Data Garden* is the theme of memory, and the loss (or deletion) of it. This issue is a recurrent subject in your work. What is your interest in this area and how have you approached it in *Data Garden*?

KG: With the upgrade of storage media, it became easier to keep everything without the need to edit and select. A big part of storage capacity has been transferred online, onto the Cloud, and many companies offer this capacity seemingly for free. So now we tend to keep almost everything online, without realising that we pay these services with our personal data. Back in 2013, I made the work, *Deletion Process only you can see your History*, for which I published my personal web search record (2008-2013) online and asked the audiences to choose whether to delete the history, or not. For its most recent presentation at The Glass Room in San Francisco, 2019, I was shocked how many people were still surprised to realise the amount of personal thoughts that we leave on search engines over time.



Kyriaki Goni, *DELETION PROCESS\_ONLY YOU CAN SEE MY HISTORY*, 2014-2015. Screen capture from website. Interactive installation, website, server, Raspberry Pi, thermal printer, archival prints mounted on dibond 120 x 67cm, 20 prints on thermal ink paper, 17 x 22cm.

Now more than ever we have the technologies and platforms to share our memories, they become presentable and seem to gain in value when others approve/like them. Privacy seems overrated, even a bit banal. In this sense, memory becomes data becomes commodity, which in turn feeds a vast surveillance system. It seems to me that we now define ourselves as social beings through these processes of remembering and sharing memory as data, resulting in a large dependence on data memory. Perhaps we are afraid that our imagination will alter our memories in the absence of data storage, or maybe these processes serve to satisfy our narcissistic side.

In the film of *Data Garden*, deletion appears as a way of resisting. I think independence can be approached in multiple ways, as a space for imagination and reinvention, but also an act of counter-surveillance. A demonstration of respect and affinity towards the planet. As mentioned in the film, we often do not consider that data storage and circulation feeds on the planet's resources.

This conversation feels more pertinent than ever during this pandemic, with everything digitised and everyone logged-on. This is a crucial moment to rethink our condition, to attempt the re-territorialisation of our bodies and our networks, of our memory, and to resist the surveillance system that becomes ever-more powerful through this emergency. I am not being technophobic here; it is rather a proposal for another use of existing technology – or, if you like, the use or creation of alternative platforms.

DF: The installation also comprises a pencil drawing of the Acropolis, which is dwarfed by the vast network of roots that stretch out beneath it. In this image and the print you seem to be posing a challenge to the dominant perception of a natural hierarchy in which humans are at the top with nature below. Can you tell us more about this?

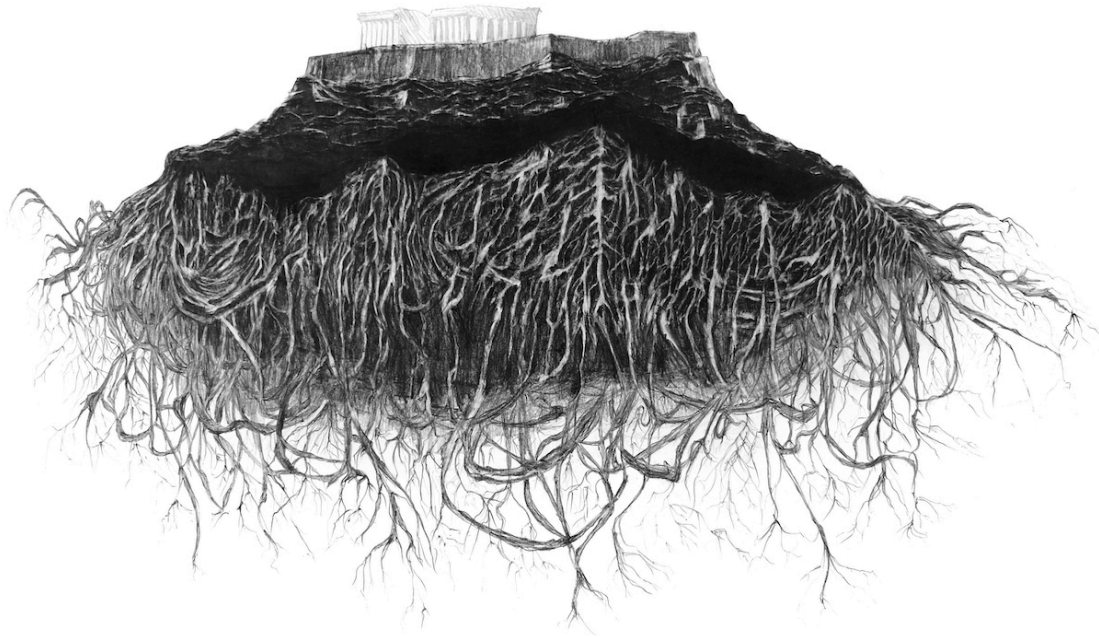
KG: All the works in the installation are interconnected with each other and with the narration of the film. The title of the digital print is *A defective hierarchy whose time to be overthrown had finally come*, which is a line from my film. The print is made from Diego Vallades's 1579 depiction of The Great Chain of Being, which portrays a hierarchical structure in which every matter and life begins with God, leading down steps that host angels, people, animals, plants and minerals (in that order). The Great Chain of Being as a concept is derived from Plato and Aristotle, whose philosophy defined for centuries the perception of Western thought about the physical world. In these hierarchical structures, the plants are placed at the base of the chain. They lack any intellect or sentience, and perform only automatic basic functions to serve man. Such a perception of the natural world is now increasingly seen as the historical root to the current ecological crisis.



Kyriaki Goni, *A defective hierarchy whose time to be overthrown had finally come*, 2020. Digital print.

In my adaptation of Vallades's engraving, I perform a symbolic gesture by lifting the plants upwards to the level of the angels, in order to emphasise the need for a continuous effort to challenge and destabilise the hierarchical relationships between the first-person perspective and others: our thought and other's thoughts. We have come to a point in history where it is clear that we cannot go on like this any longer. We have to start to care more for our planet. Even though we have only just started to have a grasp of it, the chance for a more interdependent ecosystem is available. I had some really beautiful discussions with the researcher Mel Hogan about such reciprocity; it is a matter of respect and care. *Data Garden* invites us to think about nature, plants, technology, and ourselves as humans in different ways, to develop more attentive, caring and communicative attitudes towards our planet and the other entities that live on it.





Kyraki Goni, *A Dense, Secret Network of Roots*, 2020. Graphite on paper, 110 x 150 cm.

DF: In your fictional narrative, the *Micromeria Acropolitana* are used to store data. There are some ethical debates around DNA data storage in plants. How do you feel about this issue now having made this work and having spoken to various experts in this field?

KG: Of course there are ethical queries around any genetically modified organism (GMO) and this discussion is part of *Data Garden*. In the work I approach plants, both non-GM and GM, as extraordinary, twofold bodies. There is the body that is drawn by the sunlight and grows upwards with leaves, flowers, seeds; and then there is the dark subterranean body that is part of a broad network. This kind of complexity and autonomy are celebrated in the film. Plants are both self-sustained and part of extended networks, whilst also making our lives possible. The title *Data Garden* was initially a working title, but I ended up keeping it as the notion of a garden suggests this interdependence and this condition of reciprocal care. Plants and humans are in the role of carer, givers, and takers, embracing their otherness and the possibility to otherness.

I also have been investigating possible futures though fiction in previous works. For some years now, my work has been focused on alternative distribution networks, other than human entities and various ecosystems. Very often I start from the locality of the Mediterranean and gradually zoom out. In *Aegean Datahaven* (2017), I created an imaginary cooperative platform

for storing personal data, sited in fully sustainable floating and solid data havens on islands in the Aegean Archipelago. In *Networks of Trust* (2019), a fossil narrates the origins of networks in the Mediterranean, and in response I invite audiences to continue to imagine possible futures for the Mediterranean and the Aegean archipelago – referencing the oral tradition of sharing knowledge and memory in the area. So this connection with the future is present in most of my work, an approach that reflects my personal experience: as a woman born and based in Athens, Greece, at the edge of the Mediterranean and on the periphery of Europe, where the future is possibly one step closer.



*Kyriaki Goni, Flag of the Networks of Trust on island in the Aegean Sea, 2019. Digital print on aluminium, 105 x 70 cm. Images from 13.700.000 km<sup>2</sup> curated by Katerina Gregos.*

However, I must admit that currently I cannot think of any future scenarios. This situation with the pandemic is too real and too violent. Indeed, through this planetary crisis we realise the extent of the disaster. Will this enable us to concentrate on more collective and interdependent ways of living on the planet, acknowledging the presence of other species? The rise of an even harder surveillance state, the imminent collapse of the economy, along with the rise of new forms of de-territorialised labour are all on my mind. Despite this, I would like to hope that new interspecies living networks, affinities and affective infrastructures will emerge and help us navigate through a post-corona era.

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*Interview conducted by Holly Willats, Delfina Foundation's interim Residency Manager and Director of Art Licks.*

Kyriaki Goni (<https://www.delfinafoundation.com/in-residence/kyriaki-goni/>)'s residency was supported by ARTWORKS, which took place during season 1 of Delfina Foundation's science technology society (<https://www.delfinafoundation.com/programmes/science-technology-society/season-1/>) programme, in partnership with Gaia Art Foundation.

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### KYRIAKI GONI

London: 28/10/2019 – 22/12/2019

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