

**The Sixth International Conference on  
Transdisciplinary Imaging at the Intersections between  
Art, Science and Culture**

# DARK EDEN

**Sydney, AUSTRALIA: 6 - 8 November 2020**

Conference Chair: Professor Paul Thomas, Art and Design, UNSW Sydney

Co-Chairs: Dr David Eastwood, Art and Design, UNSW Sydney

Dr Chelsea Lehmann, National Art School, Sydney

Proceedings Chair: Dr Edward Colless, VCA, University of Melbourne

**A shadow zone, a spectral landscape, a cemetery, zombieland.  
The debris of an old image culture, or compost for a new one?**

The cultural moment now dubbed “Contemporary” is defined by the networked saturation of images. By the diffusion, dissemination and inundation of frictionless image production. By image hacking, image consumption and image commerce on social media and in platform capitalism. By 24/7 crisis news, doom-scrolling and misinformation spread by web influencers. By CCTV and drone surveillance. By massive multiplayer online gaming. By “deepfake” hoaxes and simulations that augment reality and contribute to the relentlessly cynical campaigning of our 21<sup>st</sup> century political twitter “newspeak”. Is not this cornucopia and unprecedented availability of mediated imagery a kind of Eden? If so, it is a dark Eden. Metaphorically fertile as a forest that is so thick with its tentacular edicts that the light that penetrates cannot escape its web; or perhaps, and more likely, that its mutated growth is now dependent on a black rather than bright light. Its darkness might be that of the pall of ash-filled smoke shrouding a burning continent.

Conference papers addressed the general topic from any angle (direct or oblique), but were asked to consider at least one of the following areas:

- Expanded image
- Remediated image
- Hypermediacy
- Expanded film
- Imaging science
- Computer vision
- Networked image
- Immersion
- Speculative realism
- The invisible, the subliminal, the inaudible or subaudial
- Infraworld
- Enlightenment and the post-truth era
- Augmented reality
- Artificial intelligence, or intelligent systems



**Curating the Data Imaginary:  
Fears and Fantasies in the middle of a dataverse takeover  
(like science fiction but weirder)**

**Katherine Moline, University of New South Wales**

**Angela Goddard, Griffith University**

**Amanda Hayman and Troy Casey, Blaklash Creative**

**Beck Davis, Australian National University**

**Abstract**

As we were catapulted by COVID-19 to an increasingly abstract datascape in early 2020, the curatorium of Katherine Moline, Angela Goddard, Amanda Hayman, Troy Casey and Beck Davis were compelled to postpone the exhibition *The Data Imaginary: Fears and Fantasies* at Griffith University Art Museum, Brisbane, from July 2020 to 2021. Our original aim—to explore data experiments in relation to climate change, personal data security and urban landscapes, many informed and shaped by Indigenous knowledges—had become our reality with the global pandemic. We thus shifted curatorial focus from fears about data security to finding new ways to record and secure narratives of personal data and we expanded the initial focus of urban experiences to located data and its legacies so as to include the broader contexts and the differences between urban, rural and remote regions of Australia. Collective social imaginings of data, how data operates and for whom it is operationalised, altered as data on the COVID-19 pandemic quickly became a platform for survival. This paper explores how we reformulated the curatorial framework for *The Data Imaginary* exhibition and the selection of works, creating an exhibition where Lola Greeno's embodied knowledge of the impact of climate change on Palawa shell stringing on the shores of lutruwita (Tasmania) contrasts with Silvio Carta's dystopian vision of human value in *The Machine's Eye - how machines see our world* alongside a creative exploration of data by Melbourne-based artist Patrick Pound. His work collecting photographs through the eBay algorithm results in a conglomeration of artefacts. These aggregations of things and names corresponds with the poetry that can result from the abstraction of data.



Lola Greeno  
*Green Maireener Necklace* 2017  
Green maireener shells, cotton thread  
Private collection  
Photo: Carl Warner

## **Curatorial framework**

The social imaginary is defined in the curatorial framework for this exhibition as the emergent conventions and assumptions associated with the norms and practices of the everyday. Philosopher Charles Taylor succinctly defines the social imaginary as ‘the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie their experiences’.<sup>1</sup> Imagining the norms of our social existence in the world of data flipped with the pandemic as data tracking of COVID-19 transfixed us all.

## **Curatorial collaborations**

The formation of the Data Imaginary curatorium is at the juncture of several shared research trajectories, art and design passions and has brought an alignment between three university contexts and an important industry partner.

Moline first proposed *The Data Imaginary* to Davis and Goddard as a follow up to her *Feral Experimental* tour, an iterative curatorial project developed with co-curators in three cities— in Melbourne with Laurene Vaughan and Brad Haylock for RMIT Design Hub, then Peter Hall and Davis in Brisbane, shown at Griffith University Art Museum in 2015, and in 2016 at Miller Gallery, Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh

with Deepa Butoliya and Ahmed Ansari. The collaborative nature of Moline's project lent itself to establishing a curatorium model which could include multiple voices from different disciplines.

In the early discussions of the exhibition it was clear that there were many strong examples of the use of data in the work of contemporary Australian Indigenous artists, whether they were working within activist modes in the excavating of archives and histories, or within the foregrounding of Indigenous knowledge in and of itself, and, that these forms of data visualisation could be seen as integral to the ways artists and designers think about and develop research more broadly.

Moline's earliest discussions of this new exhibition concept exploring the data imaginary placed Lola Greeno's work in the centre of her formulation, particularly in response to the urgency of climate change. She was keen to invite curatorial interlocutors who could help envision the exhibition as unfolding from this core, and who'd worked in the fields of both design and art.

Discussion of potential curatorial collaborators led to Hayman and Casey of Blaklash Creative in Brisbane, who immediately saw the potential of the project. Blaklash Creative are an Indigenous owned business delivering cultural events and creative projects. The team combines their interest in the arts and business development, and their portfolio includes both art and design projects, as well as public art, creative production and event management, ensuring best practice models of community engagement. Due to their many existing commitments, Hayman and Casey were keen to provide strategic advice, make introductions and provide an overview of the project, and leave the minutiae of project management to Moline, Davis and Goddard.

In initial online group discussions via Skype / Zoom, the question was raised as to whether the addition of a theme on data visualisation in an Indigenous context could be added to Moline's initial curatorial themes of climate change, personal data security and urban landscapes or to enfold Indigenous practices within all aspects of the project. It quickly became apparent that the integration of Indigenous practices throughout each of the emerging exhibition themes was the most appropriate strategy and approach. Over regular online meetings during lockdown, all curators presented artists for discussion, and a list of artists to work with emerged.

## **Data Reimagined**

In exploring the role that data plays in framing the everyday and as it is reimagined by artists and designers, the curatorium aims to provide the exhibition audience with opportunities to reflect on data and cocreate positive images of new possibilities that challenge associations of big data only with breaches of privacy. The *Datacatcher* by William Gaver and the Interaction Research Studio (IRS) is one example of a reimagining made possible by data. *Datacatcher* is a handheld device that can be used to explore the datascapes of different suburbs of London while walking. Snatches of data scrapes appear on the screen of the device and make evident the connections between, for instance, the property prices and the health status that are typical of different areas of the city. Walking with a *Datacatcher* is to experience a guided tour of the city that through data narrates the local knowledge of London. While listening to Lola Greeno speak about collecting shells and her observations of the changes to the shells and other materials she collects in Tasmania at 'Women in Design' in 2018 the contemporaneity of her knowledge of climate change and the *Datacatcher's* Surrealist exploration of urban inequalities through data scraping became clear. Both Greeno and the Interaction Research Studio make palpable on an altogether different register how important it is to make data inclusive if it is to mean anything more than the institutionalisation of the biases of the programmers and the interests of the commissioning agents.



Interaction Research Studio

*Datacatcher* 2015

Plastic, digital and electronic components

*Datacatcher Walking Tours* 2015

Video, colour, sound, 37 mins

This research was supported by the European Research Council's advanced investigator award no.226528, Third Wave HCI.

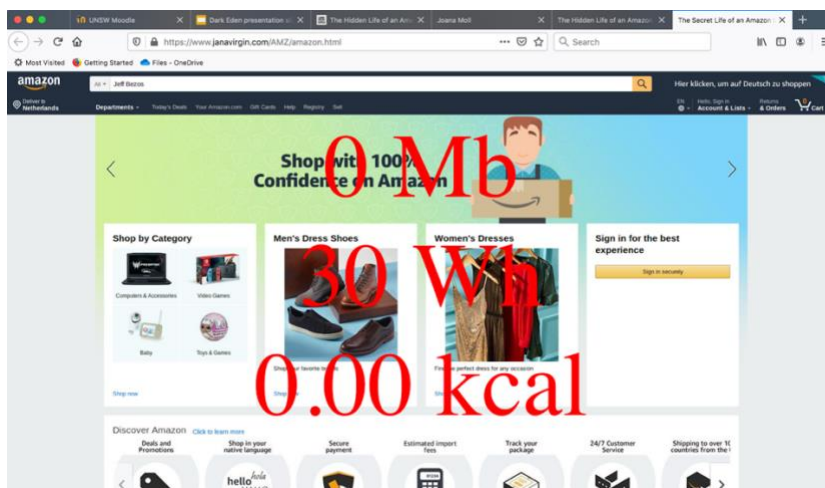
Courtesy of Interaction Research Studio

‘Each society is a construction, a constitution, a creation of a world, of its own world’ according to philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis.<sup>2</sup> His assertion that it is the social imaginary (images, practices and institutions) rather than ideology or technology that make up a society resonated as we searched for works of art and designs that make the abstractions of data tangible. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s extension of the proposal by Castoriadis that ‘instituting’ the ‘social imaginary’ consists of institutions that are neither logical nor bounded by reality motivated us to search for creative data experiments that occupied the liminal spaces between the hardcore reality and virtual dreamscapes, science fiction dystopia and poetic hallucination during COVID-19 lockdowns in Australia.<sup>3</sup> Institutions making up the social imaginary are seen as framing devices that provide meaning to human experience in specific contexts and we compared notes on our different experiences of the split between days governed by data driven lockdowns and the fantasies of what data could make possible. As the curatorium explored the concepts and ideas generated with data by creative practitioners, we were compelled to explore what inclusive data might make possible if we are to have any hope of making sense of a world fragmented by data specialisation. The data-driven interaction *Flights to Rome* (2018) by Benedikt Gross and his collaborators, for example, encapsulates the data imaginary of travel, and visualises the infrastructure of the roads and the plane routes that make travel possible. Contextualising travel with the title’s reference to the truism that ‘All Roads lead to Rome’ raises questions about the sense of inevitability surrounding data and the urgency with which we must imagine alternatives if we are to delimit the reduction of our imaginaries to what the data wants.



Benedikt Gross, Stephan Bogner and Herwig Scherabon  
*Flights to Rome*<sup>4</sup>, 2018  
 Projected digital images  
 Image provided by the artist

As COVID-19 rippled around the world we ventured back-and-forth rethinking and reconsidering the works we had identified and the themes we considered. By mid-March 2020, COVID-19 had been declared a global pandemic, permeating every facet of daily life. The centring and embedding of data in daily discourse amplified the social and the ways we connect and communicate, as well as the ways that we track, trace and document. In response to this global turn we altered the emphasis of the exhibition, anchoring the exhibition to works that parallel the centring of data and its shift from the periphery. To demonstrate, while initially focussed on *Defooooooooorest* by Joana Moll (2016), a work that visualises the number of trees required to absorb the CO2 produced by searching on Google, we pivoted to the work Moll had exhibited in Ars Electronica, *The Hidden Life of an Amazon User* (2019). The latter artwork by Moll centres on reframing the price of convenience and correlates well with the uber-fication, deepening social stratification and specialisation we witnessed alongside the social fragmentation that unfolded during the pandemic.



Joana Moll  
*The Hidden Life of an Amazon User* 2019  
 Website: <https://www.janavirgin.com/AMZ/amazon.html>, printed stack of code on A4 paper, three text interpretations of the work, book purchased from Amazon  
 This work was realised within the framework of the European Media Art Platforms EMARE program at IMPAKT with the support of the Creative Europe Culture Programme of the European Union  
 Courtesy of the artist

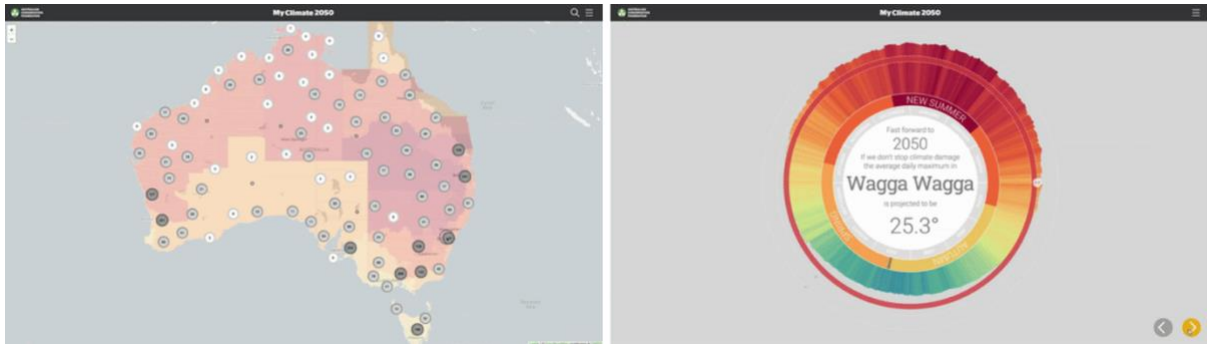
## Located data

When looking to artists that engage with climate change, scientific data, craftivism and or critical making, the work of Aiden Rowlingson and Geoff Hinchcliffe and Mitchell Whitelaw is distinct, relevant and timely. In *660* (2018) Rowlingson creates a tangible and direct response to the repatriation program at the Queensland Museum. In 2018, the Museum held 660 Indigenous ancestral remains, represented by these 660 individually sculpted beads depicting human skulls. Rowlingson's work creates a visceral response to the violations of humanity that remain in our public keeping places, and a potent and timely reminder of the use and misuse of data in these contexts.



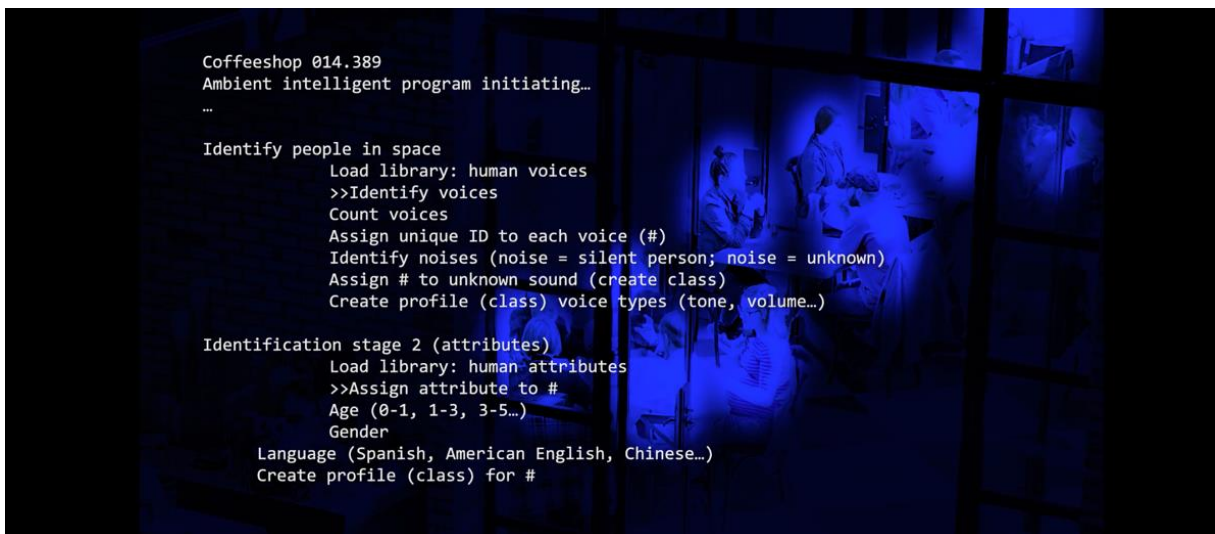
Aidan Rowlingson  
*660 2018*  
Polymer clay beads on wire  
Courtesy of the artist

While *660* recalls the traumatic history stored in the Queensland Museum, *MyClimate 2050* (2019) by Hinchcliffe and Whitelaw looks to the future. This collaborative work was created for the Australian Conservation Foundation with the CSIRO ACCESS climate model and Queensland Government SILO database.<sup>5</sup> While Rowlingson's *660* represents historical, archival and contested data, *MyClimate2050* illustrates future location-specific climate projections based on a business-as-usual emissions scenario. To that end, the work becomes a useful speculative database for considering a possible future, should no action be taken to combat climate change. By enabling the public to pinpoint their city, hometown or suburb, data becomes personal and the future, tangible. When considering these works side by side, the entanglements of historical and dehumanising data that shape national archives and the devastating data futures of current climate predictions, are brought into dialogue.



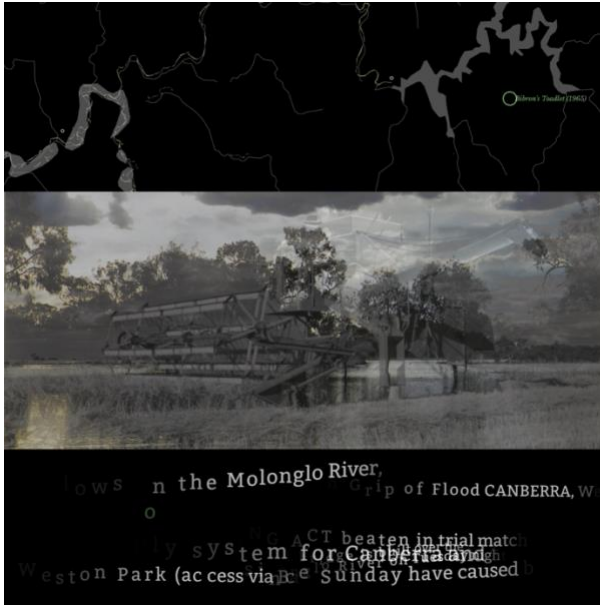
Geoff Hinchcliffe and Mitchell Whitelaw  
 Stills from *MyClimate 2050*, 2018  
 Website: <http://mitchl.net/acf-my-climate/>  
 Commissioned by the Australian Conservation Foundation  
 Courtesy of the artists

Extending the idea of data points, location and the predictive capability of technologies, Silvio Carta takes a different approach. With *The Machine's Eye- How machines see our world* (2019) Carta creates a simulation that shows the steps through which a hypothetical Artificial Intelligence (AI) system scans a physical environment, extracts data from multiple sources to profile the people occupying that environment and calculates their value as a single number based on their likely contribution to a networked capitalist society.<sup>6</sup> Through this work, the audience is confronted with how artists and designers are exploring the very real implications of the currently blunt and reductive approaches to data mining. Importantly, we hope that audiences are prompted to think about the ways in which technology such as AI may start to develop its own data imaginary.



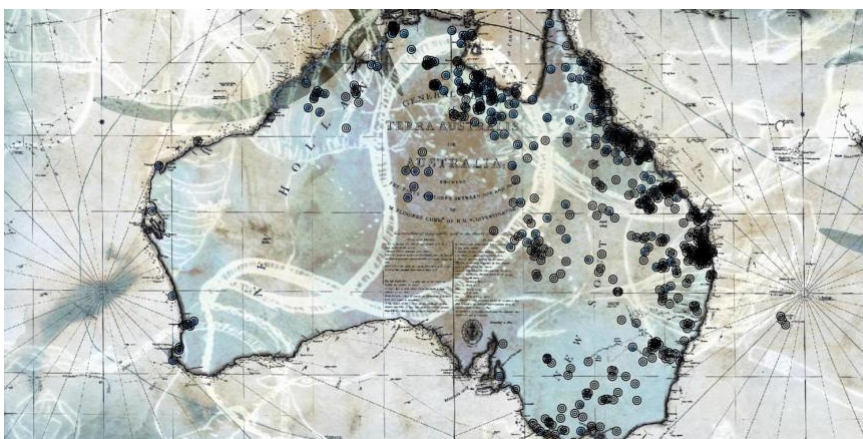
Silvio Carta  
 Still from *The Machine's Eye- how machines see our world*, 2019  
 Video, colour, sound, 2.54 mins  
 Courtesy of the artist

In the framework of the exhibition *The Data Imaginary* and the ways in which data is complex, layered but forever situated, Mitchell Whitelaw's *Drifter* (2016) provides a useful marker of these complexities. Whitelaw states that *Drifter* is a multilayered portrait of the Murrumbidgee river system, made out of data. Through historic images, newspaper articles, scientific observations and digital maps; tens of thousands of data points come together in three ever-changing views.<sup>7</sup>



Mitchell Whitelaw  
*Drifter*, 2016  
 Website: <http://mtchl.net/drifter/>  
 Courtesy of the artist

Reflecting on Whitelaw’s work and viewing it in parallel to the mapping of massacre sites in Judy Watson’s *the names of places* (2016) the complex intersection of place and data – what is known or knowable – comes to the fore. The inclusion of ‘hearsay’ and the oral histories that have recorded the history of massacres during Australia’s colonisation in Watson’s artwork recognises the fragility of ways of knowing.<sup>8</sup> Reflecting on this while viewing Whitelaw’s work, the multiple histories beyond what the machine sees are accounted for and open up inclusive futures that will make new data possible. It is precisely the valuing of difference and reflexivity with which data are represented and interpreted, that frames the exhibition. For data to be meaningful an awareness of plural histories, locations and datapoints is necessary if we are to appreciate the ways in which information is collected, coded, represented and disseminated. If we are serious about creating futures that do more than reproduce the past, it is paramount to consider what is occluded, missing and unseen, unknown and undocumented, in our collective data imaginary.



Judy Watson  
*the names of places*, 2016  
 HD video, colour, sound, 21:59 mins  
 Sound Composition and Image Compositing: Greg Hooper; Video compositing: Jarrard Lee  
 Assistants: Freja Carmichael, Indy Medeiros  
 Courtesy of the artist; Tolarno Gallery, Melbourne

## Conclusion

As the layered challenges of 2020 have demanded multiple pivots with the bushfires, NSW floods and the pandemic, and the recent reminders of the structured inequalities of our governing institutions in 2021, we persist in modulating the curatorial selection of works in response to how centrally placed inclusive data has become in the rapidly changing contexts in which we live and work. Inspired by the resilience of the selected artists and designers who also pick up the threads in the making of work in the stop/start timetabling of exhibitions and events during multiple crises, every day starts the same way, tracking the data on the pandemic and the weather in the news. At the same time appreciative and apprehensive, reforming the institutionalisation of data that makes up our social imaginary is a necessary and urgent task if we are to imagine alternatives and avert the social and environmental disasters anticipated in current data-based predictions. Demanding inclusive data so we can listen better to what it is telling us, unequivocally, will anchor us more meaningfully in the new realities we face. Inclusive data will create greater understandings of the structural inequalities that have created the forecast realities of further climate change, the extractive data economy that makes cyber-attacks more than a science fiction fantasy and the risks and merits of located data based on the evidence of its legacies so far. As climate change, narratives of personal data and located data and its legacies continue to be experienced so differently around the globe, artists and designers in *The Data Imaginary* are generating tools for, and visions of, a more inclusive and sustainable world.

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1. Charles Taylor, 2007, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, p. 171.
  2. Cornelius Castoriadis, 1997, *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, ed. and trans. David Ames Curtis, Stanford University Press, p.5.
  3. Cornelius Castoriadis, 1997, 'Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads', *Figures of the Thinkable* (Stanford University Press, 2007), available at [www.notbored.org/FTP.K.pdf](http://www.notbored.org/FTP.K.pdf) [accessed 2 April 2011, p. 126].
  4. Concept/Idea Benedikt Groß & Stephan Bogner, 3d Rendering Herwig Scherabon, Code & Data Wrangling Stephan Bogner & Benedikt Groß, Web Design Stephan Bogner, Text Raphael Reimann, Routing Engine & Dev GraphHopper & Robin Boldt, Front-end Engineer Thibault Durand, Data FlightRadar24 and OpenStreetMap. Available online: <https://benedikt-gross.de/projects/flights-to-rome>
  5. Queensland Government SILO database, available online: <https://www.longpaddock.qld.gov.au/silo>
  6. Silvio Carta, 2019, *The Machine's Eye – How Machines See our World*, available online: <https://vimeo.com/346684535>
  7. Mitchell Whitelaw, *Drifter*, 2016, available online: <https://mtchl.net/drifter/>
  8. Ceridwan Dovey, The Mapping of Massacres, *The New Yorker*, December 6 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/mapping-massacres>

### Authors:

**Katherine Moline** is an artist, designer and Associate Professor at the School of Art & Design, UNSW Sydney. Her research focuses on the dynamics between technological and social forces in art and design. Dr Moline's analyses of experimental design and creative ethnography have been published by Routledge and Bloomsbury.

**Angela Goddard** is a writer, curator and Director of Griffith University Art Museum. She is also Chair of University Art Museums Australia and Board Member of Shelia: A Foundation for Women in Visual Art.

**Blaklash Creative (Amanda Hayman and Troy Casey)** is a 100% Aboriginal owned creative agency specialising in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and design. Working in partnership with artists, designers and creatives, Blaklash produces community-driven outcomes that express First Nations perspectives through artistic process, practice and presentation.

**Beck Davis** is Head of School at the Australian National University, School of Art and Design. Her research focuses on design studies, examining design teams and how they collaborate and respond to complex problems. She is also a Board Member of the Design Institute of Australia, and Art Monthly Australasia.