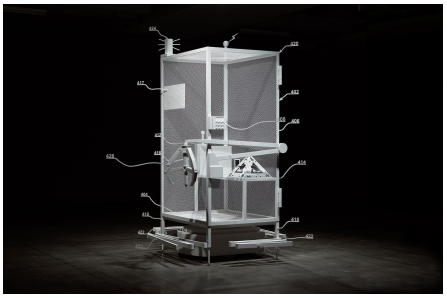
Treatise as Exhibition

A conversation with Simon Denny - Part Two

by Amira Gad

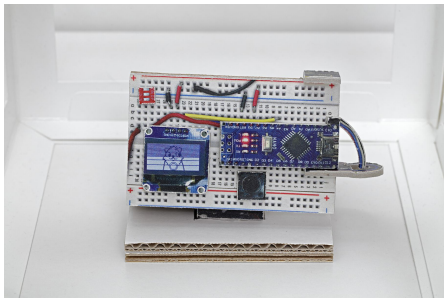
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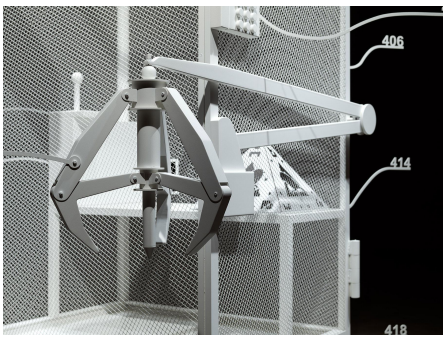
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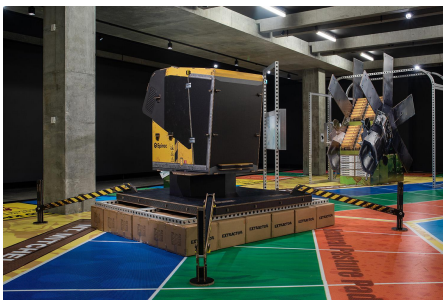
Distributed Gallery, *Chaos Machine*, 2018. Various materials, 192 x 52 x 52 cm. Photo by Hans-Georg Gaul. Installation view, Proof of Work, Schinkel Pavillon, 2018. Courtesy of the artists and Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/ Berlin/ New York.



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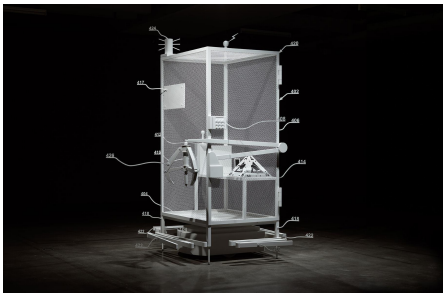
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Simon Denny, *Epiroc Down-the-hole drill rig simulator SmartRoc D65 cardboard display*, 2019. UV print on honeycomb cardboard, Aluminium poles, Extractor cardboard boxes ca. 390 x 460 x 230 cm. Photo by Jesse Hunniford/MONA. Courtesy of the artist, Petzel gallery and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/ Cologne/New York. Commissioned for Simon Denny *MINE* (8 June 2019 – 17 March 2020) by the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona), Hobart, Australia.

In the first part of this interview Rotterdam-based curator/writer Amira Gad and Berlin-based artist Simon Denny reflected on Denny's recent exhibitions including Security Through Obscurity*, at Altman Siegel in San Francisco, and* The Founder's Paradox *at Michael Lett Gallery in Auckland. In this second and final part, Gad and Denny turn their focus to Mine, Denny's solo exhibition that closed in April 2020 at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Tasmania,* Proof of Work*, a group show that Denny curated at Schinkel Pavillon in Berlin in 2018, and his participation in the* Financial Times'

Vaudeville symposium, as well as upcoming projects the artist is working on.



Simon Denny, *Amazon worker cage patent drawing as virtual King Island Brown Thornbill cage (US 9,280,157 B2: "System and method for transporting personnel within an active workspace", 2016)*, 2019. Powder coated metal, MDF, plastic, digital print on cardboard, iOS augmented reality interface, 293 x 222 x 253 cm. Photo by Jesse Hunniford/MONA. Courtesy of the artist, Petzel gallery and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/ Cologne/New York.



Simon Denny, *Amazon Worker Cage Patent (US 9,280,157 B2: "System and method for transporting personnel within an active workspace", 2016)* with King Island Brown Thornbill renders, Detail. Edition of 2 + 2 AP's, 2019. Screen print on paper, 23 sheets, each 76.9 x 59.4 cm. Photo by Jesse Hunniford/MONA. Courtesy of the artist, Petzel gallery and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/ Cologne/New York. Commissioned for Simon Denny MINE (8 June 2019 – 17 March 2020) by MONA, Hobart, Australia.



Simon Denny, installation view, *Mine*, MONA, Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania, June 2019 - April 2020. Photo by MONA/Jesse Hunniford. Courtesy of the artist, Petzel gallery and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York. Commissioned for Simon Denny *MINE* (8 June 2019 – 17 March 2020) by the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona), Hobart, Australia.



Installation view, *Mine*, MONA, Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania, June 2019 - April 2020. Photo by MONA/Jesse Hunniford.

AMIRA GAD Now shifting to another recent show of yours, this time in Australia at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA, Hobart). Your show *Mine*, which closed in April 2020, navigates through three chapters: a 3D model of a blueprint of a worker's cage that Amazon wanted to produce; a large-scale immersive version of the board game *Squatter* (Australian version of Monopoly based on sheep farming) that comments on the automation of Australia's mining industry; and finally a group of sculptures that presents different views on the concept of a worker. Can you walk us through how you link those three parts and what the show teaches us about data mining?

SIMON DENNY *Mine* reflects on the relations between humans and non-human entities through the lens of 'extraction'. It focuses on and draws parallels between extraction of data harvested through increasingly omnipresent computing platforms, extraction of labour from people and other animals in different formations of conscious and unconscious 'work' and the extraction of resources from the earth and its ecosystems as they are organised to support human activity.



Simon Denny, *Caterpillar Inc. Autonomous haul 793F Mining Truck Extractor pop display*, 2019. UV print on honeycomb cardboard, shrink-wrapped Extractor boardgames ca. 300 x 92 x 292 cm. Photo by Jesse Hunniford/MONA. Courtesy of the artist, Petzel gallery and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York. Commissioned for Simon Denny *MINE* (8 June 2019 – 17 March 2020) by the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona), Hobart, Australia.



Simon Denny, *Caterpillar Inc. semi-autonomous longwall coal mining roof support system cardboard display*, 2019. UV print on honeycomb cardboard, Aluminium poles, Extractor cardboard boxes ca. 320 x 90 x 200 cm. Photo by Jesse Hunniford/MONA. Courtesy of the artist, Petzel gallery and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York. Commissioned for Simon Denny *MINE* (8 June 2019 – 17 March 2020) by the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona), Hobart, Australia.

SD (CONT) The exhibition responds to MONA as a subterranean museum, with its exposed-rock rooms dug out from the cliff face overlooking the River Derwent – a space resembling a mine shaft. Viewers first encounter a diagram by researcher and founder of AI ethics organisation AI Now, Kate Crawford and designer Vladan Joler. The diagram tries to map every possible thing needed to make an Amazon Echo smart speaker (a basic AI

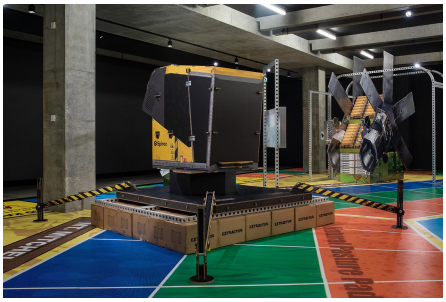
consumer product) function – from the invention of scientific categorisation systems, to various kinds of labour, to the mining and extraction of a huge range of minerals to financial and organisational hierarchies, the physical and political infrastructure underpinning the internet, energy and to all sorts of 'waste' processes. It's an image of the 'full cost' of a single AI. From there, the viewer encounters a sculpture of an Amazon.com patent design for a human worker cage alongside an augmented reality (AR) simulation of a near-extinct Australian bird, the King Island Brown Thornbill. Further along is a giant version of the 1960s Australian sheep farming board game *Squatter*, with giant cardboard replicas of automated mining machines used in contemporary (increasingly people-less) mines around Australia, and finally an anthropomorphic robot sculpture (based on a Nam June Paik work from MONA's collection) cast from the rock that the museum displaces when digging out its exhibition rooms is interacting with a group of figurative sculptures by different artists from Australia, exploring work and technology.

This whole experience is made even more charged by the fact that MONA has this proprietary software system that runs on iPods that every viewer receives when they enter the museum, which on the one hand centralises all the extra material for the whole museum like audio guide, labels, cues and maps, and on the other gathers quite detailed data about visitor engagement – where a viewer goes, how long they spend in front of each work, etc. It also gives viewers the opportunity to 'love' or 'hate' work – resembling an Instagram-like experience in real life. Of course, this is also a helpful and compelling layer of the kind of digital extraction processes the exhibition is pointing to.

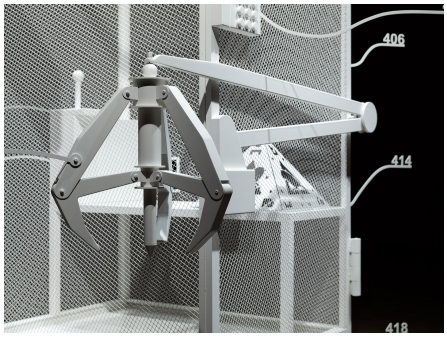
Viewers experienced a kind of theme-park to extraction, a data mine inside an underground museum. They could also take home a copy of *Extractor*, which is a new, playable board game I made which contains critical essays, miniatures from the exhibition and commentary in its rule book.



Simon Denny, *Extractor*, 2019. Commercially produced board game including critical essays and ruleset booklet: custom injection moulded plastic pieces, offset print on various paper and card stock, vacuum formed packaging components, 40 x 27 x 6 cm. Photo by Jesse Hunniford/MONA. Courtesy of the artist, Petzel gallery and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York. Commissioned for Simon Denny *MINE* (8 June 2019 – 17 March 2020) by the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona), Hobart, Australia.



Simon Denny, *Epiroc Down-the-hole drill rig simulator SmartRoc D65 cardboard display*, 2019. UV print on honeycomb cardboard, Aluminium poles, Extractor cardboard boxes ca. 390 x 460 x 230 cm. Photo by Jesse Hunniford/MONA. Courtesy of the artist, Petzel gallery and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York. Commissioned for Simon Denny *MINE* (8 June 2019 – 17 March 2020) by the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona), Hobart, Australia.



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AG In 2018, you curated a group show at the Schinkel Pavillon in Berlin titled *Proof of Work* that continues your exploration around work, tech, culture, systems and more. The show you developed together with Sam Hart and Sarah Hamerman devised a 'curatorial protocol'. I love the idea that when you're invited to curate a show, you decide to debunk curatorial practices. Can you explain how, as mentioned in your exhibition introduction, the show "performed the idea of a transparent and distributed curatorial practice"? If we were hypothetically to draw parallels between blockchains and curating, how do we mine curating? What does this 'art-blockchain infrastructure' look like and should institutions implement it? If we are to hack our cultural system, what should we do?

SD I set up a kind of 'distributed protocol' for the exhibition curating – where I invited a number of artists and curators to select works for the exhibition. I made a distributed diagram, which was reproduced on the wall of the show as you entered and in the little guidebook that we produced for it. It meant that I was not making all the decisions about who was to be included in the exhibition, that some of that process was passed on to other participants. The idea or narrative of distributed governance processes is a popular notion in the blockchain

developer community. It's a nice story. Often, in the current implementation of blockchains, it's a bit of a myth – they really operate more like elite circles of tech literate designers and businesspeople who architect what is possible within blockchain ecosystems and often reap most of the benefits by design. But that's not the ideal, supposedly. I guess that was also somewhat the case in my curatorial structure in *Proof of Work*. Some sections had a great deal of autonomy, but also I had quite a big hand in shaping the experience of the exhibition. But I do think that distributing decision-making was an important part of the DNA of that show, and I am thinking of employing similar mechanisms in upcoming curatorial exercises I am a part of.

I also made other unconventional moves as a part of that curating exercise. There's a very famous blockchain-based artwork that was auctioned by Christie's that year, a unique kind of blockchain Tamagotchi called a *CryptoKitty*, which had an online version and an offline hardware version, and we were able to exhibit this work in the *Proof of Work* show, inside a giant inflatable bubble made by Foam, the blockchain start-up/architectural collective. So this *Cry ptoKitty* artwork was inside a giant bubble inflated by the heat that is a product of the Bitcoin mining process. It was presented on a special cardboard pedestal that I had produced as a full-size replica of the *CryptoKitty* and its real display for the sale at Christie's in New York. A kind of doppelganger display-object – a fake cardboard kitty. After the show I kept it as an artwork of my own. Fake blockchain art.



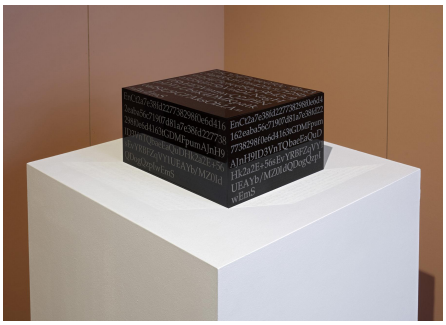
Wayne Lloyd, *How We Won the War on Socialism*, 2000. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 216 x 164.5 x 5.5 cm. Photo by Hans-Georg Gaul. Installation view, Proof of Work, Schinkel Pavillon, 2018. Courtesy of the artists and Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/ Berlin/ New York.



Distributed Gallery, *Chaos Machine*, 2018. Various materials, 192 x 52 x 52 cm. Photo by Hans-Georg Gaul. Installation view, Proof of Work, Schinkel Pavillon, 2018. Courtesy of the artists and Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/ Berlin/ New York.



terra0, *Premna Daemon,* 2018. Premna Microphylla, cameras, moisture sensor, single board computer, powder coated steel, multiplex wood, Ethereum smart contract, Python backend, JavaScript frontend, 130 x 115 x 70 cm. Photo by Hans-Georg Gaul. Installation view, Proof of Work, Schinkel Pavillon, 2018. Courtesy of the artists and Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/ Berlin/ New York.



Aria Dean, *BLACKBOX*, 2017. Etched Plexiglass, 31 x 25 x 15 cm. Photo by Hans-Georg Gaul. Installation view, Proof of Work, Schinkel Pavillon, 2018. Courtesy of the artists and Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/ Berlin/ New York.



Distributed Gallery, *Chaos Machine*, detail, 2018. Various materials, 192 x 52 x 52 cm. Photo by Hans-Georg Gaul. Installation view, Proof of Work, Schinkel Pavillon, 2018. Courtesy of the artists and Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/ Berlin/ New York.



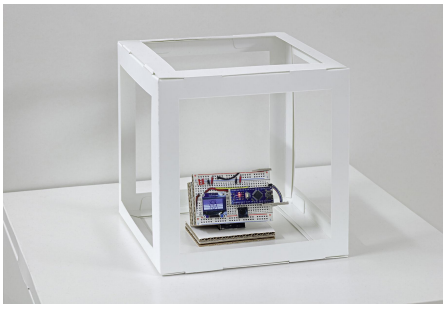
CryptoKitties / Guile Gaspar, *Celestial Cyber Dimension, (Kitty . 127.)*, 2018. Displayed in: Simon Denny, Cardboard CryptoKitty 127 Auction Display Replica, 2018. CryptoKitty, hardware wallet, display case. Dimensions undefinable. Cardboard Display, 200 x 150 x 70cm. Photo by Hans-Georg Gaul. Installation view, Proof of Work, Schinkel Pavillon, 2018. Courtesy of the artists and Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/ Berlin/ New York.



CryptoKitties / Guile Gaspar, *Celestial Cyber Dimension, (Kitty . 127.)*, detail, 2018. Displayed in: Simon Denny, Cardboard CryptoKitty 127 Auction Display Replica, 2018. CryptoKitty, hardware wallet, display case. Dimensions undefinable. Cardboard Display, 200 x 150 x 70cm. Photo by Hans-Georg Gaul. Installation view, Proof of Work, Schinkel Pavillon, 2018. Courtesy of the artists and Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/ Berlin/ New York.

AG Speaking of *CryptoKitty*… In 2019, you participated in what was the most unique symposium I had ever attended. Titled *Vaudeville* and held in London, it was organised by the *Financial Times'* Alphaville blog team led by Izabella Kaminska, and followed a unique conference style that fused the voice and vision of Adam Curtis, the former CTO of Cambridge Analytica, supposed bitcoin founder Craig Wright, and genre of Alphaville. Your work has always functioned as a cultural comment on data, tech, and systems and for this, you did something you hadn't done before: a performance using your *CryptoKitty* work. Could you tell more about this work and your experience of *Vaudeville*?

SD *Vaudeville* was one of the most nuts things I've ever done. When the *FT* invited me, I was just so excited to do it. The list of actors they had involved was very interesting in itself, and Izabella wanted me to do a kind of intervention into the event – which I was very excited to do. I had long followed the narrative around Craig Wright, who claims to be Satoshi Nakamoto, the founder of Bitcoin, first reading about his work in Andrew O'Hagan's exceptional article 2016 about him in the *London Review of Books'*.[01] Craig was there, invited by Izabellla to deliver a sermon – as it turns out he used to be a priest. My fake blockchain artwork, the cardboard *CryptoKitty*, was installed on the stage of the event the whole time. It was a kind of backdrop for the whole event. When Craig finished his sermon, I then came on stage and awarded him the *CryptoKitty* hardware wallet doppelganger for delivering his sermon. Quite a meta gesture for me, to award a dubious founder of crypto a fake blockchain artwork at an *FT* even t. One of the most amazing moments in my career – which thankfully you were there to witness, be a part of and even capture on video.



Simon Denny, *Cardboard CryptoKitty 127 Auction Display Replica*, detail, 2018. CryptoKitty, hardware wallet, display case. Dimensions undefinable. Cardboard Display, 200 x 150 x 70cm. Photo by Hans-Georg Gaul. Installation view, Proof of Work, Schinkel Pavillon, 2018. Courtesy of the artists and Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/ Berlin/ New York.



Craig Wright, Izabella Kaminska, Adam Curtis on stage with *Cardboard CryptoKitty 127 Auction Display Replica* at *Vaudeville*, the Financial Times Alphaville blog event, London, July 2019. Photo by Simon Denny.



Simon Denny gifts Craig Wright *Cardboard CryptoKitty 127 Auction Display Replica* on stage at *Vaudeville*, the Financial Times Alphaville blog event, London, July 2019. Photo by Jon Nash.

AG The 'What's next' question: What are you working on? What's coming up for you?

SD The *Mine* exhibition will travel from Tasmania to Düsseldorf and New York in various forms quite soon. There will be a version opening in September at the K21 in Düsseldorf, which is quite exciting and includes some new elements. I have collaborated with an amazing courtroom sketch artist from Brisbane, and I have asked her to produce a number of speculative drawings of trials which should happen, but likely never will. Every sculpture in the show which riffs on the form of a piece of machinery for automating mines is shown alongside an advertising video produced for these machines. From that, I asked this courtroom illustrator to depict one still from the advertising – in a way as if it were evidence in a court case – and also a selection of executives of each company appearing accused before the Brisbane courts. As if the Australian legal system would seek justice for the extractive practices of mining (which of course they likely never will, as the state is so closely aligned with those interests).

I am also producing, with an amazing Minecraft museum run by artist Jan Berger called Mythical Institution, a doppelganger of the

exhibition in Minecraft – but produced as if the exhibition space in the K21 were underneath an historical coal mine site in the region of the museum. As you may know, the district around Düsseldorf, Cologne, Essen etc. were all very active with coal and mineral mining in the last few centuries and much of the 'wealth' of that region has been extracted and transferred from the ground. The practice of using canaries as sensors for toxicity levels in mines was developed in this region. So to have a Minecraft version of my exhibition beneath an historical mine site is again really amazing for focussing on the connections between paradigms of extraction, a notion so central to the project.

I am also developing research into my own personal history which may turn into a new arc of work. My matriarchal side was a prominent legal family in New Zealand for generations - my grandfather was a high court judge, his father was a judge and a Chief Justice briefly in Samoa shortly after New Zealand displaced the German colonial regime at the beginning of the first world war. The German and New Zealand colonial histories, and how they meet in Samoa could I think be a really interesting vector for research, as it brings together extractive histories that are also tied to my own. There are various technology/propaganda/legal aspects of that, which I hope to tease out in the next months.

Footnotes

01. Andrew O'Hagan "The Satoshi Affair" *London Review of Books* 38, no. 13 (30 June 2016) www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n13/andrew-o-hagan/the-satoshi-affair, accessed 14 July 2020.

Biographies



Simon Denny (*1982 Auckland/New Zealand, lives in Berlin) is an artist whose work explores the cultures and values behind contemporary technologies. In recent years, Denny has looked at the exploitation of information in data-economies, using his work to visualise systems of competing political and economic visions, interrelationships of labour, capital, developments in technologies, and impacts on the biosphere.

He studied at the University of Auckland (2005), and the Städelschule, Frankfurt am Main (2009). Denny's work has been exhibited recently in solo exhibitions in the K21 in Düsseldorf (2020); Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania (2019); MOCA, Cleveland (2018); OCAT, Shenzhen (2017); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2017); WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels (2016); Serpentine Galleries, London (2015); MoMA PS1, New York (2015); Portikus, Frankfurt (2014); Adam Art Gallery, Wellington (2014); MUMOK, Vienna (2013); Kunstverein Munich (2013). He represented New Zealand at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. His works are represented in institutional collections including MoMA (New York), Walker Art Centre (Minneapolis), Kunsthaus Zürich (Zürich), Sammlung zeitgenössischer Kunst der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Berlin) and Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Wellington). Denny co-founded the BPA//Berlin Program for Artists, an artist mentoring program in 2016. Since 2018, he is a professor for Time Based Media at the HFBK, Hamburg.



Amira Gad is a curator and writer based in Rotterdam, currently working as Head of Programmes at Light Art Space in Berlin. Prior to her appointment, she was curator at the Serpentine Galleries in London from 2014 to 2019, and Managing Curator & Publications at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam where she worked from 2014 to 2019. She is also a regular guest lecturer at Sotheby's Institute of Art, London.

Gad has curated exhibitions of works (and edited accompanying publications) by Albert Oehlen (2019); Hito Steyerl (2019); Sondra Perry (2018); Torbjørn Rødland (2017); Arthur Jafa (2017) for which the catalogue she co-edited won the Richard Schlagman Art Books Award and the show toured to Galerie Rudolfinum in Prague and Moderna Museet in Stockholm as well as the Julia Stoschek Collection where it won an AICA Award for Best Exhibition of 2018 in Germany; John Latham (2017), Zaha Hadid (2016); Simon Denny (2015); Jimmie Durham (2015); and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's show (2015) that received the Sky Arts Award for visual arts, Julio Le Parc (2014) and Reiner Ruthenbeck (2014). Gad also worked on the Serpentine Pavilion 2019 designed by Junya Ishigami, Serpentine's Beijing Pavilion designed by Liu Jiakun, and the 2016 architecture programme that included architects Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG), Asif Khan, Kunlé Adeyemi (NLE), Yona Friedman, and Barkow Leibinger.

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