

Beyond the Hybrid

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Lost Islands: Performative Expeditions at the End of the World

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ABSTRACT:

The island is a microcosm of entangled ecologies, histories and technologies, which also can act as a proxy for probing larger contemporary issues haunting human culture. To engage with this premise, we address “Lost Islands”, a participatory performance project that was realized for the Helsinki Biennial 2021 on the island of Vallisaari. The project consists of a series of performative expeditions that explore the island’s entanglements with nature and the disappearance

of geographies under infrastructure. By analyzing the site-specific methods of immersion and participation with the material and digital culture of the island, the authors theorize on how performance as a critical environmental narrative can reframe the submerged aspects of the island as a site of labor and energy.

KEYWORDS: performance, infrastructure, energy, labor, digital culture, racial capitalism.

Guide: “Lets start with the end of the world. We are done with the golden spikes. We are done with the dying calls of white geologies. The so-called Anthropocene is long past. Let us imagine what we are left with is nothing but just this island.” (Jemison, 2015; Yusoff, 2018).



Figure 1. A scene from Lost Islands. The Guide with the submarine cable.
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The guide pulls out a piece of a submarine cable from the sea, observed by an audience gathered by the seashore at the appointed time. The performance begins with the guide leading the group of attendees from the edge of the island to its innermost depths. The island is Vallisaari, a former military island in the Helsinki Archipelago in the Baltic Sea, and the scene is part of Samir Bhowmik's *Lost Islands* at the Helsinki Biennial 2021 (Bhowmik, 2021).

The project presents a series of performative expeditions that explore the island as a specific space of cables, signal towers, and other technological infrastructures and signs spread across a rural geography (Starosielski, 2015). Outside the white cube, the island serves as an outdoor performance and exhibition space that is narrated and performed with existing sites and ruins of buildings in order to meditate and reflect on the past, present and future of how humans subjugate nature with technology and infrastructure. The island has been for a longer period a particular topos of time – of another time and time out of joint. In this case though, the explicit aim of the narrative is to draw attention to the colonial roots of extractivism, technological acceleration, and environmental damage (Yusoff, 2018; Liboiron, 2021; Ghosh, 2021).

Consisting of site-specific performances combined with film and installation, the project explores such material and political underpinnings of digital culture in ways that also resonates with recent themes in media and art studies, for example, here, the contemporary condition becomes one of labor, infrastructure, and technology as those themes are teased out in an experiential form with a participatory performance (Bhowmik & Parikka, 2021). In other words, using immersive and participative methods, *Lost Islands* creates an intangible contact zone for participants and audiences beyond the gallery or museum space, yet is nonetheless an artificial space where arts of noticing are practiced (Tsing, 2015, pp. 17–25)

Guide: "This cable is our last connection to what remains of humanity. Rather this object of in-humanity is what we have to become familiar with. This becomes our only way to trace this lost island. And it has a fault that stretches over black and brown bodies... ..like the seismic fault lines of the earth. It came from there, from under the water, traveling thousands of miles, through seas and oceans, coral reefs, islands and continents...a complex body of nature and infrastructure connecting us, humans and non-humans alike."

Lost Islands traces an imaginary route of submarine cables through Vallisaari. The performative expeditions re-enact a series of immersive scenes of land survey, mineral extraction, fabrication of technologies, and recovery of waste. The expedition moves through forests, ruins, (imagined) mines, lakes and bunkers searching for a cable line fault. The cable itself is a device that provides a narrative motif – the last connection to the outside world, a theme depicted in much of post-apocalyptic literature and cinema too where signal spaces are the last remnants of other islands and other places. Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957) novel is a good Cold War period example. In Bhowmik's version, lingering and stranded bodies, both human and non-human are discovered, witness the damage to the land by machines.



Figure 2. A scene from *Lost Islands*. The Guide carrying the submarine cable through the island of Vallisaari, which is then handed off to the audience and the characters. ©Maija Toivanen/HAM/Helsinki Biennial 2021.

Unknown to the guide and the audience, four characters linger on various parts of the island, as remainders of a post-technological society of the present. They are the remnants of racialized labor – indigenous and immigrant people often from the Global South – who are essential in making the digital world. From miners, surveyors, fabricators, polishers, and scavengers, their bodies retain the memories of their roles and actions in the excavations, manufacture, and maintenance of the island. Their technical skills and knowledge help us to understand the materials available on the island, continuing their work as operators – not necessarily anymore of elaborate machines or the usual institutional functions as before, but still with references to a lingering legacy of an earlier racialized division of labor. They understand the life be taken care of alongside the unseen dangers, and ghosts that were present when the cable-line was constructed. Each contributes to or opposes the cable-line in different ways. Upon encounter, they perform and narrate to the guide and the audience their stories and experiences on the island through bodily enactments, installations and vocals at various locations. The island becomes many as it is divided not only by the dead labor of infrastructural remains but through the persistence of those voices encountered along the route. There is a shift in focus from extractive machines and bodies to their performative relations (Bhowmik & Parikka 2021). Characters activate particular processes and connect with multiple levels of nature and infrastructure – infrastructure becomes performed, it becomes people (Simone, 2004). Together they enact an ecology of relations.

Guide: “The blackness that exists in the geologic layers, has been appropriated,and carried forward in this cable. The cable tries to slither through the subterranean ...in close proximity of the black inferno, impersonating.....mimicking what it is not, Delivering oppression disguised as hope... So much so that this forced intimacy with the inhuman ...has been repurposed and reprogrammed for survival... But, if the oppressed body is just another form of information, then what use do we have of it anymore? If one is not the body..... then one can only be this cable.”



Figure 3. A scene from *Lost Islands*. Performance by the “Miner” who measures the land. ©Maija Toivanen/HAM/Helsinki Biennial 2021.

The cable articulates the real and the symbolic as it acts as both an ephemeral and tangible body that connects nodes, with possible diversions, as well as leaks. The cable and the pipeline have become emblematic political objects of our period (Starosielski, 2015; Malm, 2021) as they give a material face to the otherwise often imperceptible structuring forces of different kinds of flows from oil to waste and from information to finance (Szeman, 2017).

What then is the cable as a poetic object in midst of this political ecology? At some points, it draws strength and then at other places it leaks away. Performances become encounters with the leakages. Artifacts and installations become physical manifestations of the various nodes. This mix of multi-sensorial, tangible and ephemeral interruptions along the route mutually co-constructs the themes, providing spontaneous opportunities for their elaboration. The audience becomes a key participant too as they help to trace the cable route, in relaying information, in gathering data, and furthermore processing it as a collective, generating internal discussion and reflection. The group becomes, gradually, a data assemblage (Kitchin & Lauriault, 2018) to use a term from recent years of critical data studies. In some

ways, the body or chain of participants themselves start to do the work of infrastructure in ways that resonates with the earlier point – they become participants in carrying the unknown flows of knowledge (or material) of the cable. This shift from operations to operators is thus emblematic of the broader inclusion of labor – and maintenance – into the communicative circuits of how we make sense of technical environments too. The ultimate goal is that this human cable then expands beyond Vallisaari, across the sea and reaches the mainland, as a way of dissemination of the contentious topics of this project.

Guide: “This innocent cable travels like an obsessed demon. It crawls through historical and intentional deformations of the earth...that press the in-human and human together. This contact with the earth was possible only with mineralsminerals that were extracted by machines ...and work that subjugated humans. It was assumed that black and brown bodies could absorb everything:...exposure to toxic landscapes, to act as buffers against the slow violence enacted upon our earth. So, when we dig into the depths, what we find is fundamentally black. And, what we call utopia, is nothing but a black inferno (Wynter, 2003; Yusoff, 2018).”



Figure 4. A scene from *Lost Islands*. A performative encounter between two characters: the “Fabricator” and the “Polisher” by a fallen tree. ©Maija Toivanen/HAM/Helsinki Biennial 2021.

Much of our thinking about the role of the performance, narrative, and real and imagined objects of *Lost Island* resonates with John Durham Peters’ argument that “We know and use nature only through the artifacts we make – both out of nature and out of our own bodies – and these artifacts can enter into nature’s own history” (Peters, 2015). This resonates closely with the concept of medianatures (Parikka, 2015; Parikka, 2018, pp. 251–253) where our epistemic and aesthetic notions of nature

are framed through (advanced) media technologies that themselves are reliant on the very same flows of nature (materials, energy, externalization of waste) in a recursive chain of operations. The submarine cable has become today a part of so-called nature, as part of terraforming the sea, as something that is dependent on extractivism. Both extractivism and terraforming entangle geologies, technologies, and populations, not to speak of all things inhuman. While the notion of terraforming comes to the fore mostly in both 20th century science fiction and in recent years of speculative design (Scharmen, 2021; Bratton, 2020), it can be tracked back to histories that relate to paleoclimatologic accounts of agriculture, and even more so, colonial contexts of “infrastructuring”: such ecological interventions were central to colonialism, European settlement in Americas and Australia, enslavement of large populations, and such artificial territories of imprint as sugarcane and other plantations around the world (Kamugisha, 2016; See also Parikka, 2023).

Amitav Ghosh argues that “the explicit aim was to turn territories that were perceived to be wastelands into terrain that fitted a European conception of productive land” (Ghosh, 2021). The notion was that the land was savage, wild, and vacant, because it was neither tilled, nor divided into property. At the same time, other bodies were considered savage, wild and vacant. Among a repertoire of operations from bureaucracy to extraction, a significant element of such colonial power functioned by way of planting and creating plantations. Terraforming was formalized with the land being gridded, numbered, and assigned values. This involved also the physicality of labor – including enslaved labor by way of bodies, muscular energy, protein and carbohydrates that echo Achille Mbembe’s thoughts about the racial regimes of energy and labor (Mbembe, 2019; see also Silva, 2017). This genealogy of the project of terraforming enframes the world, the world-as-resource, in which landscapes (or planets) come to be regarded as factories and Nature is seen as subdued and cheap (Patel & Mooore, 2017).

Guide: “We are walking on an island, that is no longer one that we belong to.... or escape to.... To route the cables, the land was gridded and exploded, ...old trees and soft vegetation destroyed. Excavators, trenchers, bulldozers, drifters... ..and rock drills had invaded the landscape. Just like, back in the past, the ancestors of these earthmovers, had drilled away the bedrock,...flattening the ground, filling up the sea and ‘reclaiming’ territory that never was part of the continent. The topography is now changed,...the rains run to new man-made routes....the underground network of trees are all in disarray ...the relationships with the soil are displaced....now entangled with unknown flows.”

Land and sea as media have been the intense focus and bedrock of industrialization and construction of infrastructures since the Industrial Revolution. What was once only about the manufacture of products and the construction of highways, rails and bridges for resource extraction and exploitation has now extended to invisible submarine cable networks under the sea, remote data centres and telecommunications infrastructures to shape our digital culture. Topographies and terrains have disappeared in this quest. Islands that once housed diverse ecosystems lie buried under



Figure 5. A scene from *Lost Islands: A performative encounter between three characters: the “Miner”, the “Fabricator” and the “Polisher” by a toxic lake.* ©Maija Toivanen/HAM/Helsinki Biennial 2021.

power plants; undersea data cables and gas pipelines divide the ocean into exclusion zones; deep-sea mining and mineral extraction leave giant holes in the ground. Furthermore, the city expands into the sea through extensive land reclamation, leading not only to hardening of the shorelines that violently offload toxic runoffs into the sea, but also to disturbance of the chemical composition of water, gradually destroying marine habitats. Such islands – natural or artificial, or all artificial with varying degrees of intensity – are emblematic of both the hinterlands of capitalism (Brenner & Katsikis, 2020) and extended urbanism. Islands are emblematic stop-overs in the historical networks of trade routes and how planetary circulation of goods and enslaved peoples came to define also accumulation of wealth. As such, the relation of property and territory is a significant part of the idea of islands as sites of connection – or in this performance, as sites of disconnection too where the haunting continues with operations and operators that seem displaced but continuing a repertoire of actions and gestures learned across hundreds of years.

This angle to the artifice of islands begs the question as to how we can reformulate, retheorize the island – how does this theorization work in relation to the space of the performance, and how the performance can help to reframe these submerged aspects of island as a site of labor and energy?

Lost Islands challenges the way we think about the disappearance of not only islands or geographies under infrastructure but also racial capitalism in relation to technological supply chains as well as broader discourses such as of geoen-gineering. If one considers it as an environmental narrative it is populated by an

awareness of “anthropogenic alterations, strange agencies, and precarious human and nonhuman lives” that Stacy Alaimo (2016) calls for as the substantial base for critical environmentalisms.

Guide: “Islands are nothing but in a state of submergence. oppressed bodies struggle for surface, to even exist. The light that transmits through the cable re-arranges the light around us. Technology cuts our ties to the land. And leaves us dislocated. These toxic bodies are just the ghosts of technology ...and geology’s material modes of dispossession (Yusoff, 2018). Re-inscribing geology as a property of the human, you have to think about its former lives of inscription, ...not just those we currently search for (Yusoff, 2018). To run that beam of light through a glass fibre, ...one also has to encounter its side-effects.”



Figure 6. A scene from Lost Islands. A performance where the characters raise a radio balloon.
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According to Pugh and Chandler, “islands, whether overtly or tacitly and across a range of contemporary works – have generated new or alternative approaches to being and knowing in the Anthropocene” (Pugh & Chandler, 2021). Islands are not merely blank spaces for the development of contemporary thought – the fantasy and literary trope of an isolated or uninhabited island is part of the troubling legacy of earlier periods. This particular geographical form exists at several scales from small isles, rocks, and atolls to the size of a continent. Changing perspective, the earth can be said to be collection of islands. They are surrounded by water as they foster unique ecosystems. Islands feature as premodern and modern, including their central role as part of the emergence of modern forms of biological thinking, not

least Charles Darwin’s Galapagos expedition focusing on the question of “isolation”. Islands are also key sites and proxies of larger planetary issues of global warming, rising sea levels, waste, and disruptive weather patterns. At the same time, the environmental elements (of the island) have expanded from being perceived as mere natural ecology to infrastructural nodes. This is one emblem of how they become also artificial, as connected, as technological. Human-induced climate and geological change, the hallmarks of the Anthropocene might be better understood by multi-scalar approaches to the island not as an isolated ecosystem, but connected to larger planetary infrastructures.

Islands are also anthropogenic recording devices. To encounter and study the island (as a microcosm of entangled ecologies, histories and technologies) is one way to probe the larger contemporary issues haunting human culture. For instance, the logics of infrastructure and extractivism as inscribed onto its landscapes and architecture can be examined to uncover correlations with its bodies of labor, its organisms and its weather (Arboleda, 2020). To conceive of natural landscapes as inscriptions and as sensorial surfaces starts to speak to an alternative formulation of both data and witnessing (Offenhuber, 2019; Schuppli, 2020; Bhowmik & Parikka, 2018). As Kathryn Yusoff writes, such a form of inscription can also become a proxy way of framing different scales of anthropogenic impact: “The catastrophe of climate change is excessive and will inscribe all earthly space. It is earth writing writ large.” (Yusoff, 2009, p. 1010. See also Gil-Fournier & Parikka, 2024).

As a recording device, Vallisaari contains the inscriptions of both human and non-human agents – from the sonic scape of endangered bats to the pulsating flow of information and energy deep in the grounds of the island. As a stage and context for performance, it offers a heterogenous terrain, containing forests, ponds, decrepit military bunkers, rocky shorelines, abandoned buildings and wilderness trails. History collides with the present, nature confronts infrastructure, along with their actors and agents. Thus, the island serves not only as an outdoor exhibition space, but also a performative infrastructure to meditate and reflect on the past, present and future of how humans subjugate nature with technology and infrastructure.

Guide: “The infrastructure of the wired has transformed and now celebrated as wireless-ness. But the wirelessing of the Planet and the island has only enslaved it further. Before we were chained as labor to the land, now we are chained from the skies above.”

Helsinki and its surroundings are a case in point of an extended urbanism with an archipelago of natural and artificial islands. While the whole area, like any other urban and sub-urban area, could be coined as a proxy of Anthropocene, measured through air and soil and other chemical and physical changes, we can focus on Vallisaari as a specific case of an Anthropocene island (Pugh & Chandler, 2021). It is replete with natural and infrastructural entanglements, elements of medianatures as mentioned earlier (Parikka, 2018, pp. 251–253). As one of the most bio-diverse islands in the Helsinki archipelago, it has over 415 existing species. A diverse ecosystem has prospered in the lush forests, meadows and ponds combined with the



Figure 7. A scene from *Lost Islands*. The final scene of the performance where all the characters let go of the submarine cable and gather to acknowledge the futility of reaching the other shore. Photo Credits: Samir Bhowmik, Christopher L. Thomas.

ruins of fortresses, caves and buildings. The unintentional re-wilding of Vallisaari has continued, entangled with the legacies and leftovers of military infrastructure that also for a long time included military waste such as ammunition (Bhowmik, 2020). In between military occupations and abandonments, the island was transformed into an ecological paradise, now to be once again drawn into the sphere of the infrastructural by culture and tourism development (Bhowmik, 2020). As such, part of this echoes the theme of exclusion zones and their relation to “rewilding”, as in the case of Chernobyl after the 1986 nuclear accident. Of course, Vallisaari is not a contaminated site of such proportions as Chernobyl and our intention is not to lessen the much more significant levels of contamination at the Ukrainian nuclear site. But we can draw a series of images – of sites and landscapes as images – that constitute the islands of “zones” across the planetary surface with varying levels of contamination or other forms of waste that define their role as both memories of the past slow violence of technology (Nixon, 2011; Parikka, 2016) and as sites of an on-going or projected development.

Biennials, of course, are one face of such development with an often difficult relationship with themes of sustainability. As such, one can see that the Helsinki Biennial also operationalises the island as infrastructure that needs water, data, and energy to sustain it as a site of exhibitions (Bhowmik, 2020). In the view of Helsinki Biennial 2023 there is also, however, sustained awareness of such key conditions as part of the curatorial thinking, with a recognition of the needed subtlety in how the natural environments can be framed through artistic and curatorial interventions.

As such, the question for artistic and curatorial thinking is about how to be aware of such sensitive locations as Vallisaari, not as “pristine nature” nor as mere

resource, but as an entanglement of nature and infrastructure. Water, sewage and data infrastructure, including submarine cables and 5G towers, co-inhabit the island with the many species and vegetation. Histories of colonialism, war and occupation mingle with issues of Baltic Sea contamination, along with shipping routes and submarine cable landings. The natural aspects of the island are irrevocably connected with the built environment. Although, extensive application of land-reclamation in Helsinki is yet to extend to Vallisaari and the neighboring Suomenlinna, they are for all purposes infrastructurally ‘reclaimed’ (by data, water and sewage networks) and connected to the ‘mainland’ fabric of the city. While other culturally ‘insignificant’ islands in the Helsinki archipelago have been long since been absorbed into the city limits by continuous infill of the sea, and as a result disappeared, and retain traces as a place name or rocky outcrops, or in archives.

Guide: “Everyone hopes for an island. At some point or the other. Whether it is black or white. Sometimes you search for your island and conquer it, ...and sometimes the dream of the island is just a symbol ...for what is one step beyond reach... ..you think of privacy, remoteness, intimacy, ...a rounded whole without bridges or fences. ..Sheltered and isolated by the water..that appears to be the only open horizon given to you.” (Jansson, 2019)

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Note

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DEEP HYBRID – LATEST DEVELOPMENTS