

# Project Launch Exhibition and Associated Cultural Events

Nora O Murchú, Lucas Matray, Jessica Fairclough,  
and Mariana Perez Bobadilla



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 870726.



Report of the EU H2020 Research Project Artsformation:  
Mobilising the Arts for an Inclusive Digital Transformation

## **Project Launch Exhibition and Associated Cultural Events**

Nora O Murchú <sup>1</sup>, Lucas Matray <sup>1</sup>, Jessica Fairclough <sup>2</sup>, and Mariana Perez Bobadilla <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> transmediale festival

<sup>2</sup> FACT

<sup>3</sup> Waag



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## **D6.1: Report on ARTSFORMATION Project Launch Exhibition & Associated Cultural Events**

WP6: Arts-Based Methods and Productions Tackling the Digital Transformation

WP Leader: Stichting Waag Society

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### **Project information**

Project acronym: Artsformation

Project title: Mobilising the Arts for an Inclusive Digital Transformation

Project ID: 870726

Funded under: H2020-EU.3.6. - SOCIETAL CHALLENGES - Europe In A Changing World - Inclusive, Innovative and Reflective Societies

Project website: [www.artsformation.eu](http://www.artsformation.eu)

Reporting period: From 01.04.2020 to 31.03.2023

Report version: 1.0

Date of preparation: 01.02.2022

Beneficiary organization: Stichting Waag Society, Amsterdam (WAAG), Netherlands

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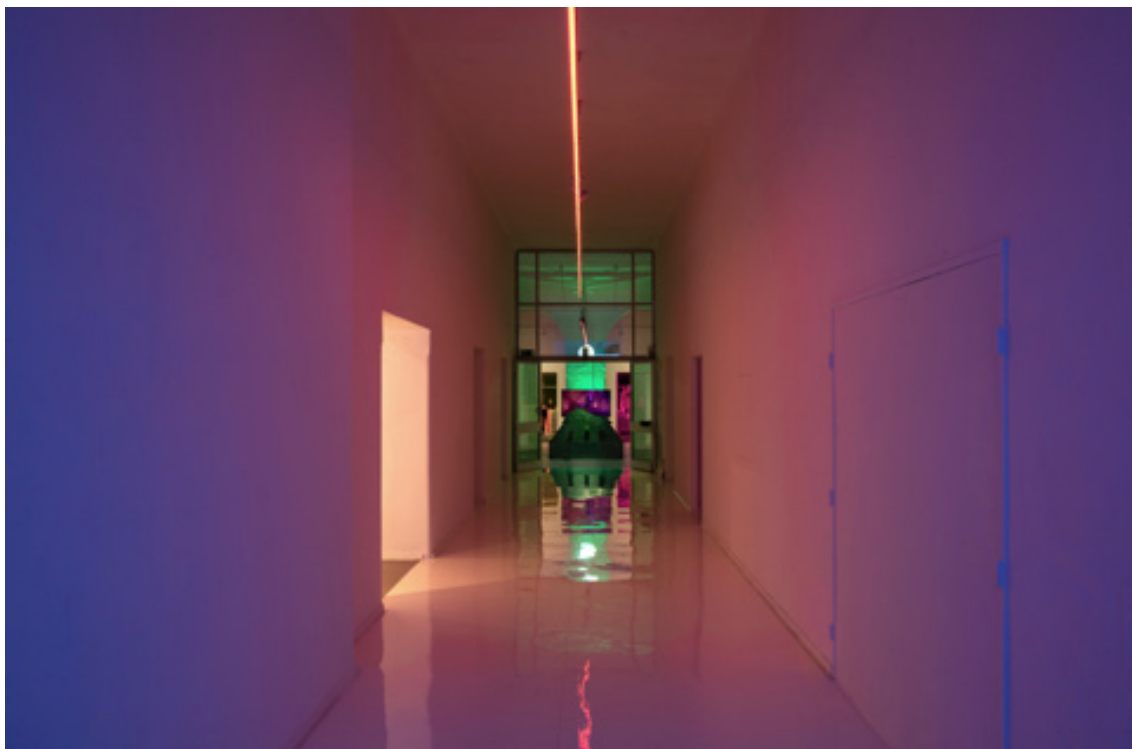
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## 1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, algorithmic systems and infrastructures have played a central role in our lives, impacting on our socio-economic wellbeing, shaping our perception of the world, and affecting our relations to one another. As these digital systems and infrastructures have become increasingly fraught due to unfolding climate collapse, increasing economic precarity, misinformation and the corruption of political processes, the Arts have played a key role in generating public discourse and building societal resilience within these systems. Acknowledging how the arts can generate understanding and transparency around complex systems, ARTSFORMATION explores new visions for sustainable cohabitation, and the development of new structures of collaboration and interdependence within the European Union. Further, ARTSFORMATION recognises the potential of the arts in the cultural construction of new spaces of togetherness and co-existence, as well as in shedding light on critical social issues. Therefore, the organisation aims to understand, analyse, and promote ways to reinforces the social, cultural, economic, and political benefits of digital transformation.

As many of the social systems we are embedded within are increasingly subject to strain and deal with newly emerging complex socio-political and economic conditions and the unfolding realities of climate collapse, there is an increasing need to devise new societal structures and ways of living together while expressing ourselves as European citizens. ARTSFORMATION aims to critically examine the various forms of oppression, exploitation, oppression inherent in digital systems, and create public understanding of them through exhibitions, workshops, reports, and research. Recognising the long legacy of the Arts as a central source for new social imaginaries, the project aims to explore how arts-based approaches can provide guidelines, orientations, and frameworks through which to productively rethink critical issues that connect to rapid technological change, social injustice, and climate collapse. ARTSFORMATION aims to map these territories and offer a new set of visions based on the cultural construction of new spaces of togetherness and interdependence through experimental approaches that create new ideologies and imaginaries of living and being.

As part of these ongoing efforts and in the framework of its one-year festival, transmediale organised the project's launch exhibition *Rendering Refusal* over the spring of 2021, bringing together 13 artists to engage with a broad international audience in a discussion about possible technological futures. Reflected in this exhibition is transmediale's commitment to continuously reflect on socio-political discourse and experimentation with structure and formats that challenge the conventions of how culture is experienced and understood. With this exhibition, transmediale aimed at building an understanding of the many intersecting fields that coalesce in the field of media arts. *Rendering Refusal* reflected transmediale's core philosophy, which continuously rethinks what culture is, where it takes place and what modes of engagement the festival offers for audiences.



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*Figure 1: Rendering Refusal at transmediale 2021. Photo by Luca Girardini, CC NC-SA 4.0*

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Alongside the exhibition, a series of associated cultural events were initiated by transmediale, FACT and Waag as part of the ARTSFORMATION's launch. These events extended the reach of the launch exhibition and explored topics that related to the exhibition theme of refusal, fostered exchange between local and international artists, researchers, activists, and thinkers, and set the space for a dialogue with a wider audience of individuals and groups with very diverse profiles. The associated cultural events took place over the month of the exhibition and occurred both online and offline in diverse formats such as transmediale's online platform Almanac for Refusal, a series of conversations titled Framework for Resilience by FACT, and a Data Centre walk organised by Waag. This report provides an overview and analysis of the Work Package 6.1 of ARTSFORMATION, which includes the launch exhibition *Rendering Refusal* and the seven associated cultural events presented by transmediale, FACT and Waag. Together with a short description of the projects and of the agents involved, the report outlines the goals, the methods used and the outcomes of the work package. Presented in the context of a year-long edition of transmediale festival and launching the EU project ARTSFORMATION, the exhibition *Rendering Refusal* took place in Berlin from February 15 - March 28, 2021. Featuring the work of fourteen international artists, it explored different artistic approaches to the consequences of the digital transformation of society. By doing so, the exhibition aims at contributing to a broader understanding of these issues and at creating possibilities for new forms of citizen action.

## 2. Launch Exhibition - Rendering Refusal

### 2.1. Exhibition Overview

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 34th edition of transmediale festival was redesigned as a year-long event taking place online and in-person throughout Berlin. The festival theme examined the political agency of refusal, and its potential for generative possibilities of social change and transformation from positions of hope, care and desire. transmediale 2021–22 began this year-long programme with *Rendering Refusal*, the launch exhibition of the project ARTS-FORMATION. The exhibition took place from February 15 to March 28 across two venues in Berlin: Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien, a renowned contemporary arts centre in the heart of Berlin city, and the exhibition hall of silent green Kulturquartier, one of the most dynamic cultural hubs in Berlin, where transmediale is based.

*Rendering Refusal* featured artworks by 13 international artists: Larry Achiampong (UK), Basam Al-Sabah (IE), Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley (UK/DE), Madison Bycroft (FR), Sofia Caesar (BR/BE), Eli Cortiñas (ES), Patricia Domínguez (CL), and Anne Duk Hee Jordan (KR/DE) at Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien, as well as Jennifer Mehigan (IE), Laura Yuile (UK), Bassem Saad (LB), Sung Tieu (DE), and Natasha Tontey (ID) at silent green. The installations by Bassem Saad and Natasha Tontey were commissioned by transmediale and presented to the audience for the very first time.



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**Figure 2:** *Rendering Refusal: Atmospheres of Breathing* - Anne Duk Hee Jordan at transmediale 2021. Photo by Luca Girardini, CC NC-SA 4.0

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*Rendering Refusal* explored how acts of refusal bring new understanding to political issues and open up possibilities for more democratic futures. The artworks examined these concerns

and showed societal resilience around climate and inequality concerns, along lines of race, class, gender and ability. In their artistic work, the artists highlighted the crucial potential of marginalised perspectives on history, alternative socio-political experiences and resistance to the status quo for the conception of democratic reform.

The artists reflected on the variety of digital divides that emerge from the digital transformation of society. Social cohesion and political participation are increasingly being mediated and facilitated by technology, which in many ways directly threatens the very foundations of democracy. Nonetheless, by pointing out ways to circumvent these fractures, the exhibition aimed to open up space for action and discourse, on the socio-political agency of refusal. The artists identified experiences and politics induced by the datafication of society, as well as forms of enclosure and exclusion that this ongoing process has been creating. Exploring tactics for refusal and their capacity to carry hope, they expressed artistic positions that alter our understanding of long-standing political conflicts, shape futures out of contradictions and differences, develop queer cosmologies, and inscribe new ideologies into the mundane. *Rendering Refusal* showed how artistic approaches, strategies and interventions can address critical issues about the digital transformation of society contribute to a broader public understanding of these issues and create possibilities for new modes of citizen action.

## **2.2. Artists at Rendering Refusal**

The work of British-Ghanian artist Larry Achiampong examines his communal and personal heritage. Observing the intersection between pop culture and the postcolonial position, Achiampong crate-digs the vaults of history. His work examines constructions of 'the self' by splicing audible and visual materials of personal and interpersonal archives, offering multiple perspectives that reveal entrenched socio-political contradictions in contemporary society. *Relic 3* is part of Achiampong's ongoing project – *Relic Traveller* – a multi-disciplinary multi-site piece that builds on themes of lost testimony, fallen empire, and displacement by deconstructing the architectures of colonialism. The work emerges from observing contrasting socio-political climates: the rise of nationalism in the West, of which Brexit is a symbol, and the African Union's passport programme, which aims to open borders across a unified Africa. The project imagines a future in which the West declines and the African Union becomes prosperous, harmonious, and responsible for shaping the planet's future. In *Relic 3* Achiampong details a migrant worker's struggles as they try to live in a hostile, and alien environment.






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**Figure 3:** Larry Achiampong, *Pan African Flag for the Relic Travellers' Alliance (Motion)*, 2018, Larry Achiampong

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Bassam Al-Sabah is an Irish artist working across video, painting, sculpture, and textiles to convey visions of war, resistance, and exile. His artwork projects political meaning onto Arabic-dubbed anime cartoons, broadcast across the Middle East since the 1980s. Concerned with how memories of the past are continually revised to meet the present, the reworked animations make space for historical trauma and queer possibility to intersect. *Fenced within the silent cold walls* features a recreation of the artist's former home in Iraq, to which his family are unable to return. As the camera moves through the derelict house, digital images begin to escape from a forgotten TV and computer screens and materialise into living forms. These forces surge out in utter destruction, invading the domestic realm. A voice introduces itself as Al-Sabah's grandmother who describes the burning of sentimental objects in the home before fleeing, leaving everything behind but her photographs. Reflecting on this childhood memory as an adult, Al-Sabah weaves imagery pulled from cartoons with paintings of his family portraits, deconstructing the links between fantasy and reality, the hero and the everyday, and make-believe and fact.

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley is a British artist based in Germany working predominantly in animation, sound, performance, and video games to communicate the experiences of being a Black Trans person. Spurred on by a desire to record the "history of Trans people both living and past", their work can often be seen as a Trans archive, where the experiences of Black Trans people are stored for the future. Set in a city that has been overtaken by an unprecedented fog, *I Can't Remember a Time I Didn't Need You* is an immersive adventure game exploring the complex relations between cultural representations, surveillance, and the everyday experiences of Black Trans people. Infrastructures of bureaucracy and monitoring permit and restrict access to the game, forcing users to reconsider their own identity and sense of belonging. In this immersive adventure, Brathwaite-Shirley focuses on grieving, remembrance, and hope for the experiences of Black Trans people, creating an archive that centres and upholds their right to life.

Madison Bycroft is a French artist working with video, sculpture, and performance. Their current interests extend into forms of reading and writing, expression, and refusal. Exploring the politics of illegibility and anti-portraiture through the language of resistance and fugitivity, they question how 'sense' is framed by historical contexts, bias, and structures of power. Portraying a series of characters who resist representation, *Ruses and Refusals* samples an array of images,

language, and references from history, pop culture, mythology, cinema, and art history in an aesthetic of kaleidoscopic excess. The film gathers a motley crew of anti-heros: Buster Keaton, Julian of Norwich, the Greek figure of Thetis, the philosopher Diogenes, a blobfish, a fox and a beaver, a satyr, and a “very hungry lady”. Their techniques of resistance vary – some perform non-expression, while others withdraw, placing themselves in a future out of frame. Together they play with their own characterisation, loitering out of shot and refusing to stay still.



*Figure 4: Rendering Refusal: Ruses and Refusals 2019 Madison Bycroft. Photo by Luca Girardini CC NC SA 4.0*

Sofia Caesar is a Brazilian artist whose work is rooted in dance practices and somatic therapies. Her work evokes physical states between activity and passivity, labour and rest, movement and pause. Acknowledging the intimate effects of technology on our bodies and minds, as well as the physical demands of productivity, her installations often summon stillness, slowness, and repose. Her practice spans the relationship between the Latin American avant-gardes, the role of the contemporary artist, and the aesthetics of leisure as appropriated by international tech corporations. *Workation* loops four self-portraits of the artist reclining while at work across four screens of increasing size: a smartphone, a laptop, and two LCD monitors. The screens rest on cushions and carpet, in a yellow space between office and beach. In the four videos Caesar holds a smartphone, where viewers can see the initial stock images Caesar retrieved from googling the contradictory term “workation”, showing “flexible” individuals subsumed by the productive forces of capitalism. Caesar is shown in a hammock, at the beach, in bed, and on an idyllic balcony, but rather than relaxing, she misuses these places of leisure as working sites, which also become “material” for her art. *Workation* presents an embodied critique of the demands for 24-hour availability, or “remote presence”, that modern technology enables - and instead meditates on collective exhaustion.

Eli Cortiñas is a Spanish artist whose video works are based on existing material that she selects based on her fascination with the work of auteur directors such as Buñuel and Truffaut. Refusing traditional filmic devices, such as linear narrative, the Cuban-descendant artist distorts footage to question the construction of hegemonic narratives around gender, race, and class. In *Not Gone With The Wind*, Eli Cortiñas explores the politics of images and their impact. Made from a collage of found sequences taken from Hollywood cinema, television series, advertising, Ted Talks, and YouTube videos, the film critiques the reinforcement of toxic stereotypes and misleading historical narratives. In this era of fake news, Covid-fuelled conspiracy theories, and global political uprisings, Cortiñas rightly asks “who owns the narrative”? and suggests that to save the future, one might have to reassess the past. With her meticulous selection of moving image sequences and quotes, Cortiñas refers to the current regime of ideas, and reveals how fear and mass media’s complicity reinforces hegemonic policies.

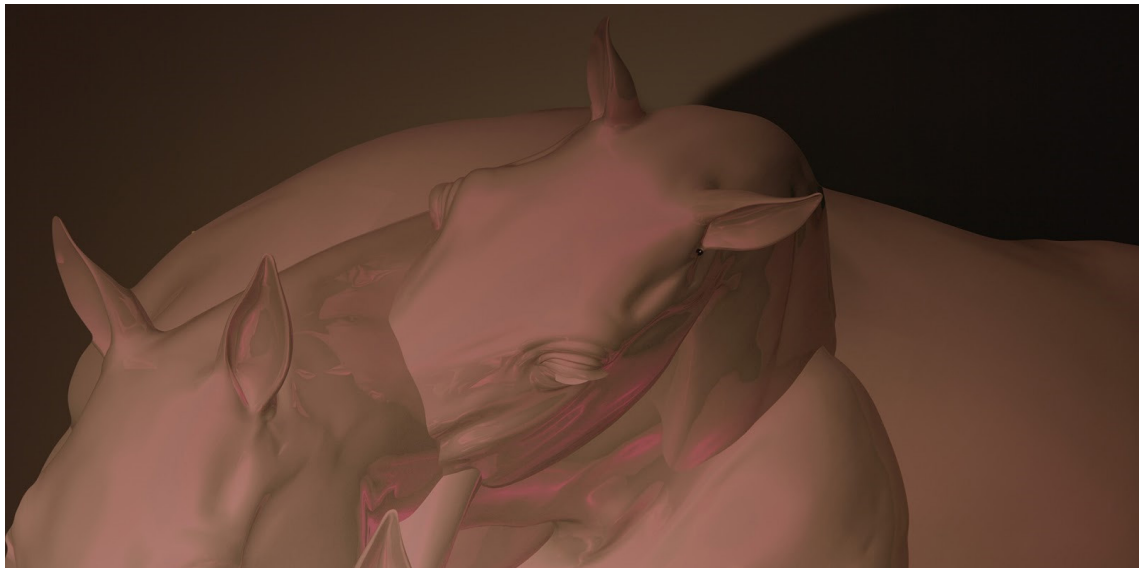
Patricia Domínguez is a Chilean artist exploring healing practices that work against colonial-capitalist extraction and appropriation. Grounded in her ongoing research into ethnobotany in South America, her artwork invites viewers to envision possible futures for both humans and plant life, creeping out of the cracks of (post)modernity. Inspired by the spread of wildfires in Bolivia as well as social protests in Chile in 2019, *Madre Drone* questions technological state surveillance through a story of multi-species resistance. The installation merges myths, symbols, and rituals with ideas of extraction, cultural appropriation, and natural destruction due to industrialisation. Domínguez’s video and totemic sculptures take the fragments of a broken world and propose new configurations for living in a strange reality in which plants neutralise robotic energy, drones cry, and toucans have been blinded by fire. Beyond the destructive forces of colonialism and its legacy, Domínguez proposes a healing space where viewers might live, like plants.



*Figure 5: Patricia Domínguez, Madre Drone, 2019-2020. Courtesy of the artist.*

Anne Duk Hee Jordan is a Korean artist whose revolves around central themes around transience and transformation. Through movement and performance, she builds motorised sculptures and creates edible landscapes. Her installation opens up dialogues between natural phenomena, philosophy, and art, and shifts focus away from humans to non-human ecologies. Taking evolution and adaptation as her primary themes, Anne Duk Hee Jordan imagines visions of post-Anthropocene futures through strange lifeforms and mechanical breathing machines. Presented as a complex system, *Atmospheres of Breathing* explores fantastical ecological networks of animated immaterial beings, where even the most microscopic of elements are made visible. Her constructed organisms combine sculptural, biological, and technological elements, between the human and the nonhuman. Micro and macro video footage shows the cocoon of a monarch butterfly, a shame-faced crab, and an inflated sea cucumber as they become entwined in a ludic environment. The machines operate according to a 4-7-8 breathing pattern based on yogic pranayama – an ancient technique for meditative breathing.

Jennifer Mehigan is an Irish artist with a background in floristry and graphic design. She combines clichés of contemporary self-help literature with queer Irish histories and the violent poetics of abstraction. Her often multi-disciplinary installations are grounded in a framework of painting, beginning as images that morph into text, sound, smell or taste. *Creamatorium* combines sculpture, image, and text to explore the grave as a space for creative expression under colonial rule in Ireland, contrasting it with English approaches to garden design in the 17th and 18th centuries. Guided by the necropastoral and the subterranean - where death lives - 'strange meetings' happen between the artist, her friends, North Belfast horse mythology, the soil, the dead, and the internet.



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**Figure 6:** *Rendering Refusal: Creamatorium*, 2020, Jennifer Mehigan. Photo by theta cool, CC NC SA 4.0

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Bassem Saad is a Lebanese artist and writer born on 11 September and trained in architecture. His work explores objects and operations that distribute violence, pleasure, welfare, and waste. Through video, sculpture, and writing, he investigates and records strategies for manoeuvring

within and beyond present systems of governance. *Congress of Idling Persons* features five interlocutors who play themselves and greater fictions amid broader transhistorical narratives. In the shadows of recent world-historical events, artist and writer Bassem Saad, DJ and translator Rayyan Abdel Khalek, musical artist Sandy Chamoun, writer Islam Khatib, and organiser Mekdes Yilma examine a cartography of protest, crisis, humanitarian and mutual aid, migrant labour, and Palestinian outsider status. Punctuated by the late Arab Spring and the Black Lives Matter revolts of 2020, as well as by the Beirut port explosion, the film weaves through transhistorical constants, from collective rage to mutualism, propelled by the speech and acts of its performers. With this work, Saad asks: If a group action is a riot and not a revolution, then who films it? If four is a riot, is it also a congress? The work was commissioned by transmediale for the launch exhibition with the support of the Martin Roth-Initiative.

Sung Tieu is a Vietnamese German artist whose work operates at the intersection of her personal experiences, global history, and cultural incursions of dematerialised art traditions. Her practice addresses post-Cold War histories and the diasporic experience of unfixed temporal and spatial certainties. Through her lens, she upsets the status of truth and foregrounds the ways evidence is manipulated to serve socio-political agendas and reinforce imperialist violence of physical and psychological nature. Investigating shifting economies within the use of toxins in past and contemporary Asia, *Memory Dispute* captures a remote rainforest in central Vietnam, an area heavily attacked by napalm during the Vietnamese American war. Ghostly images of an ecosystem now irrevocably altered become a metaphorical study when contrasted with captions meticulously documenting the process of a skin whitening treatment prevalent in Asia. An acid fluid is applied onto the body to separate two skin layers, allowing the first layer of skin to be entirely peeled off. Mapping the disparate and converging lines between napalm and that of an acid skin peel, Tieu traces how rapid economic growth, communication, and cultural exchange alter subjecthood in contemporary Vietnam.



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*Figure 7:* Sung Tieu, *Memory Dispute*, 2017, © Sung Tieu. Courtesy of the artist and Emalin, London.

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Natasha Tontey is an artist and graphic designer based in Yogyakarta. She is interested in exploring the concept of fiction as a method of speculative thinking. This investigation brings forward the fictional account of the history and myth surrounding 'manufactured fear' and looks at how it determines the expectation for the future. For *Rendering Refusal*, Tontey was commissioned by transmediale to produce new work that explored Minahasa society. In the Indonesian province of North Sulawesi, the stone-revering Minahasa were organised according to the gift economy of Mapalus, which was based on volunteerism, kinship with nature and mutual aid. According to native cosmology, the first person ever to exist was a woman who gave birth through a stone. With the presence of colonialists from the West and their interactions with the locals, the Minahasans evolved to a stone-based exchange system that was informed by a mixture of their ancient spiritual beliefs and the Christian-influenced capitalist ideas. *The Epoch of Mapalucene* explores the dynamics of Minahasa worldview through the perspective of digital culture, speculating on its potential for imagining an alternative society based on a reciprocity that brings together animate and inanimate realms.

Laura Yuile is a Scottish artist based in London. Her multidisciplinary practice explores the entanglements between domestic and urban space through matters of community, sustainability, and obsolescence, and the effects of globalisation and technological development. Yuile has exhibited and screened across the UK and internationally. In her work *Heavy View*, Laura Yuile collects outdated and malfunctioning TVs and other electrical items, grouping them in constellations of overlapping pop-up windows similar to a computer desktop while pebble-dashing their screens. This cheap architectural render is imbued with all the associations of suburbia, which the artist employs as both a 'white-noise' and an urban camouflage. Yuile's intention is to make these salvaged objects disappear and to create an opportunity for them to exist as something else. *Heavy View* is a project that developed out of the artist's consideration of technological and architectural obsolescence; the failed utopia of modernist social housing, and the rapid waste generated by unfashionable or unrepairable devices.



**Figure 8:** *Rendering Refusal: Heavy View*, 2020, Laura Yuile. Photo by Luca Girardini CC NC SA 4.0

### 2.3. Dissemination & Impact

Initially, the exhibition *Rendering Refusal* was to open to the public from February 15 until March 28 in two venues: Betonhalle at silent green and Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien. On January 19, the German government extended the public health measures in place for the fight against the spread of the coronavirus. This decision closed physical public access to the exhibition. In response to this transmediale created a series of strategies for disseminating knowledge about the exhibition and creating awareness about the artworks for the festival audiences. These strategies included:

- A programme of digital tours: Proxy Visits
- An extensive documentation of the exhibition, including a conversation with the curators and a video tour
- In person visits with major German and international press representatives

On March 15th, the exhibition was finally able to physically open upon registration.

#### Proxy Visits

The digital programme Proxy Visits offered an opportunity to explore the exhibition as an online social experience. It was inspired and informed by the project Proxy Protests<sup>1</sup>, which explores alternative ways to protest, in particular for people with disabilities. The visits took place through a one-to-one video call with an exhibition guide ("Proxy host"), who was physically present at one of the exhibition venues – Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien and Betonhalle, silent green. Together, the proxy host and the visitor decided what route to take, which artworks to take a closer look at, and what themes to discuss, for a duration of about 30 to 45 minutes. Visitors also had the option to share the visit link with a few friends, in order to participate as a small group.

Although the hosts had an in-depth knowledge of the works and artists, the visitors were encouraged to lead the discussion and direct it towards their own interests, in order to simulate as closely as possible a self-guided tour experience. To broaden the accessibility of the exhibition, the Proxy Visits were available in several languages (German, English, Spanish, Italian, French, Dutch, Slovenian, and Danish) at both venues.

The Proxy Visit programme was maintained until the closing of the exhibition, so that visitors who were unable to travel to the exhibition venues could keep discovering the artworks, even after the physical opening of the venues. To avoid no-shows, a handling fee of 2€ was required to register for a slot.

A total of 572 visitors took part in the programme, with one of the 6 Proxy hosts:

- Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien:  
February 15 - March 28 (6 weeks): 370 visitors for 220 visits

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<sup>1</sup> <http://proxyprotest.com/>

- silent green Kulturquartier:  
February 15 - March 20 (5 weeks): 202 visitors for 160 visits
- Press Proxy Visits: 7 journalists, among others from *Art Agenda*, *radio eins*, *tip Berlin*

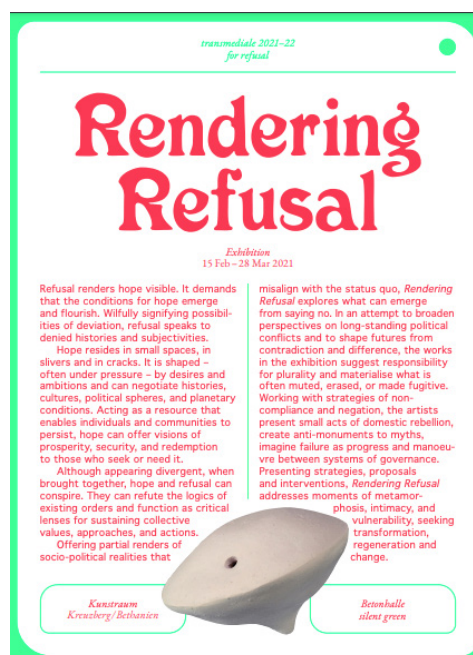
## Exhibition documentation

For the second release of the *Almanac for Refusal* on February 27, an in-depth documentation of the exhibition was published on the festival's website, consisting of a conversation with the exhibition curators and a video guided tour in English and German, and extensive video and photo documentation of each artwork.

**Rendering Refusal Curators in Conversation:** In this conversation, Nora O Murchú and Lorena Juan discussed the exhibition *Rendering Refusal*. Exploring the exhibition themes, they spoke about the work in the exhibition, and their collaborative curatorial approach<sup>2</sup>.

**Video guided Tour:** In this video<sup>3</sup>, available in German and English, arts educator Manon Frugier guided the visitors through the exhibition *Rendering Refusal*.

**Exhibition guides:** The exhibition guide in German<sup>4</sup> and English<sup>5</sup> was published on the website.



**Figure 9:** *Rendering Refusal*: Exhibition flyer, cover page

<sup>2</sup> <https://transmediale.de/almanac/rendering-refusal-curators-in-conversation>

<sup>3</sup> <https://transmediale.de/almanac/guided-video-tour-gallery>

<sup>4</sup> [https://data.transmediale.de/assets/tm\\_fr\\_exhibitionguide\\_web\\_en.pdf](https://data.transmediale.de/assets/tm_fr_exhibitionguide_web_en.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [https://data.transmediale.de/assets/tm\\_en\\_exhibitionguide\\_web\\_en.pdf](https://data.transmediale.de/assets/tm_en_exhibitionguide_web_en.pdf)



**In person visits:** In person visits were allowed in Kunstraum Kreuzberg (6 per hour) from March 15 to March 28 (2 weeks) and in silent green (16 per hour) from March 15 to March 20 (6 days). Press representatives were able to visit the exhibition in both venues from February 15.

Total Visits:

- In-person Visits Betonhalle: 264
- In-person Visits Kunstraum Kreuzberg: 540
- In-person press visits: 11, among other journalists from *New York Times*, *taz*, *springerin*

## 2.4. Audience Feedback

Despite the pandemic making access to cultural venues difficult, the exhibition was well received by both the press and the public. It was advertised in 24 media outlets and reviews were published in 14 newspapers (including *Exberliner*, *taz*, *der Tagesspiegel*), 19 online media (like *Art Agenda*, *Lampoon Magazine*) and 5 radio or TV programmes (such as *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, *Radio eins*). In particular, the proxy visits were praised by the participants.

# 3. Associated Cultural Events

## 3.1. Cultural events by transmediale

To announce the launch of ARTSFORMATION, transmediale presented three cultural events that were displayed in the form of audio and video contributions to the online platform of the festival, *Almanac for Refusal*. The *Almanac for Refusal* presents a collection of browser-based artworks; films, photo-essays, texts, images, podcasts, and more. Updated monthly throughout 2021, it explores the friction, scale, and entanglements of refusal, looking at its potential to form socio-political realities grounded in care, desire, and hope. Three video works were selected to be included in the ARTSFORMATION launch program and published with the second release of the *Almanac for Refusal* on February 27:

- *Distance from Stone*, by Michelle Doyle
- *The Feelings of Concrete*, by Mihaela Brebenel
- *Forbidden City*, by Ellen Pau, Glacier Kwong, Joel Kwong

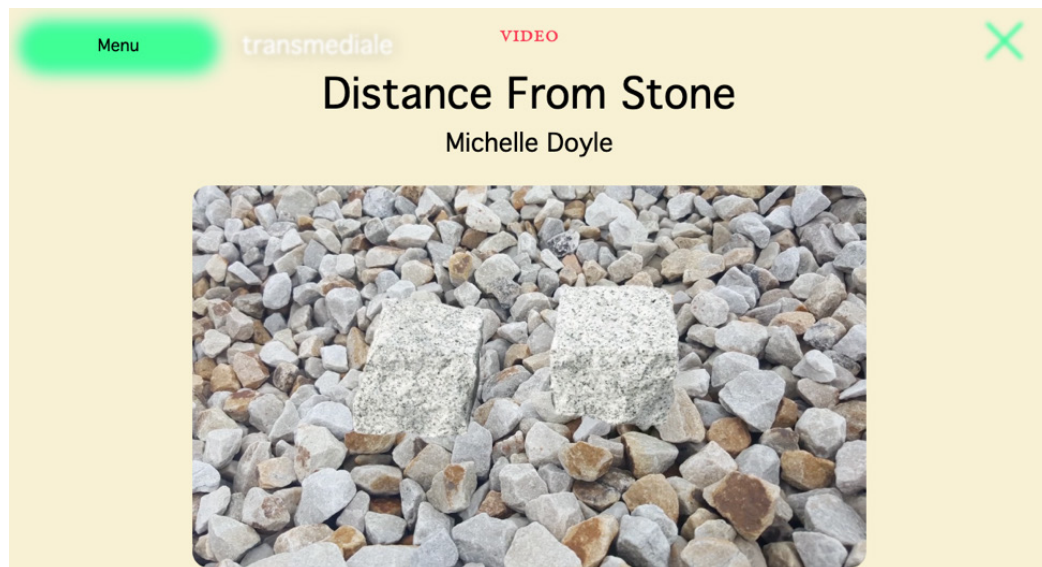
### Michelle Doyle - Distance from Stone<sup>6</sup>

Three burning castles are depicted on the crest of Dublin City, representing the watch towers outside the old city walls. Beneath the crest, the Latin motto chosen for the city – by the English colonial powers – reads “Obedientia Civium Urbis Felicitas”, or “the obedience of the citizens

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<sup>6</sup> <https://transmediale.de/almanac/distance-from-stone>

produces a happy city.” In *Distance from Stone*, Doyle comments on Dublin City Council’s contemporary ambitions to develop the ‘smartness’ of the city, and reflects on the impact that both the heritage industry and the cultural resonance of stone have had on Dublin. Taking pebble dashing as a symbolic worship of stone and aspiration, the film negotiates how the city conditions citizens into obedience. Her trope of the Visitor Centre Informational video connects the touristification of the prehistoric monuments in Ireland, such as Newgrange, to the privatisation of the cities’ resources and calls into question the unfolding realities of civic life in Dublin. Michelle Doyle is an artist and musician based in Ireland, working through sound, performance and moving image. Her work is concerned with subculture, politics, technology, freedom and communities. Doyle performs with The Healers and solo as Rising Damp.



*Figure 10: Distance from Stone in the transmediale Almanac for Refusal*

### **Mihaela Brebenel - The Feelings of Concrete<sup>7</sup>**

On 23 June 2020, in the midst of the Black Lives Matter Protests in London, the *Desecration of War Memorials Bill* was put before the House of Commons. It proposed amendments to the *Criminal Damage Act* of 1971 and aimed to safeguard historic monuments across the UK. As new restrictions around public protests were introduced and protections for protestors were removed, statues were boarded up and protected against “baying mobs.” Amidst the ongoing pandemic, the UK Home Office planned and carried out the deportation of almost 50 Black British people from the Windrush generation. Exploring these unfolding events, Brebenel reflects on the meaning of refusal and friction in UK legislation in what has been labelled “unprecedented times,” and asks what possibilities exist for Black lives when laws and legislation protect the feelings of monuments to imperialism. They perform this work from a place of learning and un-learning, from a place of whiteness and witnessing, and by scratching at the surface of work by Sylvia Wynter, Saidiya Hartman, and Alexander Weheliye.

<sup>7</sup> <https://transmediale.de/almanac/the-feelings-of-concrete>

Mihaela Brebenel is a screen and visual studies researcher based in the UK. They are interested in feminist and queer practices, as well as the aesthetics and politics of screen (and other) technologies. They work as a Lecturer in Digital Cultures at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton and are part of the Archaeologies of Media and Technology Research group.

### **Ellen Pau, Joel Kwong, and Glacier Kwong - Forbidden City <sup>8</sup>**

Since 2019, pro-democratic protests of an unprecedented scale have taken place in Hong Kong. Provoked by the aggressive clampdown on Hong Kong's freedom by the Chinese government and the proposal of an extradition bill violating legislative procedures and breaching the Sino-British joint declaration, the movement has held numerous demonstrations and committed self-organised acts of civil disobedience. In this talk, Ellen Pau, Joel Kwong, and Glacier Kwong reflect on their experiences of the protests, identifying the tactics of surveillance deployed by the government and how protestors and citizens circumvent censorship with creative strategies of refusal. They explore everyday strategies for civic disobedience and refusal; looking at the use of digital technology for collective organising and the development of community economies with businesses supportive of the movement's aims. These strategies protect protestors from detection and help to sustain the collective demands of the movement.

Ellen Pau is a self-taught video artist, and is an independent cinematographer, curator, art critic and researcher focusing on Asian new media arts. Her early works first appeared in local screening clubs and emerged on the international scene in 1987. In 1986, Pau co-founded Videotage, a media art collective in Hong Kong aiming at creating an umbrella organization for media artists, facilitating artistic and cultural exchange and promoting video and media art in Hong Kong. She is the founding director-cum-curator of Microwave International New Media Arts Festival, and works as an art consultant for her newly founded company Inter-Act Arts. Her single channel videos and video installation works have been extensively exhibited worldwide, including the Hong Kong Pavilion at the 49th Venice Biennial.

Joel Kwong is an international media art curator, writer, producer, educator and transmedia specialist based in Hong Kong. She is currently the Programme Director for Microwave International New Media Arts Festival and the founder of SIBYLS – a creative consultation & production agency. Her most recent projects include the Sunata – an immersive media art journey featuring Keith Lam & Dimension Plus in 2019, and the Microwave edition 2020 – Sharp Chronicles and a Transmedia project with 5 HK & Taiwan creative talents in the theme of About Life & Death. Her curated projects have been shown and toured around Asia and the US. She has given talks and lectures in different festivals and institutions, including Shenzhen Media Art Festival, ACT Festival in Gwangju/Korea, National University of Taiwan, the University of Electro-communications in Tokyo, FILMART, and Entertainment EXPO in Hong Kong.

Glacier Kwong is a political and digital rights activist born and raised in Hong Kong. Currently, she is pursuing a PhD in Law in the University of Hamburg, where her research focuses on data protection and surveillance in Hong Kong and China. She has been an active political activist in

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<sup>8</sup> <https://transmediale.de/almanac/forbidden-city>

Hong Kong since 2012 and has written in press and media commenting on the political and digital rights issues in Hong Kong. She regularly writes for *Apple Daily* in Hong Kong, and *Welt am Sonntag* in Germany.



*Figure 11: Forbidden City in the transmediale Almanac for Refusal*

### 3.2. Cultural events by FACT

Within the ARTSFORMATION project, FACT delivered the online discourse programme *Framework for Resilience*. This three-part series of online conversations brought together activists, artists, researchers, and educators to think about the world we are creating, the world we are destroying, the systems which will fall, and those which should prevail. This online event dealt with themes such as climate change, ecology and communication, as well as the violence of 'othering'. This wide-ranging series of conversations broadly focused on how we all experience the natural world. Speakers considered the ways in which we can better align ourselves with the needs and desires of our environment, as well as of every being within it. Their ever-evolving ways of working examine the social structures and control which prevent this, and create methods or technologies to disrupt, alter or dismantle these.

The three conversations, which are available for streaming on FACT's website<sup>9</sup>, had different thematic focuses:

- Session One: *Ecological Empathy*
- Session Two: *Climate Justice from De-colonialist Perspectives*
- Session Three: *Migration and Adaptation*

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.fact.co.uk/resources/2021/03/listen-framework-for-resilience>

### **Session One: *Ecological Empathy*, 11 February 2021**

Mediator: Luiza Prado de O Martins (Artist, Researcher)

Speakers: Dr Edna Bonhomme (Historian, Writer, Interdisciplinary Artist), Celine Semaan (Slow Factory Foundation), Shonagh Short (Artist)

This session, mediated by artist and researcher Luiza Prado de O Martins, focused on the dismissive and destructive ways colonial powers have overtaken the natural world, extending the same attitudes to those who call these spaces home. Foregrounding the importance of empathy and practices of care, the speakers discussed the effects of taking a more mindful and generous approach to the places we live, and our neighbours. Reframing our role as one of caretakers (of culture, the planet, one another), and encouraging positive action and education, we can begin to see the way to a more inclusive form of co-existence.

### **Session Two: *Climate Justice from De-colonialist Perspectives*, 18 February 2021**

Mediator: Helen Starr (Curator)

Speakers: Nabil Ahmen (Artist, Educator), Himali Singh Soin (Writer, Artist), Jack Tan (Artist)

This session, mediated by curator Helen Starr, started from a collection of questions of how we engage with time, land and ownership: What happens if we consider that the very earth and trees, as well as non-sentient beings like AI and stones, have rights? How can we understand time and consequence differently: understanding that indigenous deaths caused climate change in 1600, and prevent the repeating of history? How do we peacefully transform a racialised colonial system which values the very commodities which are destroying lives, bodies, and lands?

Gathered speakers considered how Western principles do not allow for ethical collaboration between beings, focusing rather on exploitation and one-sided gains. They explored how indigenous approaches might influence the way we establish ideas of kinship, and open up our sense of community to include other forms of existence, particularly in the future. The conversation proposed how approaching the world with a different sense of time, and with empathy for all modes of existence, might allow us to create new forms of collaboration and notions of belonging.

### **Session Three: *Migration and Adaptation*, 25 February 2021**

Mediator: Maitreyi Maheshwari (Head of Programme, FACT)

Speakers: Dr Ali Meghji (Lecturer, Researcher), Jessica El Mal (Artist), Niloo Sharifi (Artist)

In 1990, the United Nations anticipated that 'the greatest single impact of climate change could be on human migration' with estimates predicting 200 million 'climate refugees' by 2050. While the scientific case for human-caused climate change has gained more certainty, the consequences for populations affected both by meteorological and political factors remain unpredictable. The disparity between countries and populations that had been a legacy of colonialism is becoming more pronounced as the effects of climate change are not contained within the borders of any single country.

Whether motivated by need, opportunity or force, human mobility has been an inherent part of the human experience for millennia. As people move and adapt to new environments, how is our sense of self affected by the perspectives offered by distance away from a 'home' and across settled generations? Our sense of self is often located in ideas of place and narratives drawn from history and biology, creating a tension between our desire to assimilate and belong somewhere or to preserve our origins. How might digital spaces create alternative definitions of community and identities shaped by more fluid notions of belonging? And how can new technologies allow us to adapt to changing ecological conditions?

### **Outcomes of the *Framework for Resilience* online conversations**

The conversations were attended by 399 people and attracted over 6000 online impressions. Audience feedback to the events was very positive, both in regard to the content and the online platform of the event:

*"As someone who has severe chronic illness, I've not been able to come to FACT events in person for some years. Being able to engage and participate in a live event online was exciting and joyful. I hope you will continue to provide online events for disabled and sick, and other housebound people after the pandemic. It is wonderful to be part of something again."* The conversations were reviewed in Art Monthly by Tess Charnley with the following comment: *"The series does not offer an answer to how we reverse the world's destruction - it never claimed it would. But it is a good place to start in the process of unlearning the colonial attitudes that underpin our systems of living. It offers a sense of community and common purpose that feeds resilience; the framework that might lead towards resistance."* These conversations have informed FACT's programme for the remainder of the year and will focus on systems of knowledge and classification in the formation of identity and the exercise of power and will lead to our further programming supported by and delivered within the contract of ARTSFORMATION

### **3.3. Cultural event by Waag**

Waag's cultural activities included a Data Centre walk held in March 2021 and involving Lucas Evers, Miha Tushič and Rosalie Bak (Waag), as well as PostRational and Evgeny Morozov who joined virtually. Middenmeer is a site of industrial agriculture with a geothermal heat center to heat the many greenhouses for vegetable growing nearby. It is also the site of Microsoft data centres, with many more planned to be built. Emerging from on-site observations, the conversation emphasized the politics and ethics of the newly emerging data centres and in particular, the physical, material impact of our digital world. Participants discussed cyberwaste, massive accumulation and concentration of data, accessibility (and whose data? – not sure I understand). Such objects of inquiry were approached with their social, environmental and geographical impacts in mind. These early data walks<sup>10</sup> were later relevant for Waag's programming that has since organised many other walks around data centers.

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<sup>10</sup> The video produced during the event can be watched here: [https://cyber-waste.io/files/content/boxes/SEE-ING%20DATA/C\\_D\\_Walk-02-mini.mp4](https://cyber-waste.io/files/content/boxes/SEE-ING%20DATA/C_D_Walk-02-mini.mp4)

## **4. Project & Agents Involved**

### **4.1. About ARTSFORMATION**

ARTSFORMATION explores how the Arts can have an active role in shaping the transformation of society towards more sustainable and inclusive digital futures. Reflecting on the past decade of societal growth and digital transformation, the project explores possibilities for social change through artistic practices and methodologies. The project is made up of nine academic and artistic organisations across Europe, and engages with the digital conditions that form European societies and experiments with arts-based approaches to rethink how society can be transformed and made more inclusive.

### **4.2. About transmediale**

For over thirty years transmediale has been one of the key leading international events for discourse and critical reflection on post-digital theory and practice. As Germany's premier media art festival, the festival has become an influential International event in the calendar of theorists, artists, activists and makers and attracts a diverse audience interested in art and culture. The festival is renowned for generating diverse, urgent and necessary debate around how digital technologies affect the lived human experience of the contemporary now. It has an extensive international network of partners including CTM, Winchester School of Art, Aarhus University and the Vilém Flusser Archive at the Universität der Künste Berlin.

Beyond the yearly event, transmediale is a transversal, dynamic platform with a vibrant community and a strong network that facilitates regular publications and year-round activities including commissions and artist residencies. It brings together local and international artists, researchers, activists, and thinkers, but it also reaches a wider audience with very diverse profiles, thanks to a broad variety of events and formats.

### **4.3. About FACT**

FACT (established 1989) enriches lives and shapes the future through film, art and creative technology. FACT uses its galleries and online platforms to create work that amplifies diverse voices, explores art, technology and science, and is reflective of contemporary society. We nurture diverse current and future generations of artists, imaginists, critical thinkers and audiences, supporting young people and emerging artists to gain confidence, skills and experiences that pave the way to enriching futures. FACT's award-winning building houses two large art galleries, three cinemas, a media and events space and learning spaces, and is warmly regarded as a major cultural institution in Liverpool. It was the first purpose-built arts venue in Liverpool for 60 years and has played a key role in the development and regeneration of the city's historic Ropewalks area. Since 2003, FACT has welcomed over 5 million visitors and commissioned and presented

over 350 new media and digital artworks from artists including Pipilotti Rist, Nam June Paik, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Wu Tsang, Ryoichi Kurokawa, Agnes Varda and Isaac Julien. FACT's learning and public programmes embed artists within community settings (including youth clubs, schools and prisons) and empower over 10,000 young people and adults each year from communities with little or no access to cultural activities. FACT has a reputation as one of the leading moving image and new media arts centres in the world, with international co-commissioning and touring networks attracting audiences of over 70,000 annually across Europe, East Asia, and North America.

#### **4.4. About WAAG**

Waag is a cultural institute, a social organisation and research institute. It operates at the intersection of science, technology and the arts, focusing on technology as an instrument of social change, guided by the values of fairness, openness and inclusivity. Waag reinforces critical reflection on technology, develops technological and social design skills, and encourages social innovation. Waag works in a trans-disciplinary team of designers, artists and scientists, utilising public research methods in the realms of technology and society. This is how Waag empowers as many people as possible to design an open, honest and inclusive future. Waag consists of twelve research labs that conduct research on various themes related to technology and society. These labs use research methods to empower as many people as possible to help design our future. We call this Public Research. The social environment and the perspective of citizens are central to it.

## **5. Conclusion: Key Discussion Points & Findings**

The digital transformation of public space has proved to be both a resource and a challenge to artistic research and experimentation. These circumstances affect individual creators, but most importantly imply a structural change in the way ideas are born, circulate and evolve in our society. Digital cultures have been one of the most important stages of this phenomenon, often torn between the incessant flow of popular creativity, new technological products, and the increasing irrelevance and invisibility of art production. Thinking and researching digital mediation in our society has become key to imagining new ways of working, making, seeing, and living together, and yet, there is an urgent need for new approaches to tackle multi-layered issues like climate collapse and the design of 21st century society. This includes radically new structures, narratives, and practical opportunities, also mediated by digital technologies, to fight gender inequalities, build a different framework of acceptance for disability, and the need for diversity and inclusion as the foundation of trust and cooperation in general. These issues seem inextricably bound to the cultural development of our society.

In both *Rendering Refusal* and the associated cultural events of transmediale's *Almanac for Refusal*, the invited artists and thinkers explored both failures and solutions carried out by digital transformation - from the totalitarian abuses and weapons of resistance resulting from technical progress in Patricia Domínguez' *Madre Drone* or Michelle Doyle's *Distance from Stone*, to the interspecies communication instruments imagined by Anne Duk Hee Jordan in *Atmospheres*



of *Breathing*, not to forget the obsolescence of the technological and social progress evoked by Laura Yuile in *Heavy View*. Offering partial renderings of socio-political realities that misalign with the status quo, the participants attempted to broaden perspectives on long-standing political conflicts and to shape futures from contradiction and difference. Working with strategies of non-compliance and negation, they presented small acts of domestic rebellion, created anti-monuments to myths, imagined failure as progress and manoeuvred between systems of governance.

FACT's *Framework for Resilience* conversations were apt and meaningful first events for our ARTSFORMATION public-facing programme. Both the content conversations between speakers and the nature of delivering the events online to a wide public, explored our changing relationships between humankind, technology and climate. The talks offered insights into social impact that colonial histories and the climate crisis might have on democratic processes and how practices centred on care and inclusivity might offer new models of working. The series of conversations also built connections with transmediale's *Almanac for Refusal* with questions around the nature of resilience emerging from an inherent position of refusing the status quo and what the social, political, cultural and technological implications of such a position might lead to.

The *Data Center Walk* by Waag is an embodied example of an artist perspective, in this case PostRational on the digital transformation. This critical perspective brings the bodies of the Waag walkers close to the physical spaces of the Data Centers. This embodied observation allows to immerse in the geographical context the centers are in, and the social dynamics around them. The observation allowed to think of the environmental impact of data centres, and accessibility: who works there, whose data is stored, and whose data isn't. These launching activities for the ARTSFORMATION project have laid the groundwork for future areas of research and production and helped identify points of intersection across the approaches taken by each institution implicated in the work package. Key amongst them is a desire to develop the next phase of the programme, the Culturalisation Workshops, individually and collectively across the institutions, through the development of shared events and resources. Within this, the emergent themes from the launch activities around the politics of knowledge production, refusal, and the possibilities to engender agency and social change through resilient forms of hope, care and desire will be further developed and explored. There is a strong focus on environmental sustainability and climate impact in these launch activities. Subsequent activities will aim to look at the systems of governance and control at governmental, social and institutional levels which frame this and what possibilities there are for refusal or rebuilding trust and care within such structures.

