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Data Garden: Kyriaki Goni

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#### Abstract

The output is an exhibition catalogue accompanying Kyriaki Goni's research exhibition Data Garden at the Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds Arts University curated by Tsionki. The book is edited by Tsionki, including her curatorial text Data Garden and the essay Learning from Narcissus by writer Tom Jeffreys, as well as documentation from the exhibition.

Data Garden explores assemblages of a biological and digital nature, issues of storage and privacy on networked technologies, and environmental impacts. It presents the stories of two endemic plants, Saxifraga depressa, indigenous to the Dolomites, and Micromeria acropolitana, which grows exclusively in the rocky terrain of the Acropolis. Secret communities attempt to protect the plants while experimenting with new technologies of storing data in the plants' DNA. Fiction and scientific facts are intertwined in order to suggest alternative futures and forms of resistance. The stories are presented through two research-based installations that represent the two iterations of the project. Through developing a critical analysis of the two iterations, Tsionki's curatorial vision and text offers a unique contextualisation of the overall project which presented as one for the first time at the Blenheim Walk Gallery, following two major commissions by the 8th Gherdeina Biennale and Onassis Stegi.

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Really Simple Syndication Press

# Data Garden Kyriaki Goni

Curated by Dr Marianna Tsionki



1<sup>st</sup> Edition 2023  
ISBN 978-87-972365-7-4  
Edition of 300



## DATA

## GARDEN MARIANNA TSIONKI



Data gardens are formed of endemic plants, native to a specific geographical area, the only place where the plant grows naturally. The *Data Garden* exhibition presents the stories of two endemic plants: a hybrid of *Saxifraga depressa*, indigenous to the Dolomites, and *Micromeria acropolitana*, which grows exclusively in the rocky terrain of the Acropolis. A story of small secret communities unfolds throughout the exhibition, revealing their efforts to protect the plants whilst experimenting with new technologies for storing data in the plants' DNA. Almost as if Haraway's cyborg becomes a fusion of plant/machine in a revolutionary process of converting plant life into memory devices, disrupting hegemonic surveillance practices and processes of extractivism.

Data centres, one of the main digital ecosystems, allow us to store and share information, providing access to applications and data at great environmental cost. As the number of technological mega-infrastructures constantly increases across the world, so does the impact of digital activity on the natural environment; energy and water consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, waste management, land use and biodiversity are some of the areas affected. Today's climate emergency calls into question the growing demand for data centres to sustain our current techno-dependent practices, and requires us to seek alternative solutions. Thus, the data garden communities advocate not only for privacy and informational self-determination, but also for environmentally conscious and effective data management.

*The mountain islands shall mourn us eternally (Dolomites Data Garden)* 2022, presents the latest data garden community and a plant, a hybrid of *Ortiseia leonardii*, a 260-million-year-old conifer fossil, and *Saxifraga depressa*, a rare white flower that grows only on the summits of the Dolomites between 2000 and 2850 metres. The Dolomites, an ecosystem of high plant biodiversity in the Alps, have been recognized as one of the richest areas of endemism; they are also one of the most intensively exploited regions in the world. Mass tourism infrastructure continues to present a threat to the landscape, resulting in habitat change and pollution. Excessive development, over-exploitation of land and climate warming necessitate the migration of plant species from lower altitudes to the summits, shifting to new territories in pursuit of more suitable and colder microclimates.

The installation begins with a CGI video in which the hybrid plant addresses humanity on behalf of its entire species. Information stored in the plant's DNA advocates for non-human communication protocols and technoshamanic interspecies communities spread across the Earth. Through an alluring simulation, the transmission shares a planetary chronicle of deep time, geological transformations, and plant history along with an ominous future of forced migration. The mountaintop then becomes the end of this journey, the last destination before extinction. Seemingly an extraterrestrial transmission in reverse, the message demonstrates the diversity of life and technological achievements on Earth, only this time from a plant's non-anthropocentric perspective. It endorses human signals and language as a means of communication. Alongside the film is a sculpture, a wooden representation of the hybrid plant, produced in collaboration with local makers in the Ortisei region, and a set of four screen prints that depict digital drawings and notes documenting the artist's creative process.

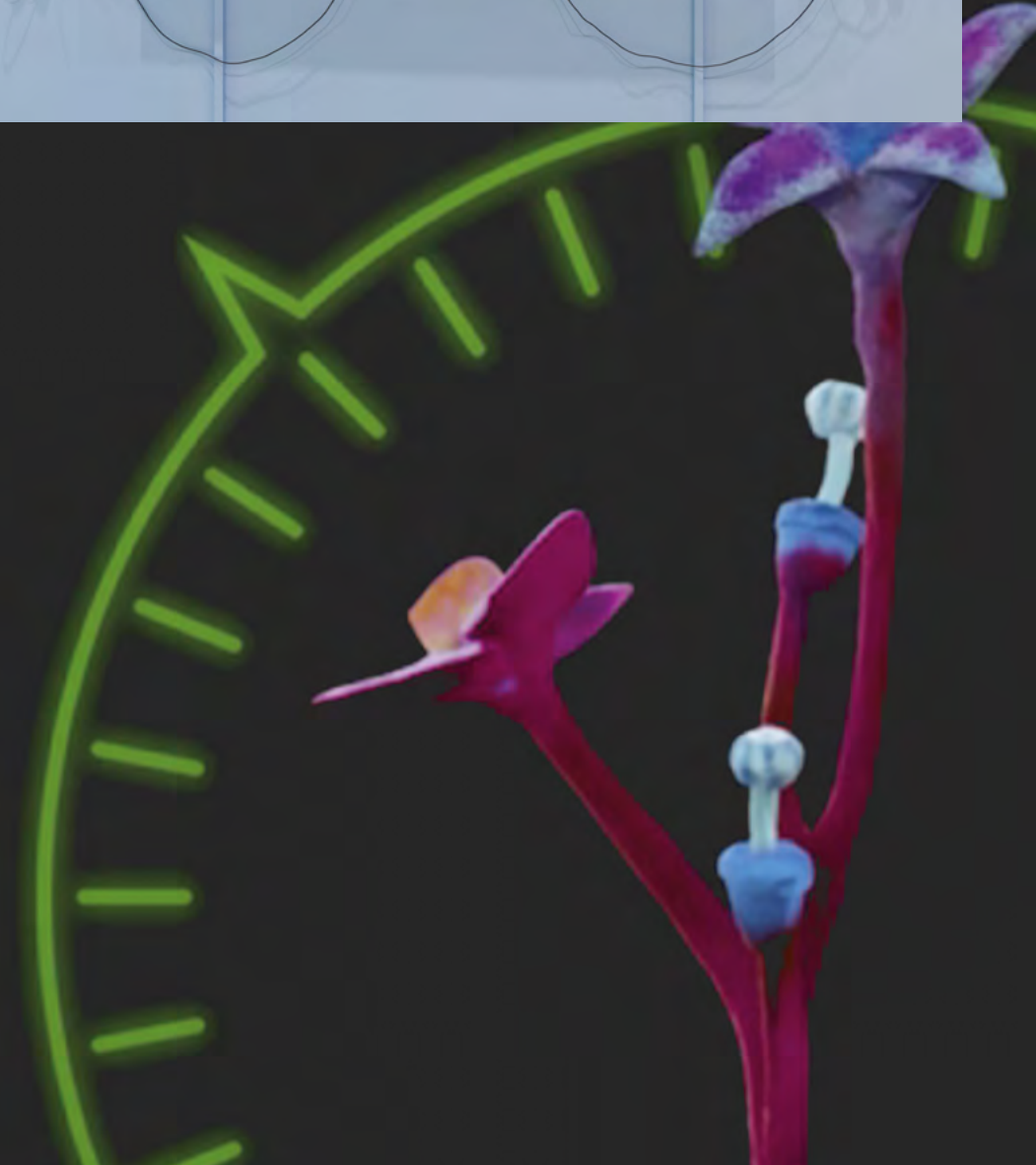
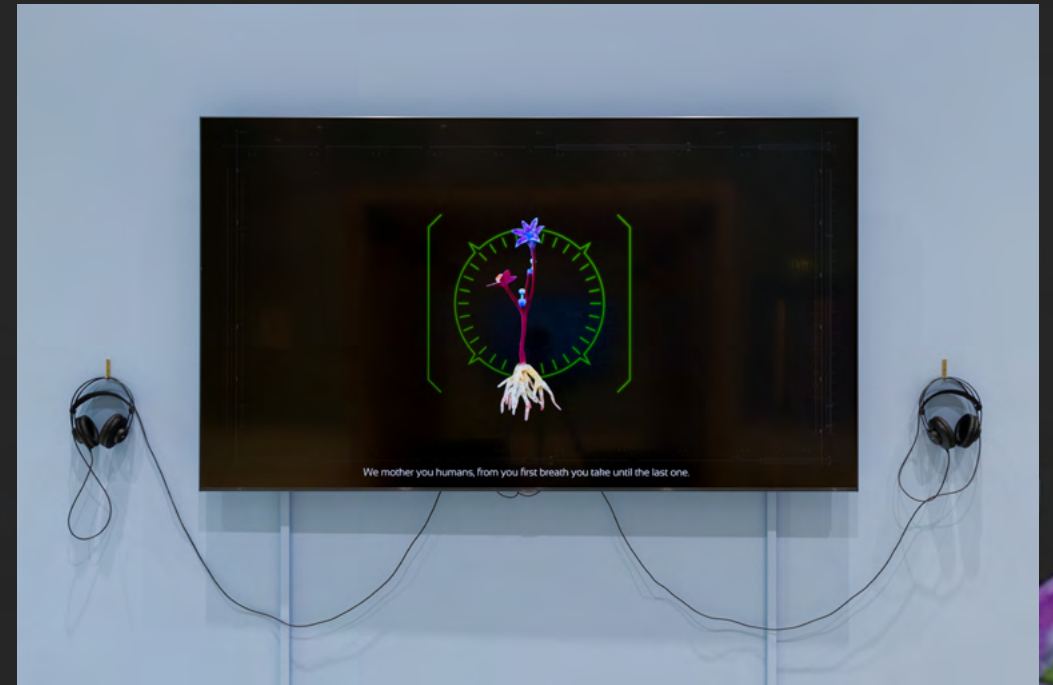
*A way of resisting (Athens Data Garden)* 2020 focuses on the first data garden and the plant *Micromeria acropolitana*, a small and humble perennial species, considered extinct for almost a century until its rediscovery in 2006. Endemic to the Acropolis hill, an archaeological site with more than sixteen thousand visitors per day, human disturbance becomes the plant's greatest threat. Kyriaki Goni takes the species' vulnerability as a point of departure to present a fictional story of a secret community's efforts to preserve plant life and data privacy. In doing so the artist invites us to imagine a network of plant/machines operating as data storage devices, utilising experimental scientific methods that allow for information to be stored in a plant's DNA. The installation's storyline does not unfold as a precise linear sequence, but rather reveals the interconnectedness, inseparability, and synthesis of natureculture.

In Kyriaki Goni's *Data Garden*, fiction and scientific facts are intertwined in an attempt to provide alternative futures and forms of resistance. Prints, videos, interviews with scientists, a sculpture, a polyphonic sound installation, and an Augmented Reality application come together to offer the potential for new insights into multi-layered, socio-eco-technological relationships. *Data Garden* invites us to critically evaluate the climate impact of digital technology, with particular focus on the growing demand for data storage and the expansion of data centre infrastructures. Potential alternative storage solutions are proposed by the artist as imaginaries of a sustainable future. The exhibition brings together the two data gardens for the first time as a proposition for glocal, eco-technological networks of human and plant life, promoting synergy, care, and solidarity.

Kyriaki Goni — *Data Garden*, 20 January – 1 April 2023  
Blenheim Walk Gallery, Leeds Arts University

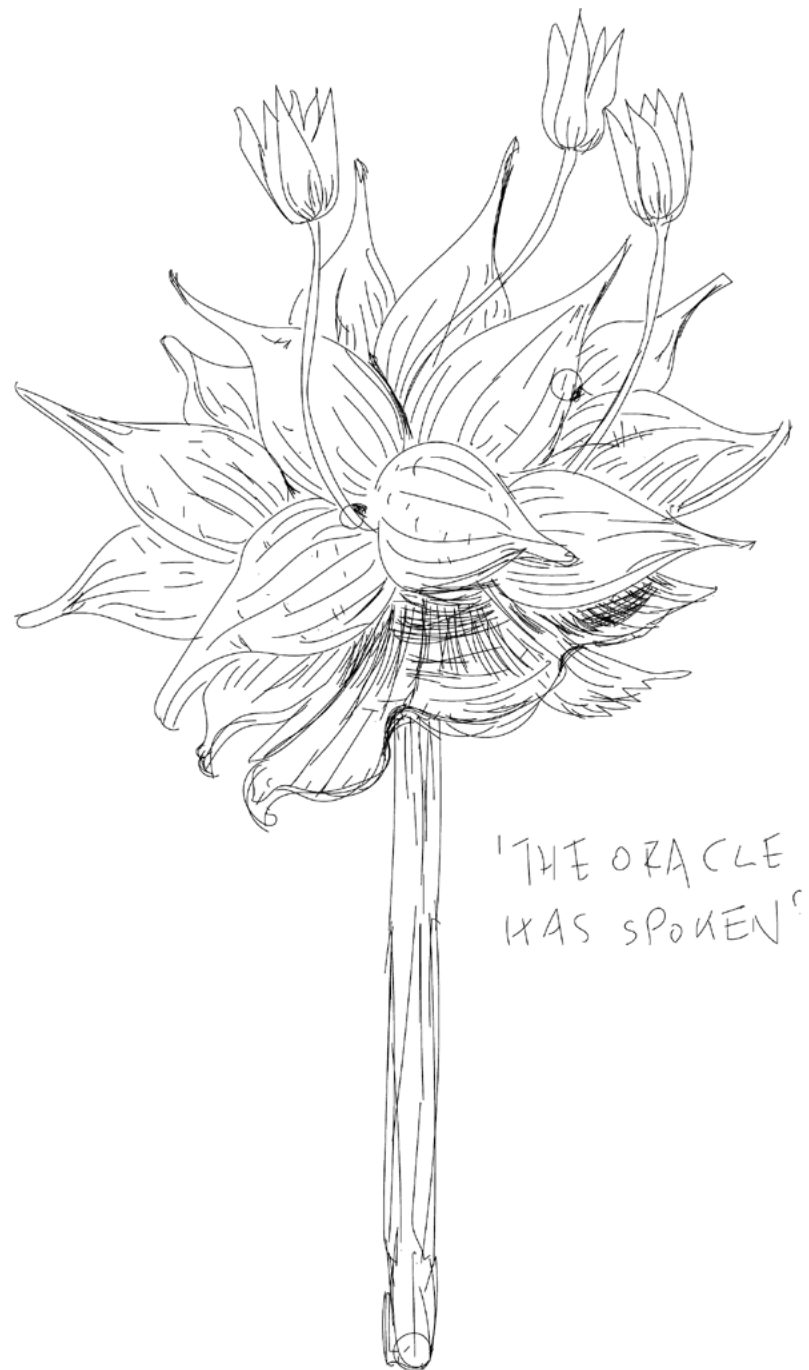




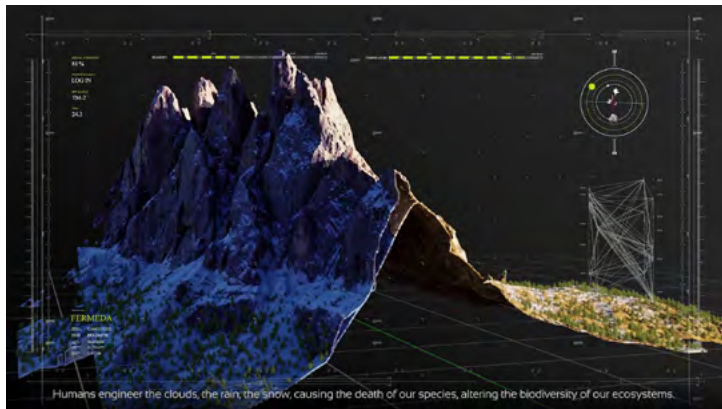
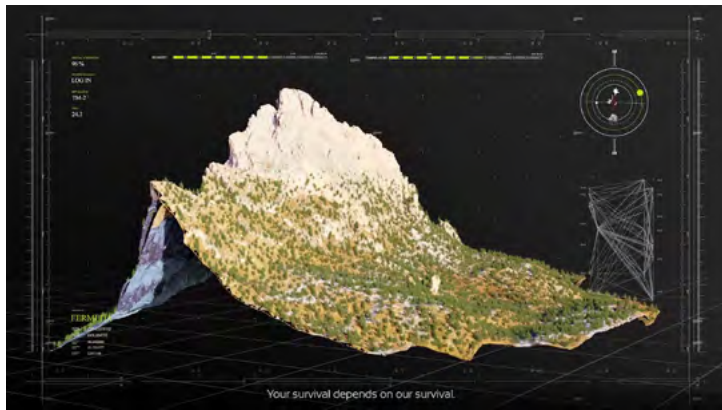












LEARNING

FROM

NARCISSUS  
TOM JEFFREYS



1.

This is how we know the difference between a myth and a fiction: a fiction contains only single gestures, only single movements; a myth contains all versions of events all at once. when we feel this inconstancy, inconsistency, slippage, multitude that's when we know we are in the dimension of myth.<sup>1</sup>



- II. It's 2050 and the lands around Leeds are changing rapidly. The Humber has burst its banks; the Ouse has flooded too, and the Trent. The waters of Ancholme are finally free of the long straight channel imposed in the name of progress or rationality.<sup>2</sup> Hull is underwater.
- As waters rise, people are on the move: Bradford has doubled in size, its suburbs sprawling west towards Haworth Moor. The eastern edge of Leeds has become a waterfront resort. Once upon a time, places like Hatfield and Stainforth, Fenwick and Crowle appeared as grey-green pixels on a red map of predictions.<sup>3</sup> Now these higher grounds jut up from the Sea of Lincolnshire like a cluster of tiny islands — an archipelago.

- III. Every weekend, *The Financial Times* publishes a magazine called *How to Spend It*. Each issue begins with 'The Aesthete', an interview about the glossily expensive life of some tastemaker or other. The questions are always the same. Interviewed recently, composer and musician Mimi Xu said:

An object I would never part with is my four-terabyte LaCie external hard drive, which I treasure. It's got my life on it. So much music, so many films. It's a big loss when it crashes. I back it up now. But is it all going to exist in 100 years, I wonder?<sup>4</sup>

1. Isabella Streffen, *Fabulae: How It Began* (Ma Bibliothèque, 2022) p27

2. The course of the River Ancholme in Lincolnshire was altered in 1635 by the construction of a straight, canal-like channel. The aim was to improve drainage for the surrounding agricultural lands. Further changes to the river's course were started in the early 1800s by Scottish engineer John Rennie and continued by his son.

3. Climate Central Coast Risk Screening Tool, accessed 01.12.2022 → [coastal.climatecentral.org](https://coastal.climatecentral.org)

4. Victoria Woodcock, 'The Aesthete: Mimi Xu', *How to Spend It*, *Financial Times*, 26.11.2022, p26

IV. In 2019, art historian Alexander Strecker interviewed Kyriaki Goni. He wrote that:

There is no way to understand Kyriaki Goni's work without the concept of the archipelago. More than a cluster of islands, it is a community — a carefully balanced collection of individualities that each retain their sense of separation and independence. A confederation of singularities.<sup>5</sup>

If Strecker's tone is assertive, his point is important. He observes a connection between the 6,000 islands of Greece and the artist's interest in relationships between the individual and the collective. Strecker is writing specifically in response to *Networks of Trust* (2018–ongoing), a multimedia work that connects a dwarf elephant fossil from before the Aegean became a sea with new networked file storage systems in order to test ideas and possibilities around decentralised infrastructure. The archipelago shapes other works too. Like *Networks of Trust* and other projects, both *A way of resisting (Athens Data Garden)* and *The mountain islands shall mourn us eternally (Dolomites Data Garden)* proliferate across a range of media (films, exquisitely detailed drawings, collaboratively produced sculptures, prints, audio works...) as if the stories that Kyriaki weaves cannot be contained within a single form.

The question that arises for me is: how might singular identity be threatened, but also nurtured, made possible, by relationships to wider technological or ecological networks? In responding to these multi-faceted works, my own writing bobs around, landing in one place but not for long. Kyriaki is always able to bring things together. I'm afraid this text may get a little messy.

V. In 2017, I spent three months at the National Archives of Finland. My office looked out between fluted neo-Renaissance columns which, now I think about it, are not so different to those of the Parthenon. With little to do, I wandered empty corridors, took the lift deep into the granite bedrock, roamed among folders and files. With limited Finnish, I could not comprehend much amid the vast volume of information around me. Instead, I imbibed the quiet, dark atmosphere of the archives, the repetitive aesthetics of its systems, and I studied the politics of storage. I watched first-hand the destruction of books in the service of digitisation — data being, for archivists, more important than materiality.

Finland's Act on the Openness of Government Activities (1999) is a piece of legislation relating to access and secrecy of official documents. I remember it when Kyriaki Goni tells me about *Athens Data Garden*. The act prioritises public access to information, but with a series of exceptions. These include, for example, documents that might damage Finland's international relations, documents relating to military intelligence, and rather unexpectedly:

documents that contain information about endangered animal or plant species or the protection of valuable natural areas, if providing information about them would endanger the protection of the animal or plant species or area in question.<sup>6</sup>

5. Alexander Strecker, 'Facing the Future, Connecting the Past: Kyriaki Goni's Time-Bending Networks', ARTWORKS fellows, accessed 28.11.2022 — [artworksfellows.medium.com](https://artworksfellows.medium.com)

6. Finlex Data Bank, accessed 28.11.2022 — [finlex.fi](https://finlex.fi)



## VI.

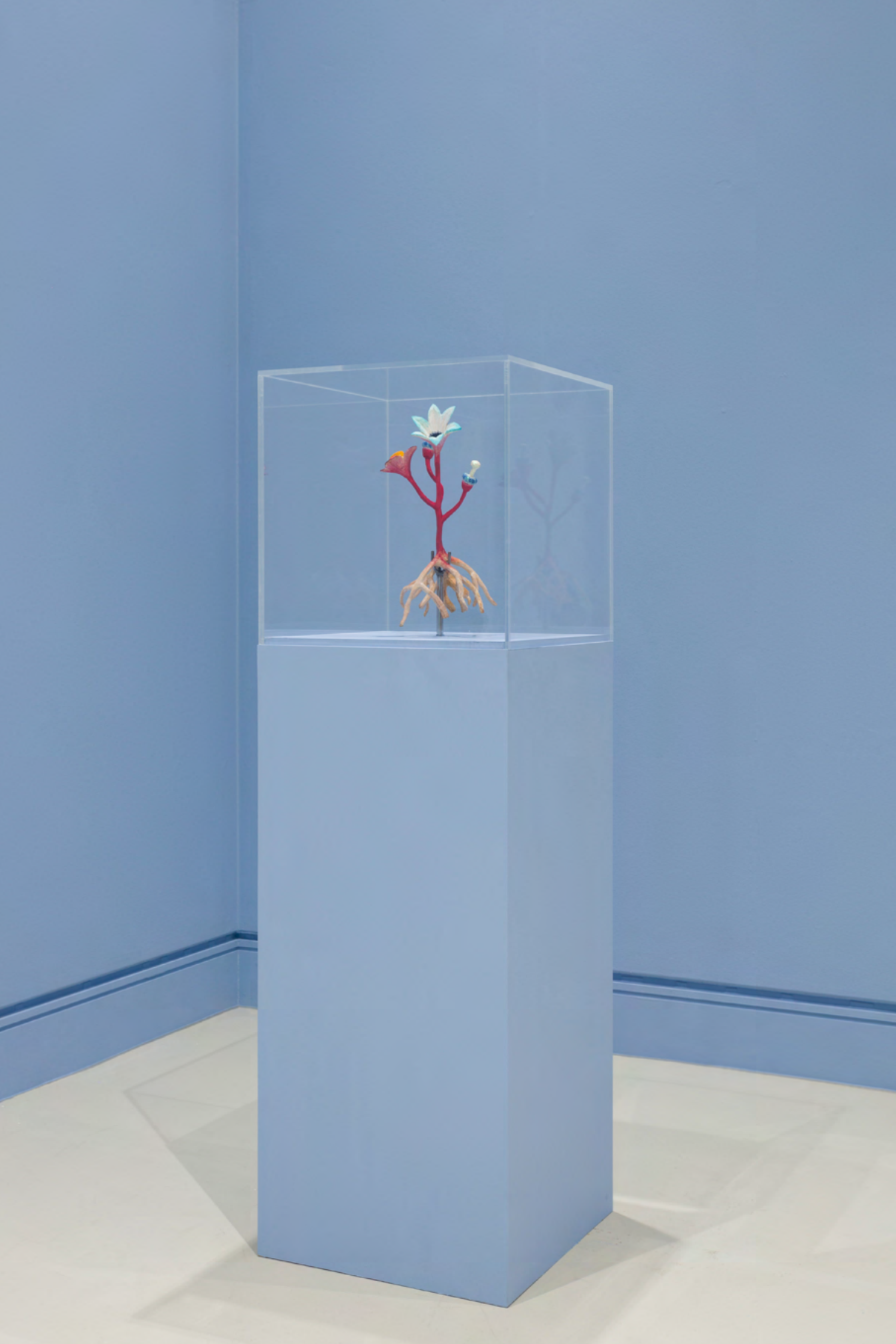
I first meet Kyriaki in an absurdly idyllic setting, wandering the verdant valleys of the Dolomite mountains. I'm writing about Biennale Gherdëina, for which *Dolomites Data Garden* was commissioned. Kyriaki's work feels like the conceptual heart of the whole biennale: rooted in that particular location, it resonates with a whole world of technological and ecological connections. In the CGI video, the language of the ambassadorial plant narrator is formal, elevated and theoretical. It is also very quotable and, in trying to write everything down, I find I'm failing to pay attention to the dizzyingly detailed simulation of the mountain landscape around us. I watch the work three or four times, another half dozen on my computer at home. It is rich and complex, but it is also surprisingly approachable. I mean, who could fail to be seduced by a narrative that begins 'Greetings human person'?

*Dolomites Data Garden* also includes a series of silkscreen prints and a sculpture of a hybrid plant placed on a plinth under a blown glass dome. Produced in collaboration with a painter and a wood carver in the Dolomites, the sculpture weaves tighter threads between the data garden and its site of origin, testifying at the same time to an ecological ethics that does not exclude human labour.

It is also a beautiful, intriguing thing. Dolomites makers are known for their religious figures, and there is a strange jolt in seeing this carving language of multiple chiselled planes utilised to create a plant. A photograph of the object in the maker's studio emphasises the formal similarity between the roots, pale pinewood prior to being painted, and the limbs of Christ being nailed to the cross in a painting behind. The specialist pigments, some of which are up to 100 years old, are extraordinarily vivid. Colours have been combined in a way that would not be done for traditional religious work, imbuing the plant with its own hybrid luminosity.







## VII.

I rarely write about technology. The artists I'm drawn to advocate for memory as a form of resistance — often in contexts where governments and corporations conspire to erase the past. These artists have taught me to be suspicious of secrets, to question the guarding of knowledge by a select special few. In interrogating digital spaces, however, Kyriaki turns that on its head. Her work makes me re-evaluate what knowledge might do, how it might act in relation to power and freedom. For such things are not only abstractions. All states keep secrets, but not all extend the cloak of secrecy to the protection of the nonhuman world. In *Athens Data Garden*, with privacy a precious commodity, this task is taken up by an anonymous community in resistance to the surveillance of the nation state and the multinational corporation. *Micromeria acropolitana* is a plant species unique to the Acropolis whose survival has depended on its secrecy. By binding their digital identities, and therefore their fates, to this little pink flower, members of the society have shifted the ground: this is no longer about protecting one plant; now it's a question of mutual survival. The extent to which we might trust these secretive conservationists remains unclear. What is their politics? Perhaps they don't yet know themselves.

Where *Dolomites Data Garden* is cool and aloof in tone, *Athens* is much warmer, narrated by a human over soft sunlight and lens flare. The gorgeous vocals of the Pleiades gust and rise. The film begins with seasonality, with the fierceness of spring. It's a strange image — the idea that spring might have teeth — but perhaps it reminds us that consumption is always a bodily act. It is a poet's way of asking us to pay attention to language and to bodies.

From this specific time (spring) at a specific place (the Acropolis), the film takes us into the domain of the non-place. Pairs of images superimposed upon one another, each cropped tight with no contextual information. In one we see ports and multicoloured wires of yellow, orange and turquoise. In others we are surrounded by the blue-lit anonymity of the data centre — row upon endless row of digital storage.

Such places are mouths, in a way. The voice-over describes the energy and minerals needed to power these places. The cloud was never bodiless. The English translation, in green text at the bottom of the screen, tells how data centres 'devour' resources, our online existences 'feeding an advanced surveillance system'.

Later, when the narrator discusses the data gardens, we're told how plant roots sense 'soil nutrients' and contribute to the 'nourishment' of our digital selves. As the secret society warns: 'Our narcissism feeds on the planet's resources.'

## VIII.

There can be no garden without gardeners. And I cannot think about the garden without recourse to Gilles Clément. Clément, a gardener, designer and theorist, advocated for an ecological ethics that recognised the symbiosis between humans and nonhumans. He argued against a rigid separation between humans and some kind of mythically pure, untouched ‘nature’, arguing instead that, as animals ourselves, we are part of the rich and vibrant world we inhabit. “‘Nature’ is a sterilized ‘elsewhere’,” he wrote, before asking: ‘How can the citizen be made to understand the value of this “elsewhere”?’<sup>7</sup>

Clément’s use of the ‘citizen’ feels very French, but I think there is an idea of citizenship running through Kyriaki’s work too. As if in speculative response to Clément, Kyriaki’s reply is to bind our fates together, or to make clear that they always have been. Humans cannot live without plants. You learn as you watch the film that it is not we humans who will be mourned by the titular mountain islands. It is the plants, *Saxifraga depressa*, whose extinction would echo for eternity.

So who should we trust with the task of survival? And what should each of us be doing? This exhibition brings the two data gardens together for the first time, away from the places of their conception and the plants and people that informed them. Two plants, two places, two stories: how do they travel? *Athens* points downwards and inwards — it is a narrative of excavation, digging underground to decipher encrypted messages from secret societies. *Dolomites* points upwards and out, issuing an oracular warning from the summits of mountains that formed beneath ancient oceans. Both works exist in a zone that Elvia Wilk calls ‘reality adjacent’<sup>8</sup> — speculative fictions that speak not from a predicted future but within a possible present.

On a map of the world, the three *Data Garden* locations (Athens, the Dolomites and Leeds) form an exact straight line, with each location equally spaced along it. Together, they form a mini constellation, like Orion’s Belt. This cannot be a coincidence, it must be a sign — a warning, perhaps, or a promise. Both Orion and Narcissus were born in the same region of ancient Greece, Boeotia, and both, after all, were hunters.

## IX.

Culture is a network of connections whose roots are buried out of sight. I don’t recall ever reading the myth of Narcissus and yet I know the story: the beautiful boy who spurns all earthly lovers, falls in love with his own reflection, and turns into a flower. The story is told, I gather, as a cautionary tale: Narcissus is punished for his vanity. Re-reading the myth today, we might think more broadly of western society under late capitalism which, unable to see beyond its own self-image, will eventually come to ruin.

But, after watching *A way of resisting (Athens Data Garden)* I wonder if this ancient myth might be approached a little differently. For many, usually the least culpable and least able to protect themselves from its effects, ruin has been taking place for centuries. If the myth of Narcissus really held true, it would be the sites of wealth and privilege that bear the catastrophic impact of extractive capitalism.

And so we might approach Narcissus another way. Perhaps being transformed into a plant was never punishment for self-obsession, but the culmination of a quest for self-knowledge. Maybe merging with the nonhuman, joining a community of rooted beings (the narrative takes place in a forest, after all) was the strategy Narcissus chose simply to survive.

7. Gilles Clément, ‘The Planetary Garden: Reconciling Man and Nature’, *The Planetary Garden* (trans: Sandra Morris) (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015) p59

8. Elvia Wilk, ‘Future Looks’, *Death by Landscape* (Soft Skull, 2022) p124

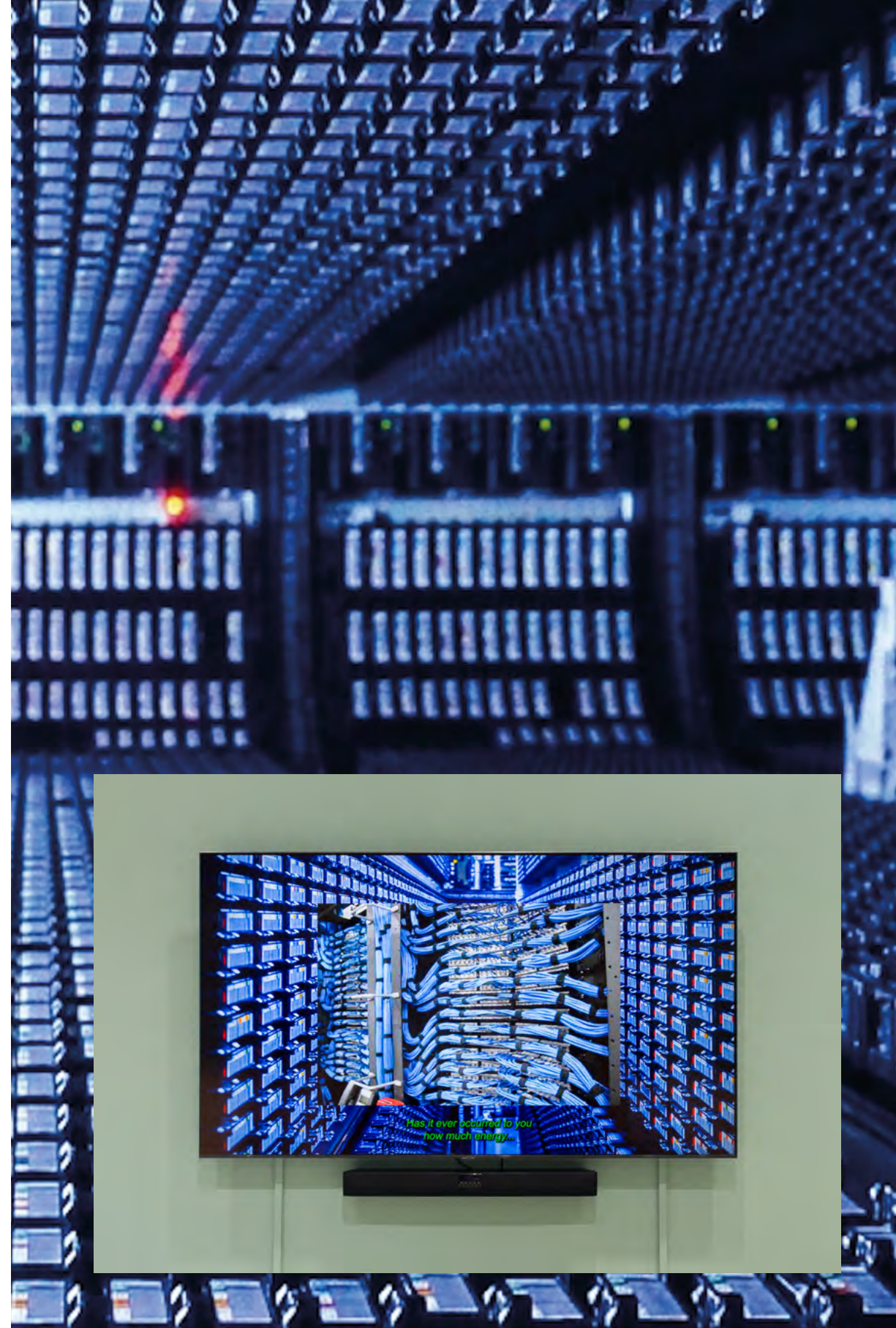
In Ted Hughes's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus escapes bodily destruction by becoming invisible to the humans who wish to burn his body:

When men came with timber  
To build a pyre, and with crackling torches  
For the solemnity  
That would reduce Narcissus  
To a handful of dust in an urn —  
No corpse could be found.  
But there, in the pressed grass where he had perished,  
A tall flower stood unbroken —  
Bowed, a ruff of white petals  
Round a dainty bugle centre  
Yellow as egg yolk.<sup>9</sup>

'Bowed' but 'unbroken', the call of a bugle, an egg: these final lines are filled with symbols of regeneration and new life. What if the story of Narcissus were not a warning but a promise? What if the end were just the beginning? In this reading, Narcissus gives up hunting to become a gardener. Among the trees, he finally flourishes, bequeathing his body in the name of living with others together.

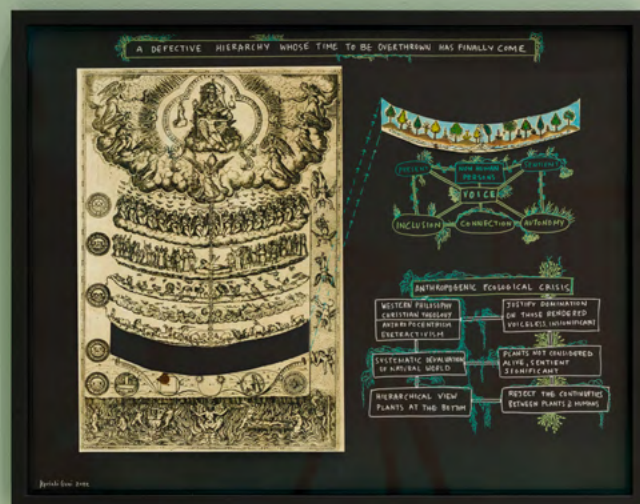


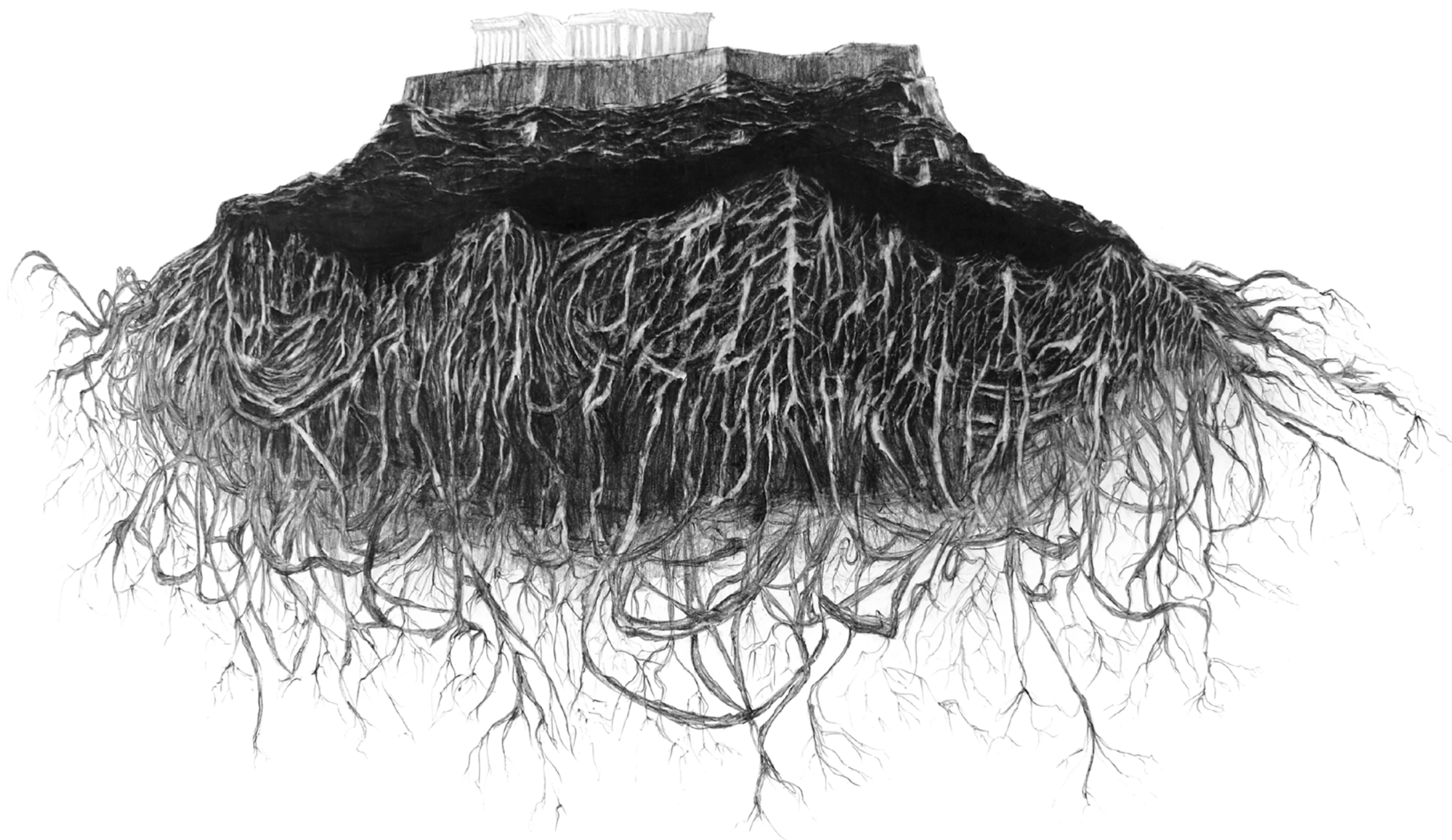




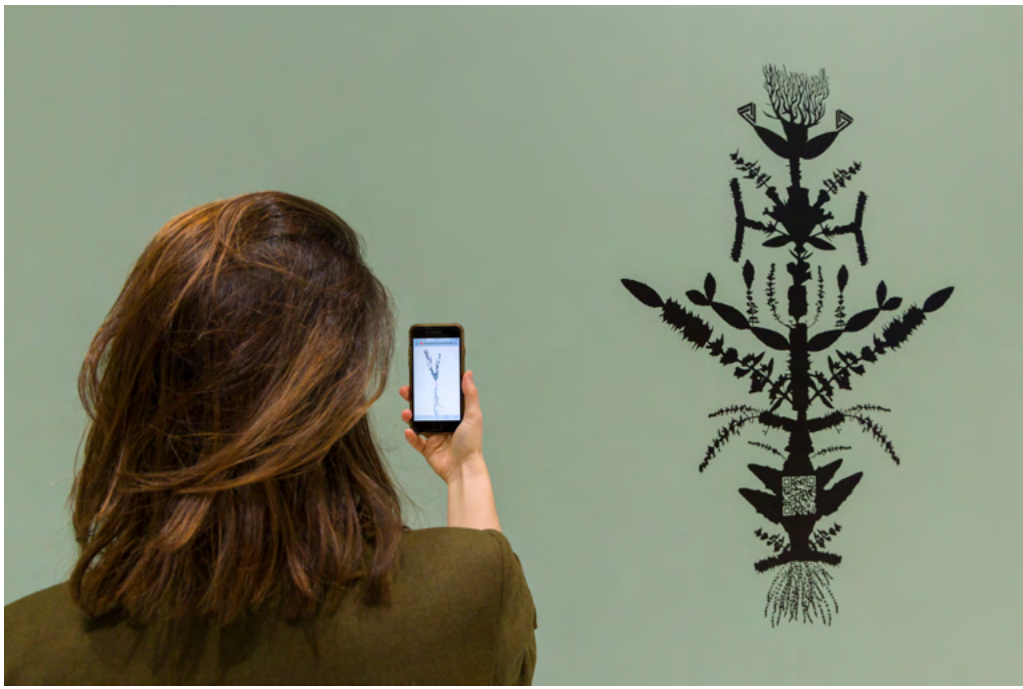
Has it ever occurred to you  
how much energy...











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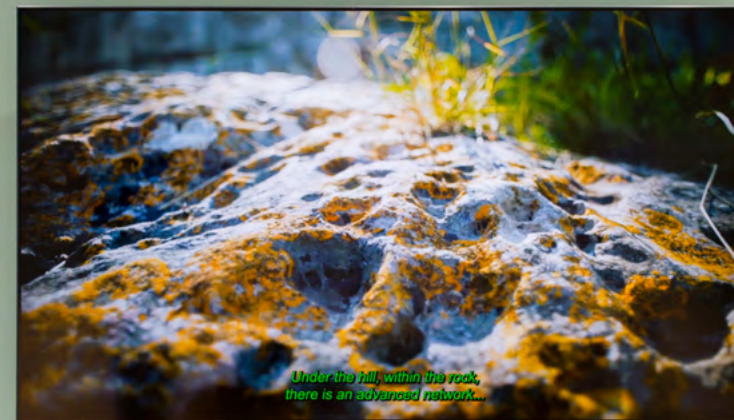
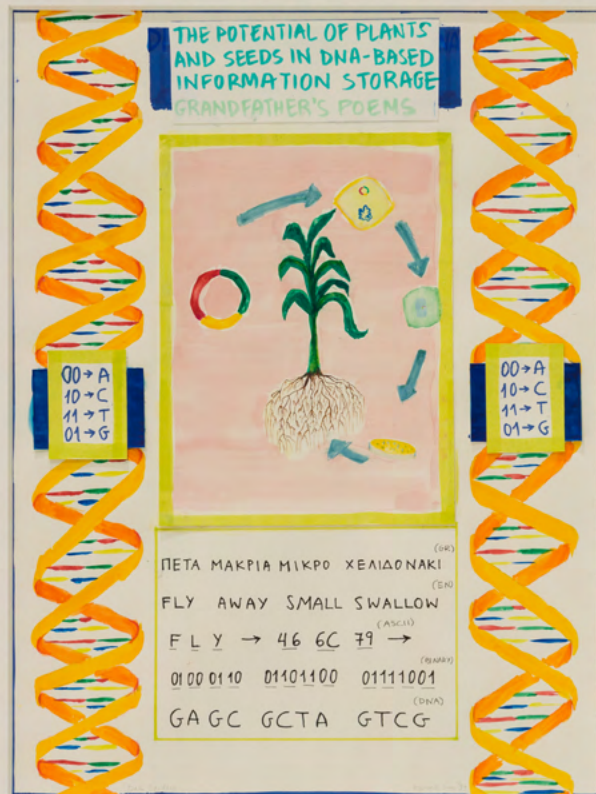
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**KYRIAKI GONI** is an artist based in Athens. Employing a variety of media, her practice explores the political, affective and environmental aspects of technology. She focuses on extractivism, surveillance, human and other-than-human relations, distributed networks and infrastructures. Her installations build alternative ecosystems and shared experiences by connecting the local with the planetary, the fictional with the scientific. Featured in solo and group exhibitions worldwide, her work also is held in private and institutional collections. Her work is featured in journals such as Leonardo MIT, Neural, etc. She has studied Fine (BA) and Digital Arts (MA), and Social and Cultural Anthropology (BA, MSc).

**TOM JEFFREYS** is a writer who lives in Edinburgh. He writes mostly about contemporary art and is especially interested in work that engages with environmental questions. His writing has appeared in art-agenda, ArtReview, Frieze, The Guardian, The Independent, Monocle, New Scientist and The World of Interiors. He is the author of two books: *The White Birch: A Russian Reflection* (Little, Brown, 2021) and *Signal Failure: London to Birmingham, HS2 on Foot* (Influx Press, 2017).

**MARIANNA TSIONKI** is University Curator at Leeds Arts University, overseeing Curatorial Programmes and Library Operations. Previous curatorial projects and writing have focused on the scientific and social conditions of the Anthropocene, as well as aesthetic and knowledge production about climate change issues; topics of interest have been the impact of globalisation, migration, the politics of extractivism, global ecologies of resource exploitation, humanity's post-industrial relationship with nature, networks, and indigenous and local ecological knowledge. Her writing features in numerous books and catalogues published by Sternberg, Palgrave Macmillan, Wetlands, and dpr-barcelona, among others.

Kyriaki Goni: *Data Garden* is curated by Dr Marianna Tsionki, University Curator, with Izzy Webb, Curatorial Trainee (Exhibitions) and Ruth Viccars, Curatorial Trainee (Collections and Public Programmes).



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