

Distributed Critique: Critical New Media Art as a Research Environment for the Post-Humanities

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The field of new media art needs a new paradigm to articulate its critical potency as it outgrows the frames of artistic criticism formed around the production of tangible forms, events, concepts and relations, and moves into methodological and technical areas akin to science, technology and political activism. Not by chance, an art that has untapped critical capacity emerges at a time when scholarship, faced with issues of vastly distributed, large-scale and complex natures, needs a new form of cultural response to push it into new forms of organisation. Distributed Critique is the name of an approach to collaboratively analyse new media art’s relationship to the non-art world. It is inspired by some specific “problem artworks” I encountered through The New Networked Normal’s Freeport online platform (2018), which also manifested as exhibitions in Berlin and Salford, where I advised on the discourse programme.^[1]

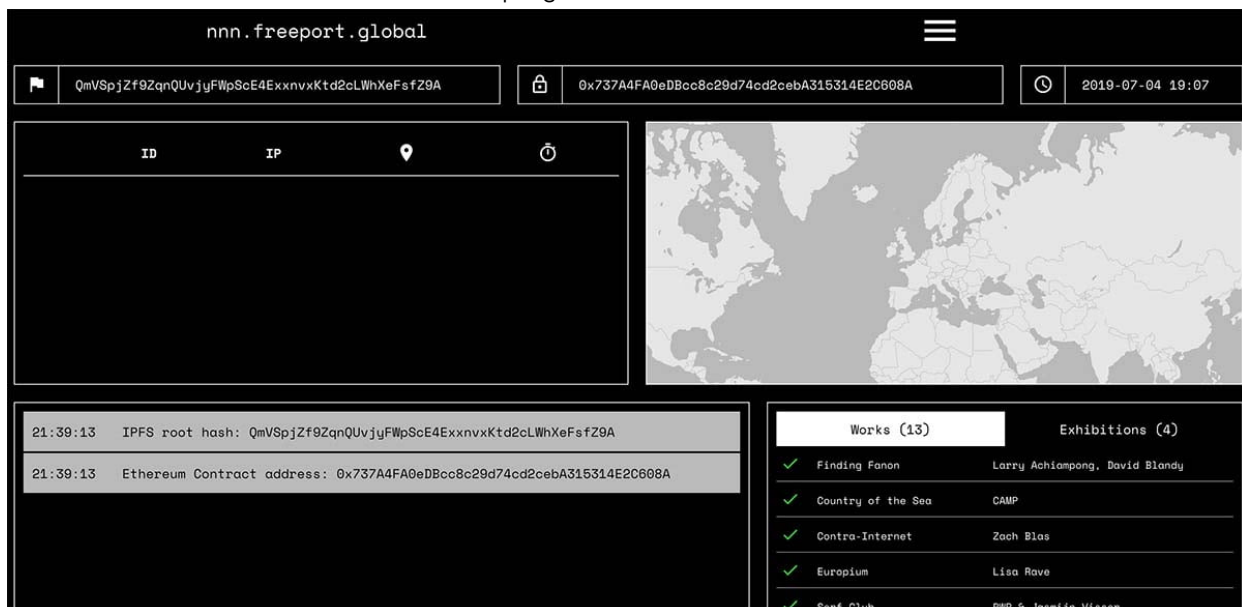


Fig. 1: The Freeport website homepage, including the hashkey information, and information on its most recent visitors

The Freeport website (nnn.freeport.global) takes inspiration from new networked geographies, such as duty-free art storage sites and free-trade zones, the darknet and other liminal spaces, to ask what challenges and

opportunities these spaces and concepts pose for anonymity, autonomy and authorship. Built as an alternative space for the sharing and distribution of content, Freeport uses the “backstreets, black markets, and divergent parts of the internet” to share and debate the value of art.^[2] It experiments with the peer-to-peer, content-addressed system Interplanetary File System (IPFS):

Instead of referring to objects by their location, which server they are stored on, IPFS refers to them by what they are, by making a cryptographic fingerprint a hash of the content. This allows information to be addressed in a permanent manner and located on a peer-to-peer network.^[3]

IPFS is one component in an emerging stack of web technologies that include blockchain and the blockchain-based code system Ethereum, that promise to “steer the development of digital communications in a distributed, peer-to-peer direction”.^[4] My theory is that the works made public on it also operate in a peer-to-peer way cutting across disciplines, and steering the development of knowledge in a post-disciplinary direction. This basic analogy between disciplinary and network centrality also has a practical dimension.

The artists whose work is exhibited via Freeport combine methods and knowledges about our “new networked normal” in ways that artists of previous eras might have combined materials and contexts, actions and words. The resulting artwork is often difficult to grasp: on the online platform, among the plethora of documentation, background research material and technical explanation of each work, it can be hard to identify where exactly the work *is*. What I realised while trying to address their complexities within a discourse setting, is that such difficulties can act as occasions what I have come to think of as environments for networking apparently disparate interests from different disciplines in ways that have broader potential: pushing us to understand what learning has to become in order to meet planetary-scale issues of today.

To illustrate this, rather than inviting the artists to speak about the work, I invited scholars from divergent fields Ancient Greek scholar Christy Constatakopolou, human geographer Emmanouil Tranos, the sensor specialist and social scientist Jennifer Gabrys, and film-maker and philosopher Mitra Azar to use Kyiaki Goni’s *Networks of Trust* and Geocinema’s *Framing Territories* in conversation with me. In these conversations I attempted to move beyond the critique of the artworks as singular objects or events, and instead use them as spaces in which to think together with these experts about the world that produces such work. Subsequently, I documented and interwove the conversations into two podcasts, included as links at the end of this article, working the respondents’ views into an encounter between the artwork and the world at large. The proposition of this article is two-fold: first, that there is a next phase in the movement towards interdisciplinary critique, where the collaborative, networking aspect is more fully realised as a post-disciplinary research environment. Second, that post-disciplinarity proper is an embodied, learnt phenomenon, and our own encounter with seemingly difficult artworks can spark individuals and groupings into gaining such experience.

One of the leading curators behind the Freeport programme, Daphne Dragona, has observed that critical new media artists have adopted a range of distinctive methodologies that offer ways of interacting with the world, “responding to an urge for new methods of thinking and acting that would be useful to broad communities of users”.^[5] In her essay “What is Left to Subvert? Artistic Methodologies for a Postdigital World”, Dragona identifies a particular strand of workshop-based practices as adopting particular methods that are drawn from art practice. Here I want to suggest that certain artistic, technical, aesthetic and methodological conglomerations imply useful gatherings of people into research orientations that are valuable beyond the meanings put into operation by the artists themselves.

In the sciences, and latterly in the digital humanities, “virtual research environments” are networks of computers that facilitate dynamic collaborative research at globally distributed locations. Early examples of such “e-research” tools focused on distributed computing mechanisms, “the grid” through which teams of researchers could compose and share conglomerations of virtually unlimited computing power. Following this, virtual research environments have also come to include the interfacing of particular people, technical resources and facilities at a global reach. The virtual research environment is, fundamentally, a distributed computing system with interfaces for human, social and institutional entanglements. I think this is a useful metaphor for the ways in which networked and critical new media art can be used to foster otherwise difficult cognitive collaboration. As Judith Butler has noted, though, this form of critique is first of all critical of the institutions that house it.^[6]

Critique-Cognition

In “What is Critique?” (2002) Judith Butler suggests that there is much unfinished discussion around critique, around what it is and what it does. Butler’s article draws on Foucault to state that it is the responsibility of critique to use the objects it focuses on to question the relation of knowledge and power, and to disclose “alternative possibilities of ordering” in them.

the primary task of critique will not be to evaluate whether its objects social conditions, practices, forms of knowledge, power, and discourse are good or bad, valued highly or demeaned, but to bring into relief the very framework of evaluation itself. What is the relation of knowledge to power such that our epistemological certainties turn out to support a way of structuring the world that forecloses alternative possibilities of ordering?^[7]

In this, Butler notes that Foucault’s views coincide also with Raymond Williams’s and Theodor Adorno’s, who each issued methodological warnings as to the default role of critique during their time. For Williams “what always needs to be understood... is the specificity of the response, which is not a judgment, but a practice.”^[8] For Adorno, there is a “danger... of judging intellectual phenomena in a subsumptive, uninformed and administrative manner and assimilating them into the prevailing constellations of power which the intellect ought to expose.”^[9] The point here is that a critique developed from the position of knowing more than its object has an inherent rigidity that turns it into the advocate of the status quo.

In proposing a methodology for “distributed critique” in response to the dispersal of new media art among new tempo-spatial, conceptual and knowledge vectors, I am first of all keen to assert that we do not know in advance what the resulting formation is, or what we should bring to it as researchers. In later work on critique, Butler is keen to observe that far from being the preserve of philosophy, with which it has become associated, critique is inherently political and dissenting, and must demand a form of non-discipline-specific form of academic freedom: allowing for kinds of questions that challenge disciplines-as-institutions to change.^[10]

Critical media artworks of the kind found on Freeport are political when they instigate allegiances for critique between amateurs and experts with divergent interests. In “Issues that Spark a Public into Being” (2005), Noortje Marres notes that the challenges posed by the sheer complexity and scale of information technologies in the early twentieth century in effect produced a new possibility: demanding that the public become involved in politics through democratic process, forcing itself to understand and process into value the new information flows that were released by the computer. Marres notes that the sociologists Walter Lippmann and John Dewey were almost alone at the time in suggesting that it was precisely the kinds of information and communication

flows that made conventional, accepted discourse around politics difficult, that the need for the new publics of the contemporary era arose and gave birth to democratic involvement. As Marres characterises this view, the issue of “foreign entanglements” of technology and political process in the early twentieth century brought a new public into being: “manageable’ problems can be expected to be taken care of by existing institutions and by the social groupings that encounter them. For ‘foreign entanglements,’ this is not the case. They require something else if they are to be taken care of: a public.”^[11] We can be inspired by this observation, to think about the problems of complexity, locality, speciality and scale at work in today’s networked society.

As the current viral pandemic and the ever-more pressing issue of climate collapse show, it is not just society that is networked: ecologies of vast scales and complexities are also drawn into our social sphere. Tim Morton’s *hyperobjects* (2010) concept is tooled to attempt to grasp the prevalence and dominance of planetary and intra-planetary phenomena in our lives, which are at once a deeply tangible and known part of our experience, while also impossible to grasp in their totality.^[12] There is no single science, visualisation mechanism or rhetoric for hyperobjects nothing that escapes their networked influence, which can be used to capture and articulate them in their fullness. Dragona echoes this state of play in her description of commercial technologies, noting that we are ourselves infested by the all-consuming processes of “the cloud” and so critical subversion of it appears at best undesirable.^[13]

Critical new media art encapsulates the “foreign entanglements” we encounter through data, updates, visualisations and other affective intensities of the Internet, and turns them into a subject of study. The demands placed on the critique of new media art practices are great, but they secondarily offer to create the communities of knowledge-making that we need, rather than the ones we have inherited from humanist and science traditions. Embracing the problem of art practice as generative puts art at the service of thought in a serious way. At the end of this article I pick out two moments in the conversations I had through Freeport at which practices of knowledge occur in a way that I think is useful and differs explicitly from other forms of critical conversation around art: developing on the sensuous realisation of art, with an intellectual project.

Distributed Condition

Our experience of today is the experience of being distributed in time and space. Partly because new technologies allow us to retain the impression of phenomena as singular through interactions that are massively distributed across space and time. Olga Goriunova describes the existence of a “digital subjectivity” that floats and flocks around our physical bodies, extending it, diffusing its influence and presence throughout various levels of material and information networks.^[14] The distributed subject is being gathered continually into seemingly autonomous archival-qua-prediction systems that weave the past and future into our present-day bodies, distributing the production of present-ness itself back to nostalgia and forward into anticipation.

For distributed conditions and distributed events, there is a distributed art. The philosopher Peter Osborne characterises contemporary art as distributed, partly as a response to air-travel and communications networks, but also a kind of post-conceptual condition:

No longer identifiable with either a physically unique instantiation or a simple set of reproducible tokens (readymades), the unity of the work becomes both distributive and malleable. [...] each work is distributed across a potentially unlimited, but nonetheless conceptually defined and in practice (at any one time) finite, totality of spatio-temporal sites of instantiation. Furthermore, the material borders of this totality are historically malleable, with regard to the new relations into which the work enters in the

course of its “afterlife”.^[15]

The work of “post-conceptual” contemporary art is always distributed across further iterations, dislocated from the gallery or theatre where it is encountered, or the localities where it is produced. Often with artworks of the sort Osborne writes through, the kinds of hybridisation and dis-location employed by artists create a kind of fog (or cloud?) consuming all possible meanings. As the Marxist critic Julian Stallabras commented back in 2004, the facility for contemporary art to abstract and combine aesthetics from locales and disciplines designed as it is for a global network of international biennials is perfectly aligned with an economy built around financialising semantically empty relations: “It may be concluded that the most celebrated contemporary art is that which serves to further the interests of the neoliberal economy, in breaking down barriers to trade, local solidarities, and cultural attachments in a continual process of hybridization.”^[16]

A different kind of complexity and distribution is at play in critical new media art practice. As Dragona identifies in her observation of the “soft subversion” of workshop-based art practices, these artists often emphasise locally situated communities in their work.^[17] Conceits, aesthetics, methods and technologies remain locally situated, but are networked into global concerns. What is important is that we learn how to pose and pursue the questions raised by the works, and acknowledge that practical barriers to doing so may be signs of institutional resistance to the kinds of answers we possibly arrive at.

Uncritical New Media Art

Michael Dieter has used the phrase “Critical Technical Practice” to emphasise the ways in which the reflexive, technical and critical questions triggered by the work are a key component of the practice.^[18] It is precisely in the framing of specific questions that the works in Freeport contrast with more high-profile science and technology collaborations with the arts, such as those hosted by the multi-billion-pound CERN science experiment.

In “Broken Symmetries” (2019) which I saw at FACT Liverpool, artists such as Diann Bauer, James Bridle and Yunchil Kim presented work made during their Collide Residencies at CERN. The curator of this programme, Monica Bello, states that “the process of learning through discovery in arts and science make them well-suited partners in interdisciplinary work.”^[19] However, in the exhibition we frequently encounter work that is suffused with *glamour* an enchanting sensual mystique rather than learning potential. Such a distinction, between glamorous mystique and critical learning, can be about legibility. In Yunchil Kim’s work *Cascade* (2018, see Figure 2), for example, the artist suggests that his arrangement of liquids and pipes can be used as “essential elements for viewing and understanding natural phenomena”.^[20] But the arrangement appears primarily designed to inspire a kind of sensuous awe, rather than invite any serious observation. Kim’s squid-like pipe, liquid and bubble arrangements resemble nothing so much as chandeliers for the liquid-crystal era.



Fig. 2: Yunchil Kim, Cascade, 2018, image credit John Barraclough

While exciting to see, such “new media” artworks avoid engagement with the question of their context, and instead act as promotion, even obfuscation mechanisms for CERN. A more critical art would, for example, enable thinkers to engage in the utility of a facility that costs billions of pounds to maintain and uses as much electricity as a middle-sized city to indeterminate ends.^[21] A Critical Technical Practice may also combine science technics with art methods, and use them to frame questions anew. I will now turn to Goni and Geocinema’s work as it was exhibited in Salford, and look in detail at the function of their own hybridisations of technical and artistic materials.

Networks of Trust

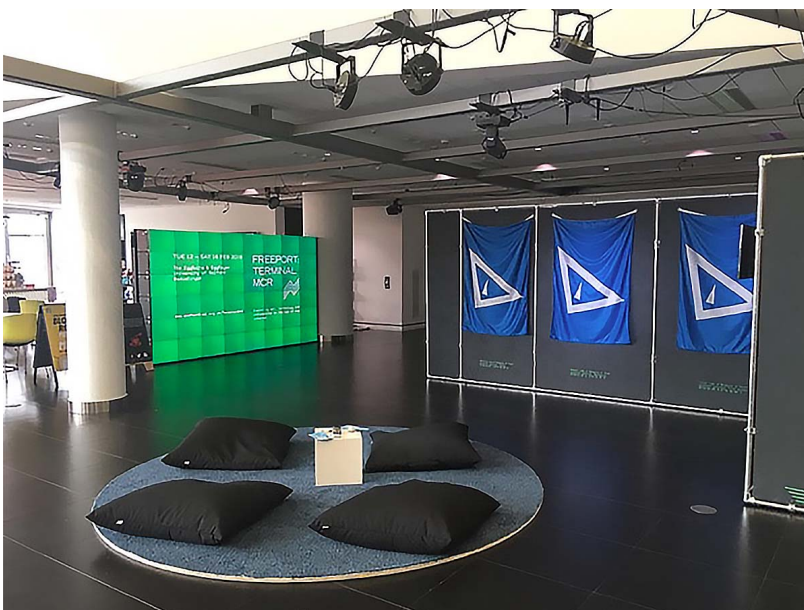


Fig. 3: Kyriaki Goni, Networks of Trust, 2019, installation view Salford

Goni’s work has several components: three minicomputers, nodes, represented by the three points on specially designed flags, a series of stories stored on these nodes, and a number of narrative works displayed visually and

on paper, written by the artist. We are told in the exhibition that as well as a Wi-Fi enabled node in the exhibition space, there are two other such local network nodes, one in Athens and another on an island in the Greek archipelago. If you are in the presence of one of the nodes, you are invited to read or upload a story, about the future of networks, of islands.^[22] The nodes periodically share data between them, and once the exhibition ends, the networks will continue a tour around the globe, gathering anecdotes on what the network means to people in various conditions of isolation and connectivity. It is a highly personal archive, entrusted to the localities of the Wi-Fi network. Along with the node itself, several textual artefacts are exhibited in the gallery. They are stories, perhaps designed to inspire our own literary response. One is a work on paper, a kind of diary entry, we are led to believe, documenting Goni's visits to Islands in the archipelago in the present day. The second is a text about the past, an origin story of the archipelago being born from the volcanic fragmentation of a single landmass. The birth of the archipelago in this geologically localised big bang, she suggests, was in fact the birth of the network as a universal concept: the network as an imaginary born from a desire of cultural memory. The textual component about the future is the one stored in the semi-public digital archive, written by "us" the gallery visitors, accessible only in the geographically distributed "territory" delineated by the Wi-Fi presence of one of the three nodes. At the time of writing, these stories include uploaded contributions from Athens, the archipelago itself, from Salford, and Berlin, which the artwork has also visited.^[23] In Berlin, Goni also read out her "past" story, in which she describes a pre-historical landmass that is blown apart by a seismic ecological event, leaving behind the desire for newly disparate islanders to re-connect.

Framing Territories



Fig. 4: Geocinema's Framing Territories, exhibited in Salford 2019

Geocinema's *Framing Territories* takes the form of a three-channel video work and wall-based text diagram installed on the gallery walls. The films document the work taking place at a big data centre in Thailand, which processes planetary-scale data points for China's global infrastructural project One Belt Road. The films are atmospheric, showing uncanny levels of access to the notoriously secretive government's data centre. But we are told that these video works are nothing more than one of a number of proposals for a future cinema, one in which big-data infrastructure combining information from thousands of sensors and satellites might be considered as a "lens" for planetary-scale drama and storytelling. The videos we see are not intended to coalesce in the event-object of the films, but rather to "spread out" as multiple possible imaginaries; films that

will look and feel entirely different from the ones in the show. In one of the scenes in Geocinema's work, the camera passes across a mostly empty office in the data centre. A soap opera plays on the screens, surrounded by other screens with numbers, maps and graphs playing out on them. Human dramas, and planetary-scale ones, brought into constant temporal and perhaps emotional relation by the new tangibility of the screen.

The distributed research environment produced by the "new network" practices on Freeport offer unique experimental conditions for thinking through new conceptual tools, conditions, methods, experimental proposals and sometimes actual new hardware and software devices. In Goni's work, there are a number of social methods (harvesting stories, for example), literary and poetic experiments (narrating the birth of networks using origin myth or fictionalised diary entries), and a technical apparatus (an IFPS network that is separate from the Internet, but periodically uses Internet infrastructure to transfer data between its member-nodes). In Geocinema's work there is access to a rarely seen component of global infrastructure project the data centre that processes China's One Belt Road's initiative's huge sensor-network data a geological and social analysis that shows the continuity between geo-engineering and data-harvesting, and a speculative cinematic practice that invites us to consider what a camera is and could be. Each of these components is drawn from advanced knowledge of its respective field, technical or cultural, but it is in their synthesis through the composition what Adorno would refer to as the constellation of the work that its cognitive potentials resides.

These artworks present two problems for critique: first, they are formally and conceptually "distributed" in ways that the exhibition format can only partly resolve Goni's work is by definition only ever partly on show in any location, Geocinema's work is presented as a form of trailer for a cinema to-come. Second, they emerge from technical cultures that conventional art language finds hard to accommodate, because the mode of knowledge they exhibit is distributed across various disciplinary fields. Artists working in critical networked media practices frequently do so from a position of intellectual and practical expertise primarily in the area of computing, but in practicality they do so in relation to any number of ostensibly diverse research areas. Goni and Geocinema's work activate ideas and approaches from cinema and data ethics, ancient literature and network security. These artists typically develop their work over long periods of time, embedded in cultures, archives and labs that distinguish them from the universal "every person" to (and for) whom they may be expected to speak. They also collaborate with specialist technicians, coders, research assistants in the case of Geocinema, the artist is actually a partnership between Solveig Suess and Asia Bazdyrieva and so embody particular experiences of technology in operation. As such, the artists themselves operate as research-subjects that experiment with technologies we currently use as lived in ways that may inform our future pedagogical environments.

Distributed Critique

As I have suggested, artworks that challenge traditional models of critique are a synecdoche for the broader set of challenges faced by thought in the face of an increasingly globalised, networked and diffuse socio-political environment. Dragona names such problems "soft subversion", which "cultivate[s] a new culture of learning", rather than repeating the "hard" resistance-based methods that have already been co-opted by corporate entities in their coercion, regulation and control of citizen users. The artworks, while at work in different conceptual and geographical locations, can be used to draw together diverse critical voices, ideas and terminologies into a kind of systematic coherence and this is the means through which they do something in the world. In a first, rather modest, attempt at doing this, I staged some conversations with experts from fields into which the works reach.

Embracing the anachronism, the first respondent I invited to speak to Kyriaki's work was a scholar of Greek

ancient history, Professor Christy Constantakopoulou. Christy's work speaks directly to how Kyriaki's particular para-literary approach, and its evocation of oral histories, is a particularly locally engaged method relating to the Aegean sea. In fact, the first thing that she commented on was how typical Goni's origin story of the Internet was, and its echoes with ancient Greek Telemachus's origin story for the archipelago: both Goni and Telemachus understand the network as being born through disaster. Constantakopoulou's work involves understanding the archipelago through the choreographies implied in localised historically dispersed stories. This method for developing social knowledge is of course echoed in Goni's work: the stories that are uploaded in *Networks of Trust* tell us something about how our new archipelagic world is connecting and distributing itself in the same way as the ancient Greek stories tell us about trade, labour and geo-politics of their time.

The co-correspondent on this artwork was Emmanoile Tranos, an economic geographer whose research focuses on the spatiality of the digital economy. Tranos has published on the geography of Internet infrastructure, specialising in the economic impacts that this digital infrastructure can generate on cities and regions and the position of cities within complex spatial networks. Tranos's most recent research has shown that the physical side of the Internet in fact gathers people towards one another, into newer, larger versions of "old" city-country infrastructures. He uses the metaphor of islands himself, suggesting that there are "peaks" of technological connectivity which put certain areas of the world above the flood waters of information overload and buffering glitches. These areas of the world speak to one another through "the clouds". Instead of making cities extinct, these new islands of connectivity gather people onto them.

It is in the interplay of power and network architecture that the most striking resonance occurs between Tranos and Constantakopoulou's commentary on Goni's work. On first inspection, the overtly modest and locally situated quality of *Networks of Trust* do not appear to encourage explorations of power. But the constellation of the work brings together observations from two different fields about the nature of islands, whether islands of connectivity or islands of land, as establishing power hierarchies. One interchange I tried to draw out in the edited "mix" of interviews with Tranos and Constantakopoulou starts with Constantakopoulou commenting on the power-relation inherent in the stories that human thought is founded on:

C: So you have a complete, in Greek literature, creation of the world geographic constraints of stable mainland, unstable islands, only to reverse that geographical order, and create the complete opposite to re-create a new world. And all that, of course, works very well in the hymn, but is an allusion to the world order that Ptolemy, the poet's patron, is bringing into the world. It is narratives about power using the mythology of the Greek islands.

T: So, from this perspective, there are different layers of network that serve different kinds of connectivity.

C: And at the time of this story itself, Ptolemy builds the libraries,

T: You are based in the Aegean, you might be a coder, you can use Github, or LinkedIn, something that you wouldn't be able to do without those tools... But at the same time, the new network follows the existing hierarchies... It's not that if you live in a remote place, you can just enjoy the same kind of connectivity as those in urban conglomerations. People who live in cities use digital tools more. Places like the UK are at the top of the hierarchy in terms of connectivity.

C: Let's be frank. It is imperialism at micro, macro, and large level.

Subverting power hierarchies and “micro, macro imperialism” is a concern of some experimental literary practices, and of much critical art practice, but perhaps it is a particular wisdom offered within Goni’s work: that there is a deep relation of narrative form, imperialism and the movement of stories. At least, this is a conceit that deserves greater post-disciplinary exploration for example how different kinds of stories, new forms of network technology and new sites of reading and writing can be thought together.

To speak about *Framing Territories*, I invited Jennifer Gabrys, whose work on global sensor networks and terraforming *Program Earth* had been influential on the Geocinema partnership when devising their project, and Mitra Azar, whose philosophically engaged film-making practice and his concept “Cosmo-cinema” develops an embodied, deeply local analogue to the mindboggling scale of the One Belt Road initiative. The conversations captured in the podcast show the spectrum of language and tone that separates Gabrys and Azar, and also the huge diversity of entry points into Geocinema’s work. As one of the inspirations behind the work’s concerns with sensors and terraforming, Gabrys is able to articulate the technical nature of the work and the sociological dynamics of it. In interesting ways, part of the conversation about the data-processing power of the Chinese government echoes both the power-connectivity nexus of conversations on Goni’s work, and the issues of visibility-readability that I have already suggested are endemic in artists’ access to scientific apparatuses. In contrast, Azar’s comments on the work highlight the philosophical questions raised by Geocinema’s work at the global scale. For Azar, global scales and local materialities are in a constant tension with visibility and tangibility.

The bifurcation of these conversations is perhaps most evident at the moment I use as a gateway between the two interlocutors in the podcast version. I ask both to comment on what I think is the most jarring image in the video works: a shot that dwells on the sparks of a fire outside one of the data-processing plants, at odds with the interiors and computer-apparatus content of the rest of the film.

G: When I watched it, I was thinking about the conversion of elements. So, what these observations technologies are detecting and capturing, and by and large one of the biggest signals, is the consumption of fossil fuels, the release of CO₂, and fire and consumption. Being one of the principal ways in which that conversion is taking place. To place that next to satellite dishes also converting earthly processes into data and themselves requiring energy in order to make that process happen. So they were different registers of conversion. But they were speaking to each other in the kinds of processes that they were variously registering and causing to happen. So it, it’s not inconceivable to think of fire having a very close relationship to remote sensing, because so much of what remote sensing is now capturing are events like deforestation, which takes place through mass burning.

[...]

A: What, what’s fire there for? I would like to read this image. The symbol of fire is really talking about, in one sense, the apparent universal implication of the originary technicity of the human being, and at the same time the declination of this originary technicity into local technologies, and at the same time the resistance against these local technologies for a project which is in a way metaphysically going back to this idea of the fireplace as the place in which civilisation began...

What is fantastic about their responses is that they show the poetic potency of cinematic technique. Geocinema’s work is discursive, and at times the essayistic rhetoric they use in the films can itself be highly

specialised. But there is a sensory-critical effect to the image of the fire in this scene: it combines the observation that our use of technology increases the temperature on Earth, with the observation that fire is primal technology. The fire is an affective moment in the film, and an “expert readable image”, which allows us to ask critical technical questions of the environment in which the work was produced. In this case, we are invited to understand the tension between the fundamentally technical quality of the human condition, and the hugely damaging ways technologies have unfolded as a social phenomenon.

Conclusion

In these podcasts, I tried two different approaches to resolve and channel the different modes of relating happening between the speakers across the artworks. Neither was completely successful, and a collective conversation between all four participants about both artworks would have been more useful had it been possible time wise. Nevertheless, Distributed Critique is a methodology that is determined by more than any thematic or shared interest, but rather and explicitly by the demands of actual artworks as practised today. This experiment proposes a new model for addressing these potentialities: first, through the production of sketch-like podcasts in which ideas and concepts can be heard rubbing up against one-another productively (complemented by the sound production of the musician Kepla). Second, as a proposition for a kind of analysis that should be brought to the fore in critical practice. Finally, as a proposition for a learning framework for individuals: a suggestion that embodied collections of knowledge, “sparked” into being by the sensuous realisation of discursive possibilities as art works, objects, encounters, can form the basis for new post-disciplinary syllabi.

By starting to organise conversations around critical artworks’ central themes, and teasing out the relationships between theory and practice that they open up, we begin a journey. But in order for this journey not to end up with the kind of mystical glamorisation of esoteric knowledge cultures I have seen in CERN’s Collide, we begin an exploration that will have to end with a re-articulation of these discoveries to larger and more coherent publics. For this reason, I’ve become very interested in these images of public dissection.



Fig. 5: Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Willem van der Meer by Michiel van Mierevelt (c1620)



Fig. 6: The Reward Of Cruelty by William Hogarth (1751)



Fig. 7: The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp by Rembrandt van Rijn. (1632)

The idea of public dissection is interesting: not only because in early (Western) medicine it was a sensuous and performative technical demonstration, but also because it offers a collaborative model in which the learning process of the teachers can be *rehearsed* and then executed as demonstrations for broader, and interdisciplinary publics. For the next iteration of our project, we plan to invite scholars into longer engagement with the research environments opened up by artworks. The result will be learning that can be translated back into science, technology and philosophy departments, but also be collective, performed deconstructions of what make such complex systems work. The Distributed Critique network sparked into life by Freeport has the opportunity to grow, shift and generate new lines of connections between experts in ways that meet the demands of new artworks, while also generating a diverse set of interlocking and overlapping critical trajectories relevant to today's networked condition.

The Podcasts

The Distributed Critique podcasts were commissioned and produced by Abandon Normal Devices, curated and hosted by Nathan Jones.

Sound design is by Kepla.

They were co-funded with support from the Creative Europe programme and with public funding from Arts Council England.

<https://soundcloud.com/abandonnormaldevices/distributed-critique-on-kyriaki-gonis-networks-of-trusts>

<https://soundcloud.com/abandonnormaldevices/distributed-critique-on-geocinemas-framing-territories>

Credits

nnn.freeport.global, and the Networks of Trust and Framing Territories artworks were commissioned as part of The New Networked Normal (NNN). NNN explores art, technology and citizenship in the age of the Internet, a partnership project by Abandon Normal Devices (UK), CCCB – Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (ES), The Influencers (ES), Transmediale (DE) and STRP (NL).

Footnotes

1. An indication of the timeliness and potency of the themes explored: this exhibition was first named “Freeport: Terminal” and was to take place at Manchester Airport, but the airport management withdrew support for the project as Brexit approached and the notion of a UK-based freeport became a greater reality.
2. “Freeport”. 2018. *Nnn.Freeport.Global*. Available at <https://nnn.freeport.global/>.
3. “Freeport”.
4. “Freeport”.
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 21. At an event accompanying the opening of this exhibition in Liverpool, there were audible gasps from the audience when a scientist from CERN was forced to admit the huge power usage of the facility.
 22. The timing of this show's arrival in the UK, during the aftermath of the Brexit referendum and the subsequent tortuous journey through the country's parliament of the so-called Withdrawal Agreement was not lost on a single visitor that I spoke to.
 23. When I saw the exhibition in Berlin, the "trust" implied in the work's title had, in a sense at least, been broken: the node contained a series of explicit images uploaded by a gallery visitor—anonously of course—apparently keen that we became intimately acquainted with him.