

# Rethinking Symposia ... as Systems

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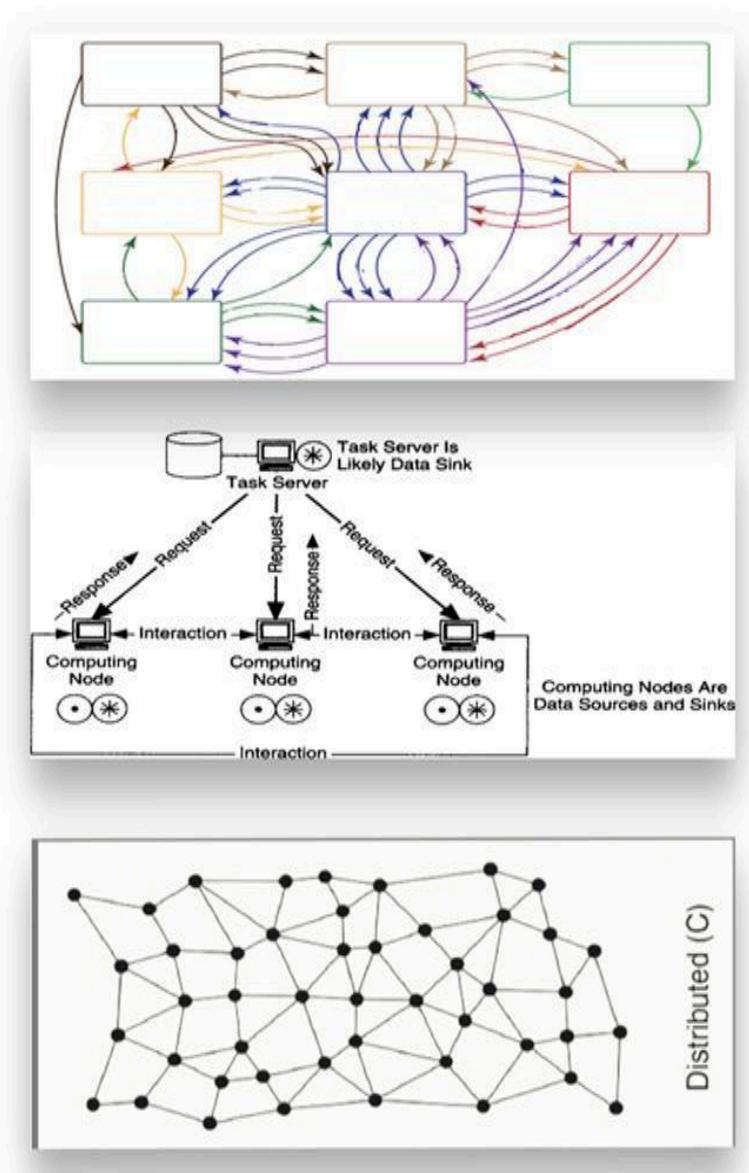
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## Foreword

This piece of writing was developed through two workshops I ran with Daphne Dragona, attended by several other people with experience in arts participation. The idea I had was to experiment with a proposition for modeling symposia, inspired by 'distributed computing' (a method for doing computing tasks across multiple machines in different locations), machine learning, and ecological systems thinking, such as permaculture. What follows is a reflection on the workshop results and a proposal for rethinking symposia in the context of challenges offered by Covid-19, the climate crisis and the post-digital age. Rethinking Symposia as Systems is a provocation to think holistically about the energies and information and forms of collectivity that constitute arts symposia, and how to refit them with bespoke formats and orientations that produce new kinds of sustainable proposition. I finish with a practical proposition for a kind of expanded, distributed symposium-system composed of variously situated specialist groupings, to supplement/replace the traditional notion of a symposium-moment which situates people in space and time.

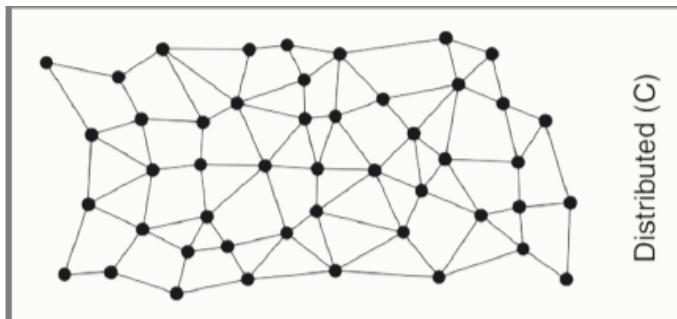
## Using Systems Diagrams

"Different frameworks are appropriate for different stages of planning"



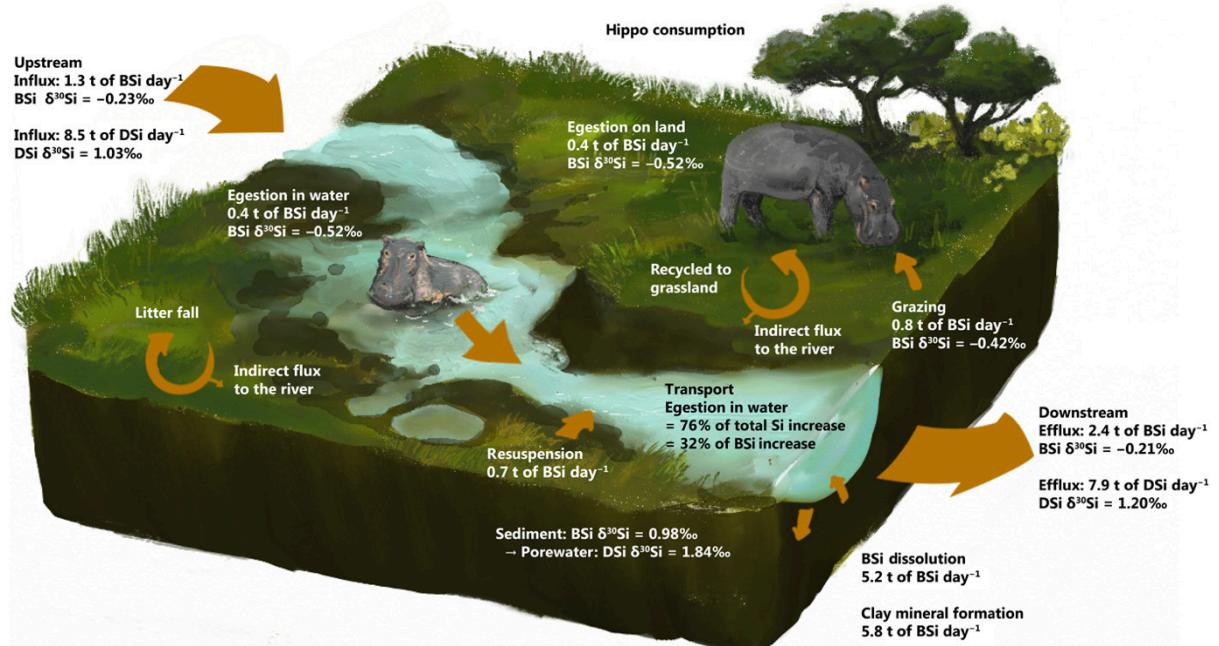
I derived a three-stage process for rethinking symposia, each based different kinds of systems diagrams.

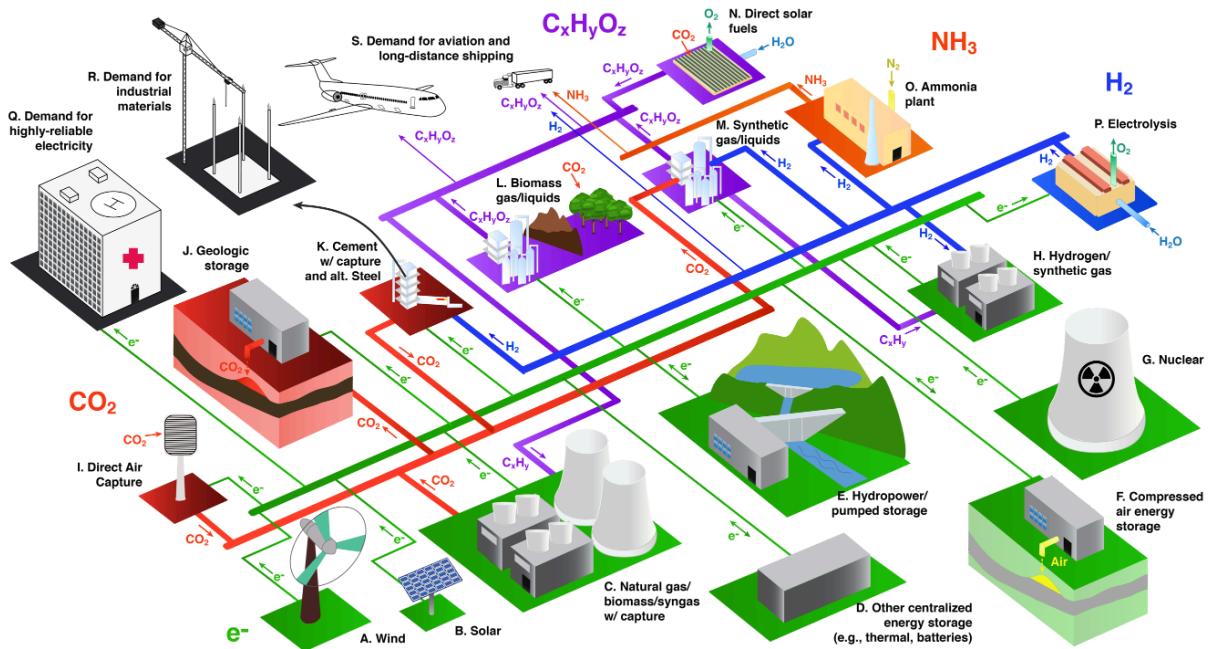
Stage 1: Mapping the situation. Distributed and decentralised network diagrams articulate the crisis of hierarchy faced by art symposia systems today.



Experts, Audiences, Artists, Artworks, Technologies

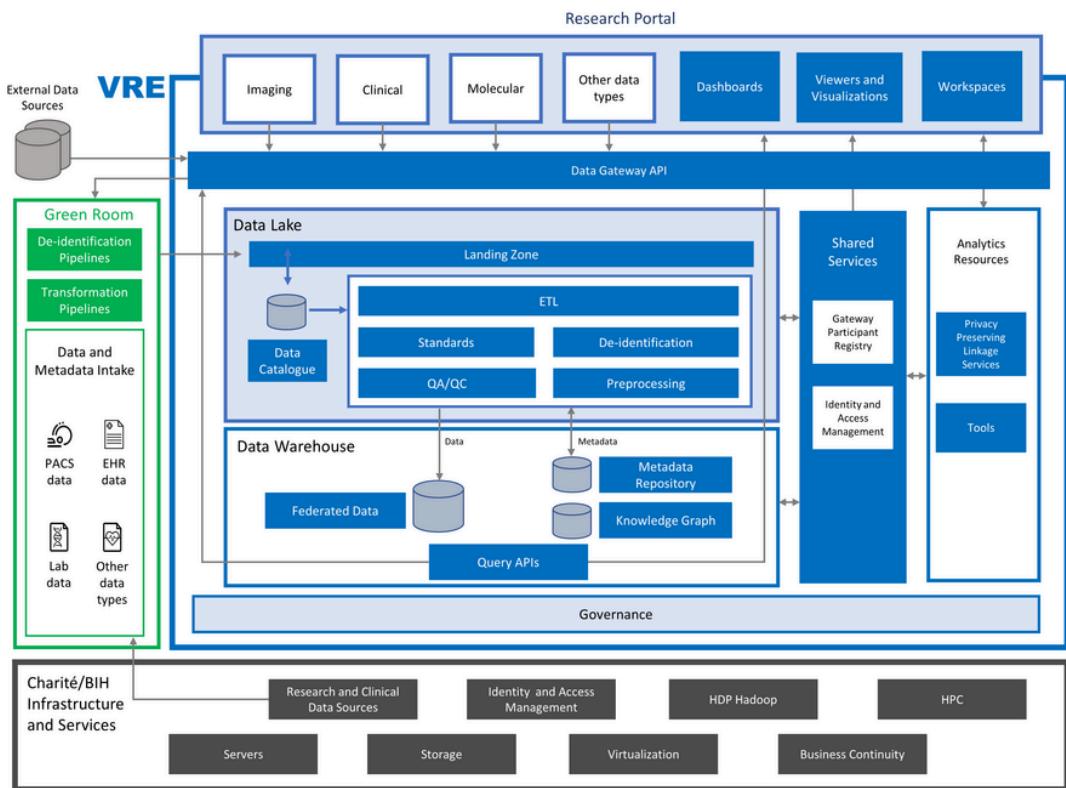
Stage 2: Showing the principle. Permaculture and other ecosystem diagrams are good for diagramming the relation between the forces, energies, stores and flows in a given system. Energy grid diagrams are good models for showing how to combine production, storage, use, recycling, in holistic ways. They echo the permaculture approach of trying to achieve close-loop systems.





I use "energy" in this section to name the property that art symposia can have in abundance, distinguishing them from other fields' symposia and conference activities. The provocation here is to think of the relation between the energy and knowledge functions of critical art practices, and the storage and re-distribution mechanisms the organisation can have.

Stage 3: The practical dimension. I suggest that the distributed computing model can be used to illustrate the potential for small variously tasked, diversely constituted groups to work independently while receiving and processing energy and informatic tasks from a central hub.



## STAGE 1: Mapping the Situation

### Rethinking Symposia as Systems

Digital Arts of the kind NEoN produces contain complex ecologies of thinking, knowledge making, politics, technology, audiences, and organisations. Its value is contained in its critical relation to the world. Critical has three functional meanings here,

1. *inclined to criticise severely and unfavorably*  
*"His critical temperament cost him several friends."*  
*... exercising or involving careful judgment or judicious evaluation*

2: *of, relating to, or being a turning point or specially important juncture*  
*a critical phase*

3: *of sufficient size to sustain a chain reaction —used of a mass of fissionable material* —*a critical mass*

Meaning that critical new media art works on three critical vectors

As I see it, these can be taken as the purpose of NEoN Digital Arts symposia:

- INFORMATION: makes propositions and judgements about new media (as a manner of suggesting things might be otherwise), and embodies a temperament of sceptically knowing new media
- ENERGY: is an art practice that appears at critical (media) moments of transformation and breakdown, at critical moments for the world

- c) MASS: is an agent of change, a collective enterprise that gathers and transforms its environment

### Critical = Crisis.

The term critical is an extension of “crisis”, and I want to think about the notion that the symposia itself is in crisis, via the triumvirate meaning of critical: as judgement, as moment and as gathering force. The symposium is in crisis, but also a symposium is a kind of crisis because it is a critical tool, it is a tool for knowing, a moment in time, a gathering towards tipping points. Many of the default decisions that promoted symposia historically to their current primacy in discourse channels, has been bifurcated.

As I see it, these are the problems NEoN Digital Arts symposia face

- a) INFORMATION: The idea that a symposium is a subject specific thing is bifurcated by the increasing dissolution of subject silos, and the atmosphere of interdisciplinary (where one field draws from the methodologies in other fields) and multi-disciplinary (where people from a variety of different fields combine their expertise) practices. The question of media has become imbricated in every aspect of our lives. The post-digital moment is one where the ideals of the digital – its capacity to provoke positive change from ‘pure’ innovation, its immateriality and democratisation of knowledge and power – have collapsed into deeply problematic labour, industry and political practices. At the same time, it is hard to conceive of any kind of living-in or knowing-about the world (including knowing about the problems of the post-digital situation) that doesn’t involve the use of inherently unknowable, or at least obscure, digital media. Knowing the digital and using the digital to know requires a thoroughly interdisciplinary approach. With this, we might also observe that the anglophonic hegemony of mainstream or general intellects might be displaced, introducing new problematics and opportunities for translation, and other forms of lexical-matching inherent when people from different worlds meet. Knowledge is produced collaboratively, or emerges from combinations and frictions between adaptive knowledge areas and worlds.
- b) ENERGY MOMENTS: The idea that a symposium is a time-limited ‘event’ has been bifurcated by combined iterations of, shorter *synchronous* and, longer-term, even endless, *a-synchronous* modes of interaction. And the idea that a symposium is a gathering of people in a space for learning has been bifurcated into multiple actual and virtual kinds of gathering. Symposia are hosted across multiple urban locations, embedding them in the ecologies of community and industry; they happen simultaneously across multiple globally distributed locations; they happen in online locations with contributors who remain in their own homes, offices, or even on-the-move.
- c) MASS & COLLECTIVITY: The “big name” keynote speaker who attracts audiences and defines the ambition and scope of the event, is problematised particularly during Covid-19, as access to these people’s talks became more available via online linkups and recently recorded sessions from around the globe. Instead, intersections of more minor voices on apparently marginal issues have become as attractive and popular. There is a challenge here to the economic model of tickets fees, grants from collective sources supplementing fees for individuals. The beneficiaries of a symposium also do not have to be individuals representing a field, but could be representatives of other kinds of partner, a community, a political standpoint, an individual ‘for themselves’, a collection of individuals who together decide to attend.

Covid-19 has accelerated the crises of knowing and doing, of the time-limit, of the forms of collectivity in symposia, but it has not caused them. Much of what the participants in the workshops observed was to do with the post-modern bifurcation of traditional power hierarchies and the distribution of time and place opened up by the internet and associated social forms, and the increasing presence of climate collapse over the last few decades. The symposia crisis is not at all an existential danger for art symposia, because we still require (perhaps more than ever) the interpretative and social mechanism of these systems; rather this is a crisis that demands we rethink symposia on these lines:

Perspective, Judgement: What will it include? What level of detail is needed? How widely or narrowly can it be defined?

Moment, Change: How long will it take? When and where will it happen? What will change?

Mass, Collectivity: Who should come? Who should benefit? Who is it for?

The bifurcation and dissolution of hierarchies, puts these questions into relation with one another in a distributed fashion.

## STAGE 2: Showing the principle.

### Critical Ecologies

"The art world is an ecosystem. Institution are hippos. The important thing is the whole, birds fish insects. metaphors - biodiversity, Health of the whole ecosystem? Hippos provide poo!"

### *Materialities*

Critical ecologies<sup>1</sup> is a term usually used to refer to our critical responsibility towards the environment. But it can also refer to the relations of critical work in the arts. And it can include, now, the symposium, particularly in its newly mediatised and bifurcated form.

Media ecologies is a term by Matthew Fuller<sup>2</sup> that describes the a media system as complex object formed of processes, or elements in a composition. In his -ology of the media ecosystem he tries to capture them as "informational, but without forgetting their fundamental materiality".

From the workshop responses, I learned that material concerns are fundamental to the existence of symposia, even as the symposia's knowledge frameworks, moments, communities and hierarchies are broken up. In fact, perhaps materialities – in particular those of the body – are the factor common to all historical examples of symposia thinking. Plato's symposium ends, not with Socrates' speech, but rather with Socrates' discourse becoming lost in successions of drunken-interruptions, members falling asleep, waking and, finally Socrates himself taking his leave; the ongoing discourse is punctuated by gaps of attention and frayed across different times and spaces until the book itself loses focus.

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<sup>1</sup> Eg. <https://criticalecologies.gold.ac.uk>

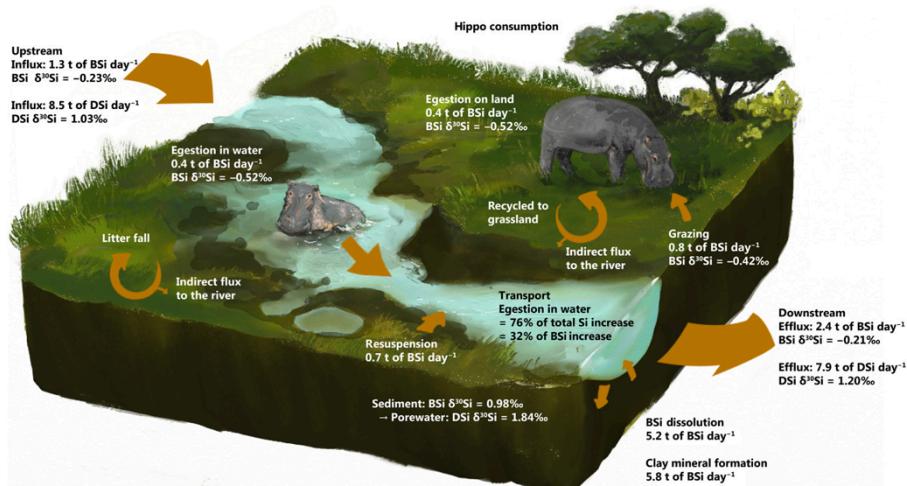
<sup>2</sup> <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/media-ecologies>



The materialities of the body sitting in a room, energised by artistic performance, or depleted by screen-time; the eyes that droop; the attention that wanes; the face that appears eager, willing the current speaker on; nodding or shaking heads; all are integral to symposia, they are energy-nodes that the symposia produces and recycles. Alvin Lucier's *I am sitting in a room*<sup>3</sup> exemplifies the additional media-materialities of the situation by re-recording and playing back his voice, amplifying the presence of the echoes of the amplification and recording system most symposia are subject to. The media materiality of internet, causing bandwidth disparity, also provides a material continuum with historical power-distributions. The fundamental materiality of the informative system of symposia provides a slower time of symposia rethinking, preventing us from thinking the present crisis as a clean break with the past.

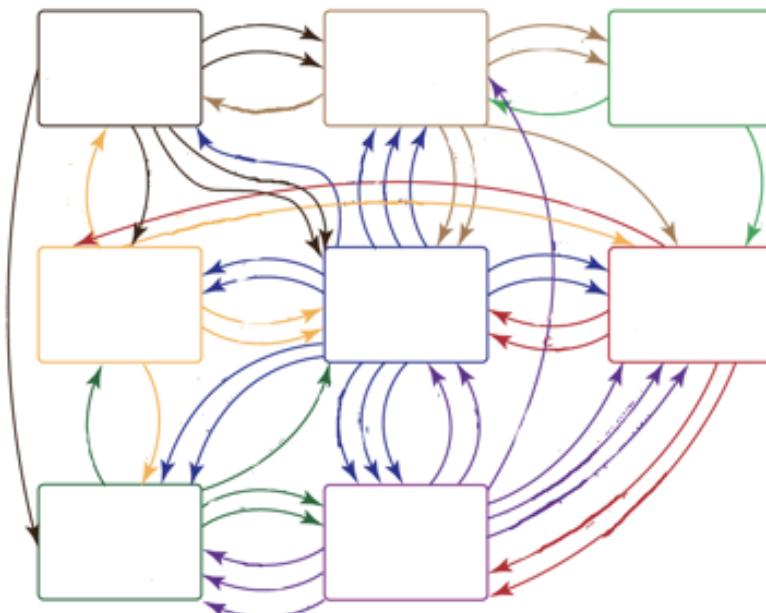
The word ecology also brings to mind a variety of methods for understanding and mapping our environments as material systems. These are the models that accommodate the informational and material - understanding these as different vectors for energy, in particular.

Ecologists diagram the flows of different nutrients through a local environment through food, waste, wearing, birth.



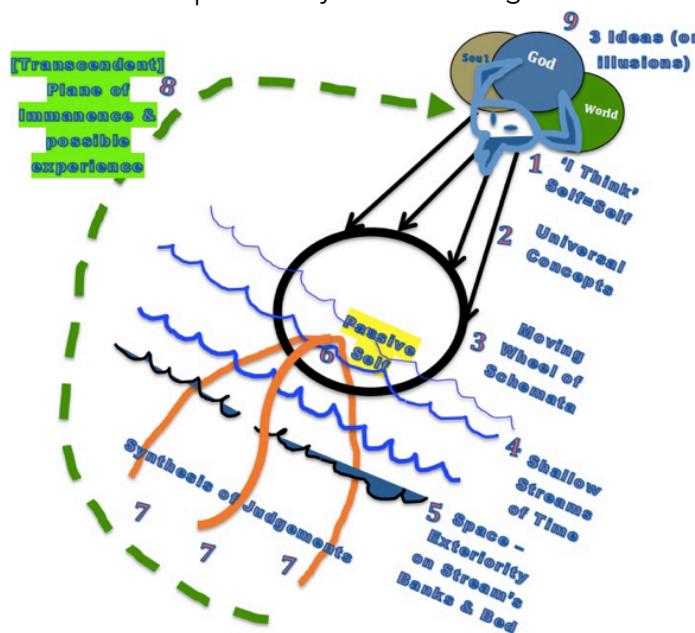
<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAxHILK3Oyk>

Permaculturists try to map a system of such flows and make adaptations in order to produce 'closed loop' systems that retain and reuse energy, drawing one area of surplus into a lack in another.



Boxes: Funding bids, Artworks, Exhibitions, Talks, Archives  
 Lines: Nerves, Excitement, Conversation, Funding

Deleuzian conceptions of the system and the ecology inspire weird diagrams where conceptual energies, such as judgement and illusion combine and interface with more conventional aspects of systems thinking such as time and persons.



*Emergency*

Fuller was inspired by the process philosophy, ideas of emergence, notion of multi vector spaces in Deleuzian philosophy. In *Life After New Media* Kember and Zylinska<sup>4</sup> describe the media situation similarly, as composed of processes, temporary arrangements of elements, from which 'things' like phones, networks, computers emerge.

Things merge in ecosystems. And things emerge from symposia-systems in crisis. In the workshops, it was proposed that 'common purpose' emerges for example. But what else might emerge? And how to allow the time and space to observe, dictate that what emerges from symposia can grow and develop. The emergence of media devices informs media ecologies, the emergence of energy, mass and information products from symposia should shape the art ecology.

Thinking about symposia as complex objects, ecologies, systems, processes, elements in composition, is thinking about them as momentary, emergent, informational, with fundamental materialities: "after symposia" perhaps, but with the same energy and 'thingness' that we know of the symposia that we (sometimes) love. The challenge here is to capture and recycle what emerges, in ways that reflect the positive loops of permaculture and natural ecologies, rather than having the art symposium engender 'products' with shelf lives, built-in obsolescence, as in the media ecology.

#### *Situated*

"There's something that happens to us when we move from our own/known environments... good and bad"

It is really not clear whether there will be a collective rejection of travelling for symposia, or a 'renaissance' of in-person, located activity in the wake of national lockdowns. Probably it will be somewhere between these.

Lockdown conditions have opened up the range of things that symposia can be. They have fragmented possible and actual audiences. De-emphasising location and time-based activities. Moving from own/know environments is not purely a geographical or even spatial definition. People have certainly started to develop new awareness of the 'etiquette' of attendance, via online portals. This echoes the discomfort many feel in real life, but is felt by different people.

Certainly, the question of access and exclusion, or the spectrum of these we could call 'situatedness' is not any more solely to do with geographical or even network centrality. We can think of the symposium as a multi-dimensional latent space, with vectors of situatedness including time, money, intellectual investment, work, speciality, interest, dis/ability, knowledge, skills. We are separated and situated in relation to one another in the intellectual and energetic mass-space of the symposium. Situated knowledges is a term used by Donna Haraway to describe the importance of social location and contextual advantages of a researcher in the development of scientific knowledge. All attendees were not created equal. Artworks, speeches, workshops, performances, posters, books, food, conversation, accident. All content is also distributed across the latent space of the symposium. Overlapping with attendees. To create concepts in relation. Bring disparate singularities into relation. Potentials into relation.

What vectors attendees situate themselves on depends on the control exhibited by the symposium form. Distances and proximities between people and presenters, one

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<sup>4</sup> <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/life-after-new-media>

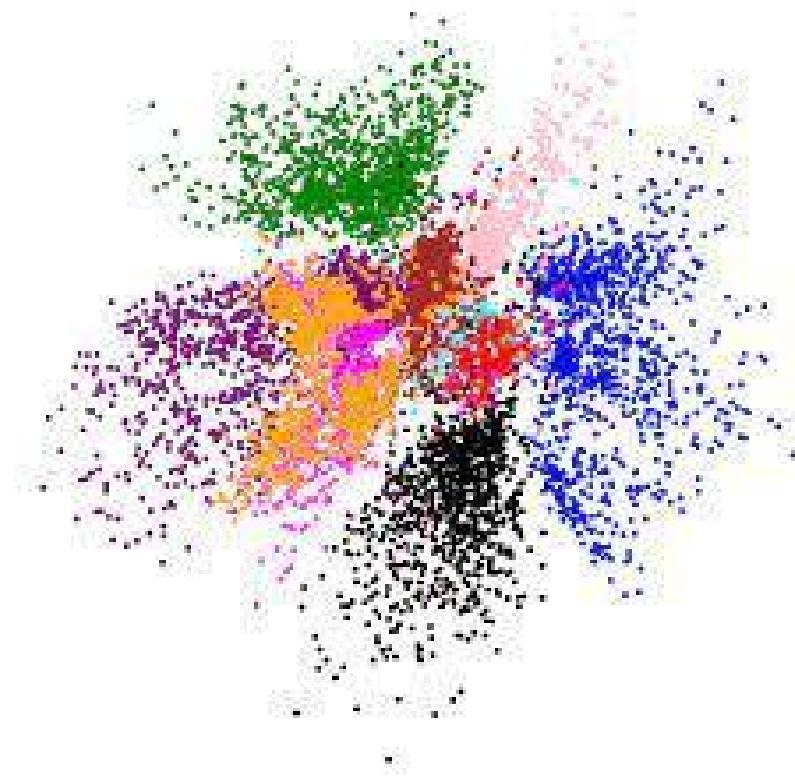
presentation and another, a question and an answer. Each of these can be thought and brought into a kind of proximity-distance equation by the systems diagram.

We can resituate information in relation to what is "known", or what we "know" or "feel" in relation to information

We can resituate events close or faraway from power centres in space and time

We can resituate people and clusters in relation to others, forming new tipping-point masses.

What is important and possible, is that the organisation know their own vector of situatedness in relation to any given community, sector, individual. Ways of being close.



### The Kludge

"each participant's own purpose doesn't necessarily have to add up to ONE common purpose"

Uncommon purposes produce a complex of compatibility issues. As with media systems, each node of engagement in a diverse symposia system comes with its own compatibility issues: issues of language, of access, of locality, of timing, of ethics. Which each open onto deep complex systems of their own. Compatibility between local staging, and global themes, globally distributed audiences. Compatibility between the technical and conceptual complexity of the project and the time, space, knowledge, language of audiences and the organisation. Compatibility between the ambition of the artist and curator and the resources and audiences through which the work can be understood.

The issue of compatibility, and in particular the combination of human, common, and media compatibilities that characterise the symposium in crisis, brings to mind the startling work

done with compatibility by glitch artists working with the *kludge*<sup>5</sup> as a method. The kludge is a method for combining things 'in a pinch' (an emergency for example), jamming wires into ports, so that information and power just about flows, or flows irregularly and with spontaneous extraneous and unpredictable results. Viewed negatively, the kludge is a temporary fix, and results in low-efficiency, poorly rendered transmission; viewed another way, the kludge makes the energy of a system into an aesthetic, it is a "critical sensory"<sup>6</sup> exposition of the system, destructing its preconceived informatic regime in return for new energetic potentials.

All symposia today are kludged arrays of speaker, art, audience, spectator, curator, venue, just about coping with the expediencies of the contemporary moment. These nodes are 'jammed' together to work 'in a pinch', balancing compatibility through a number of more or less unsuitable contingencies. Timing is everything in this context, the pinch-point is a node of energy and a place where information throws itself into new shapes, dissolves into noise. In short, the kludge's working allows for flows of information, by turning the symposia system into a tangible energy. The issue of energy is key to this conversation around the symposia system. Energy is what we gather from being together, from the weird encounter, as 'aura' it is the magical thing given by the presence of artist, art object; it is also the free form of potential information.

## Energy as the Distinctive Proposition of Art Symposia

Energy is scarce: fuel, personal resources, reasons to go on.

Energy is depleted by Zoom calls.

Energy is what NEoN offer to those outside the network – audiences especially

Energy is generated in negative conversations, arguments; and positive ones, laughter.

Energy is the *frisson* of bodies

Energy is people power, "anger is an energy"

Energy is the dissolution of information. So energy and information have an inverse relationship.

Energy is also the name for the weird moments that only art, and even the seemingly technically oriented brand of art that is critical new media, can produce.

It is a name for the vibe produced in an arts event. What the art event gives to a city, to its audience, to its community. But it cannot be easily stored, outside of the critical mass of the symposia moment.

Symposia then, can give and take away energy and are energetic centres.

In a large part, energy is what funders expect from NEoN, and what NEoN has to produce from raw materials

Arts symposia have a particular excess of energy transfers. Critical and physical energies. Administrative and aesthetic energies that are poured into the events and manifest as gloriously wasteful happenings

But these energies are often diffused unhelpfully into the environment or the body. Stress, heat, critical frictions.

It is obvious to observe that people have finite amounts of energy, parcels of which they are willing to contribute to attending arts and discourse events, sometimes for payment,

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/09/the-appropriately-complicated-etymology-of-kluge/499433/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://networkcultures.org/\\_uploads/NN%234\\_RosaMenkman.pdf](https://networkcultures.org/_uploads/NN%234_RosaMenkman.pdf)

sometimes paying for the opportunity. Energy and knowledge exchange have a financial dimension on this basis. People who are paid to put energy into the festival. People who pay to be recharged. People who pay to exchange knowledge for energy. The breakdown of knowledge in excessive arts happenings. Those, fewer, who pay to exchange of their attention-energy for knowledge. Energies are therefore a resource that can be bought and sold by the arts organisation; a kind of ghost of the information economy unique to the creative 'industries', stored within the mass of the organisation, as information. This observation aligns with the scientific principle of mass, energy, information equivalence<sup>7</sup>.

## Information, Energy, Mass

Remember criticality is about

- a) INFORMATION coming to know something, particularly the media situation, reflexively judging and understanding, thinking otherwise. Art ecologies usually have this dimension as an adjunct, as art criticism, but in critical media arts, coming to know, producing information about a media ecology, is a built in 'feature'.
- b) ENERGY energetic moments, tipping points between one and the next. Moments of decomposition, release, excess, transformation. Understood in the art context, we can understand the critical juncture of the performance, when we are lost or won over by the performance fiction; the critical moment of the experience, when we burst into tears, laugh, feel ourselves dissolve. What we know about the media ecology is broken down in the emergency of the critical media art work, releasing energy.
- c) MASS critical mass, collective, energetic gatherings, enigmatic points in space that draw proximate and alike things towards them, gathering speed and weight as they tear through what is pre-existing, acquiring increasing amounts of mass-energy. Arts organisations often gain and lose critical mass as they move through various cycles of their operation. Critical mass of funding, critical mass of audiences, of ideas.

One question for rethinking symposia using INFORMATION, ENERGY, MASS is: what is the relationship between the criticality of art as a knowledge-producing thing, and the critical moment of the art experience with its excesses of energetic transfer? How can the organisation turn energies given and taken by symposia into an accumulation of some sort? An energy library. A vibe-rary? Probably not. So how can the energies of the single event be channelled into the mass-organisation to propel it into its next loop of informatic-energetic activity? My feeling is that interpretation is necessary for this purpose.

## INTERPRETATION: TURNING ENERGY into INFORMATION

Perhaps the way that art's energies are stored is as information. An information that can be recorded, developed, amplified, transmitted, awaiting the moment it is broken down in the fissile moment of the art event, or debate: that is, turned back into a primary energy.

Perhaps the key to achieving great transmission between the critical energies of art, the criticalities of the moment, and the kind of knowledge art contains, the criticalities of the proposition, the judgement is interpretation.

The kludged symposium event is an energy-rich fissile information destruction. The debate, the performance lecture, the intimate zone of discussion and co-discovery, friendships emerging, breakdowns. The critical media artwork is an information-rich energetic mass, where the artistic methodology is deployed in such a way that it interprets and unfolds knowledge from its immediate environment. The organisation's network and adaptive 'core'

<sup>7</sup> <https://aip.scitation.org/doi/full/10.1063/1.5123794>

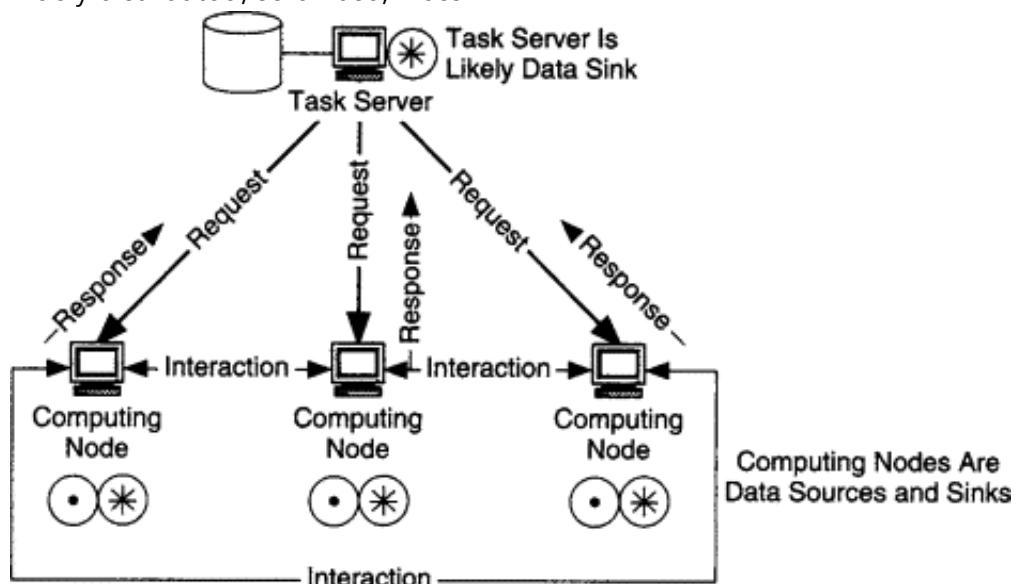
epitomise the transformation of critical new media art's mass effect as it moves through moments of gathering, shedding, explosion, coalescing. The symposia needs to be a critical tool with information, energy and mass dimensions.

It is the function of the symposium and the arts event to achieve information, mass, energy transmission. We can think of this transmission as *interpretation*, when it refers to energy>information, and *fission*, when it refers to information>energy transfer. The important element of this is that the organisation cannot meaningfully store the energy it produces other than as "mass"<sup>8</sup>, collectives of people, and "information", whether interpretation or otherwise.

## STAGE 3: The Practical Dimension

"dynamic governance to form a reciprocal culture- to build organic ownership"

Distributed computing actually doesn't run on a distributed network. It runs in a decentralised way, with peripheral processing nodes connected to a central processor/display node, which offers instructions and receives calculations. The central node is often, but not always, the only way that the peripheral nodes communicate with each other. Why distributed computing is useful, is that it allows for specific tasks to be given to specialised machines, or particular kinds of attention and energy mechanisms, and for kinds of storage to be enabled, as 'cloud' infrastructure. The cloud has a huge, but widely distributed, so diffuse, mass.



Task Server: NEoN Digital Arts

Computing Node: Audience-Artist groups (each v different, different kinds of participant/sizes)

The decentralised model of distributed computing is the most realisable method for rethinking symposia as [information-energy-mass equivalence] systems. Practically, this means that NEoN Digital Arts should be looking to set up representative "batteries"

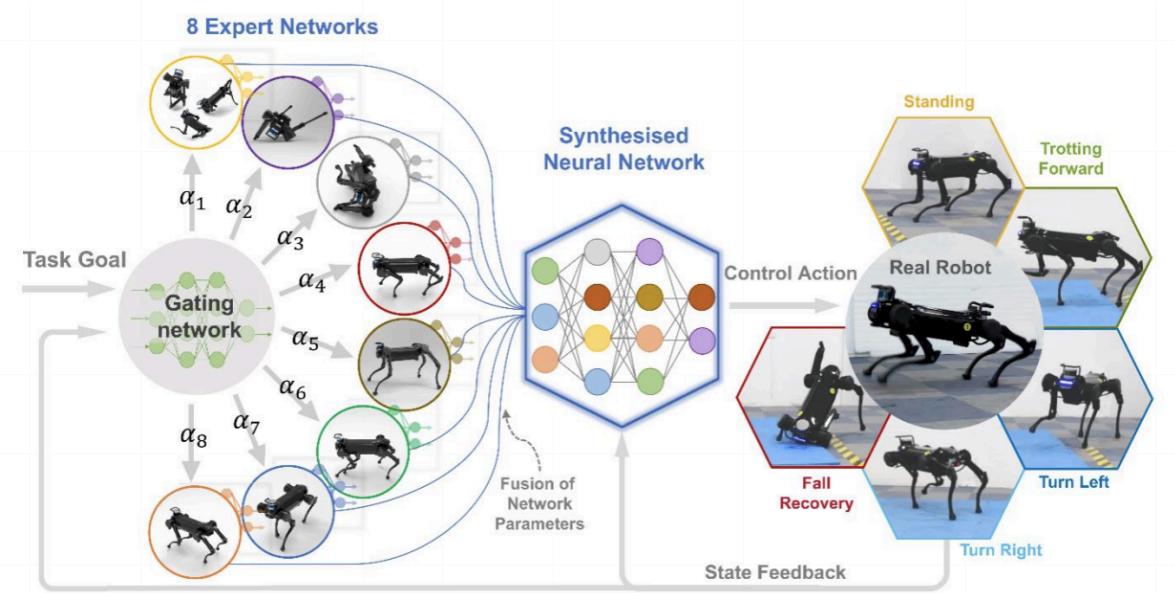
<sup>8</sup> Derived from a different etymology, the liturgical Mass in the Catholic church also refers to a 'dismissal'. This kind of Mass precisely acknowledges the transfer of information-energy into the congregation who are told "now go" to spread the word. We can think of the art symposium as such a mass, also.

"processors" "collective" peripherals that increase their sustained mass in an efficient way, and that speak to and receive instructions from the core organisational unit. These peripherals can at different moments be engaged in energetic fissile breakdown of information and knowledge, in the arts happening/event, and the interpretation of existing artistic energies into information for transmission back to the core unit.

Small groups can be composed of paid/unpaid attendees over various durations, formed for day-long, even hour-long specific activities; but what they do will be lost if the grouping is disperse before its energies are turned into a knowledge/informatic form, interpreted for and by the core unit. While they're constituted, the peripheral groups can contain their energy as a mass. Experts, specialists, whose relationships unfold over time, fission and interpretation happening internally and reliably: vibraries.

### Multi-expert Learning Architecture

In recent advances in a kind of distributed computing with kinds of artificial intelligence called "Deep Neural Nets" (DNN), describe ways of combining groups of DNN 'expert' groupings within a fluid and responsive system. A Multi-expert Learning Architecture (MELA)<sup>9</sup> is a method where trained and (and training) DNNs are connected together dynamically "the advantages of trained expert skills and the fast online synthesis of adaptive policies". The authors of a recent paper observe that "during runtime, MELA constantly blends multiple DNNs and dynamically synthesises a new DNN to produce adaptive behaviours in response to changing situations."



Rethinking symposia as systems, we can understand the organisation's role as blending and synthesising multiple interest groupings, communities; dynamically producing new groupings, and new connections between these, to produce an adaptive responses to its own changing situation: its versions of 'control actions' in this diagram, seen by audiences etc.

My provocation is for NEoN Digital Arts to understand its role in producing an ongoing symposium-like environment in which MLEA are formed by producing kinds of situatedness, with various energy and informatic vector relations to the core unit of the organisation. Bringing people from different interest and knowledge kinds into the same space, allowing

<sup>9</sup> <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2012.05810.pdf>

for energetic information-knowledge fission; enabling geographically disparate groupings to 'connect' around a particular subject or object about which they have a shared insight; engendering personal connections among people and community representatives over longer time periods, whose insights can be stored and re-activated. Remembering it is perhaps not possible to store-transfer energy, other than as interpreted information.

## The Considerations for Producing an Ongoing Symposium System

For the MLEA groupings, each requires:

- an engineered or existing proximity, a shared situatedness
- a vector of relation to the central unit
- resources: money, time, other energies: 'reasons/means'
- an energetic fissile methodology (a mode for breaking down knowledge, turning it into artistic thingness)
- a mode for sustaining its shared situatedness "critical mass" until its inherent energies can be interpreted as transferable or stored information: storable outputs are only informatic
- unless immediately proximate to another node in an energetic momentary
- an informatic relation to the central organisational unit

For the core unit:

- the capacity to form and resource groupings over various durations, distinct to the needs and environment
- a fluid and responsive method for understanding what forms of proximity and duration can be used in constituting groupings (groupings in other organisations, groupings of theme-specific kind, groupings that are task-specific)
- resourcing the groupings with financial and resource energies, and an awareness of how individual members of groupings need to be resourced at a given moment
- a continual, responsive, informatic relation to the groupings, exchanging 'tasks' for 'answers', and processing diverse outputs into new tasks
- forming useful, discrete links between groupings, including 'critical mass' moments and durations of diffuse, unevenly distributed energetic activity
- storing information and knowledge in energetically empty moments for the network