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David Cross

Black Narcissus

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Name:

David Cross

Output Type:

Artefact

Output Title:

Black Narcissus



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Project Overview

Black Narcissus uses financial graphs to visualise a fusion of financial turbulence and ecological collapse resulting from the pursuit of economic growth beyond ecological limits. The work critically engages two properties of the financial system that drive ecological destruction: the abstract quality of financial data that allows calculation to dominate judgement, while distancing decision-makers from the harmful consequences of their decisions, and the feedback loops in markets that amplify the chaotic oscillation between greed and fear.

The work's title references the 1947 film *Black Narcissus* by Powell and Pressburger, a psychological drama in which desire engenders destruction. The title also hints at the imperial origins and racialised tendencies of the earth system crisis, in which economic costs and ecological damage are inflicted on peoples and places beyond the enclave of white privilege. *Black Narcissus* uses computer software normally employed to generate pristine virtual environments for advertising and entertainment purposes. The work has

been displayed in several different forms: on a screen, projected onto a wall, and printed on the page as a sequence of stills.

The work develops artistic engagement with the connection between economy and landscape first addressed in a previous work by Cross, *Lost Horizon* (2003), which was the result of an artists' residency at the London School of Economics curated by Ben Eastop. *Black Narcissus* was visualised as an intersection of an abstract financial graph with a figurative representation of a mountain landscape. The resulting two-dimensional image was produced as an animation using the 'Ken Burns' effect to move the point of view from left to right steadily along a straight line at a fixed distance from the apparent scene. The aim of this approach was to reject the simulation of a three-dimensional 'fly-through', and instead to produce a disembodied sensation of entrapment within a passive form of spectatorship. Scrolling smoothly past a 'mountain' of data, the audience experiences a dramatic but lifeless scene in which technocratic power has resulted in the

closure of possibility. In this respect, *Black Narcissus* develops the artistic engagement with the politics of spectatorship that Cross articulated in relation to *The White Bear Effect* (2012), a work commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella.

Output

Black Narcissus

Artificial mountain landscape generated from financial graphs.

Dimensions, scale and materials

Single channel video, 4-minute loop, aspect ratio 16:9, wall text.

Method of production

Financial graphs were digitally standardised and assembled into a 10-year timeline, which was used as the silhouette for an artificial mountain landscape created using terrain-modelling software.

Venues/locations

Black Narcissus was first exhibited in the touring exhibition, *Show Me The Money: The Image of Finance, 1700 to the present*, which opened at the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland (14 June–30 August 2014).

Accompanying the exhibition, a publication was produced, *Show me the money: the image of finance, 1700 to the present*, edited by Paul Crosthwaite, Peter Knight and Nicky

Marsh, published by Manchester University Press, June 2014, 168pp., hardback.

Black Narcissus was subsequently shown at: Chawton House, Hampshire (19 September–22 November 2014), John Hansard Gallery, University of Southampton (7 October–22 November 2014) and the People's History Museum, Manchester, (11 July 2015–24 January 2016).

Black Narcissus was exhibited in a group exhibition, *Liquid Land*, at the Ruskin Gallery Cambridge, curated by Rosanna Greaves and Harriet Loffler 5–21 April 2018.

Details of collaboration and role.

Cross initiated and researched the project, chose the title of the artwork, directed its production and gallery installation, and wrote the gallery text. Following initial conversations with Matthew Cornford, Cross made concept drawings, defined the significant historical period (2003–2013), and accessed relevant financial graphs. Cross set the graphs for each year to a standard vertical scale, which revealed the

extent to which the critical years of 2008 and 2009 had been compressed to fit the 'normal' proportions, thereby downplaying the severity of the crisis.

Cross gathered reference material of photographs of ecologically damaged landscapes, including tar sands extraction sites, coal mine spoil heaps, oil spill zones, gas flare pits, and forests killed by acid rain. He sent this material to Massimo Verona, a digital visualising professional based in Amsterdam. Cross briefed Verona and communicated online to model the terrain from the financial graphs and to render its form, texture, colouring and lighting to evoke a mountain terrain following total ecological collapse.

Funding and commissioning process

Black Narcissus was commissioned by Alistair Robinson, Director of the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC—£6,000).

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Other significant recognition

Black Narcissus featured on the cover of *The Oxford Handbook of Financial Regulation*, edited by Niamh Moloney, Eilis Ferran and Jennifer Payne (Oxford University Press 2015, 816pp., 246 × 171cm. ISBN: 9780199687206). The handbook is described as a comprehensive, state-of-the-art survey of the nature and purpose of financial regulation.

***Black Narcissus* was featured in:**

Art After the Crash, Sunderland Museum, 13 June 2014. Cross was invited to join a panel of artists and academics from disciplines across art history, contemporary art and literature, and authors and former financiers in a symposium on the interrelationships between art, money and finance.

Shadow Money, John Hansard Gallery, Southampton, 6 October 2014. Cross participated in a panel discussion with artists and academics whose work concentrates on contemporary finance to explore the relationship between culture, money and economy in the contemporary crisis.

Show Me The Money: The Image of Finance

1700 to present was part of the 77th annual Southampton Film Week 2014 (1–9 November 2014) at the John Hansard Gallery, Southampton.

Black Narcissus was selected by the curator of *Show Me the Money: The Image of Finance, 1700 to the present*, Dr Paul Crosthwaite, as the "key standalone" representation of the exhibition.

The Manchester Review: Show Me the Money: The Image of Finance, 1700 to the Present, [Pod Academy](#)

Radio/Podcast: [Economics and Everyday Life](#)—Part One, Professor Nicky Marsh talks to Dr Christopher Daley, 2 June 2014.

Radio Solent: *Katie Martin Programme—The Pride of Britain Awards, Schizophrenia and Bumblebees*, 7 October 2014. [Listen here](#).

BBC Radio 3: *Free Thinking Programme*, 12 June 2014. [Listen here](#).



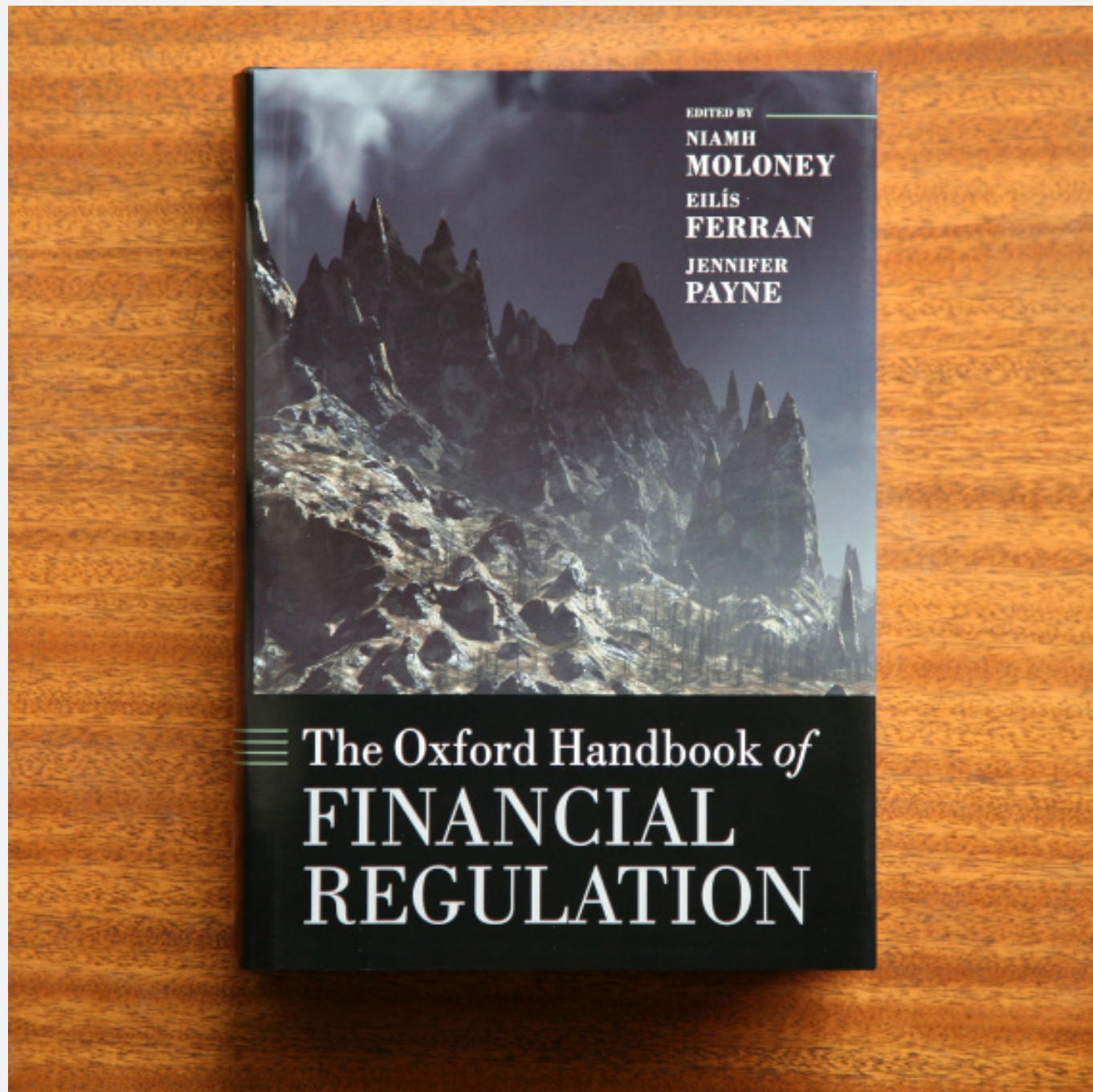
Black Narcissus (2014), detail



Black Narcissus (2014), detail



Black Narcissus (2014), detail



The Oxford Handbook of Financial Regulation (2015), cover

Context & Questions

Context

Since *Black Narcissus* was commissioned for the exhibition *Show Me the Money: The Image of Finance 1700 to the Present* in 2014, it has become a widely recognised contribution to the burgeoning field of the visual culture of finance. In 2015, it was featured on the cover of *The Oxford Handbook of Financial Regulation*, (Moloney, Ferran and Payne, eds.). In offering a historically and aesthetically coded visual embodiment for financial instruments and processes that cannot be seen or touched, *Black Narcissus* engages with one of the central issues in this field of research, namely ‘how can the abstractions of high finance be made visible?’.

In addressing the question of how to find a visual embodiment of the intangible, *Black Narcissus* contributes to the public understanding of knowledge at the intersection of culture and aesthetics with the natural and social sciences. It does this by using cultural imagery of mountain landscapes to connect economic policy of exponential growth to scientific projections of the ecological consequences, in a vision

of the ‘Capitalocene’ (Moore, 2016). Cross turned to a tradition of allegorical representations of landscape, presenting a scene of wilderness turned to wasteland. He drew on the following key reference points in this tradition:

- the painting, *The Wreck of the Hope* (1824) by Caspar David Friedrich, that presents the barren wilderness of the Arctic as a desolate scene following the traumatic loss of a ship while attempting to open up new imperial trade routes.
- the landscape paintings, *We Are Making a New World* (1918) and *Totes Meer* [Dead Sea] (1940) by Paul Nash, which present landscapes systematically laid to waste by industrial warfare.
- photographs from the series, *Desert Cantos* (1990), by Richard Misrach, which study the violent and destructive impulses underlying both misogyny and ecological exploitation.

• images of mountains by Gerhard Richter, especially the screenprint *Schweizer Alpen I*, (1969) and the paintings *Monstein* (1981), and *Berg* (1981), connect the cool detachment of photography to the close engagement of painting and printmaking.

• ‘Bergfilms’ such as *The White Ecstasy* (1931) directed by Arnold Fanck.

• Ed Burtynsky’s photographs of industrial wastelands, especially *Super Pit #1, Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, Australia* (2007) and *Morenci Mine #2, Clifton, Arizona, USA* (2012), convey the sheer physical scale of extractivism and the resulting ecological destruction.

• *Logorama* (2009) by François Alaux, Hervé de Crécy and Ludovic Houplain, an animated film set in an artificial landscape composed entirely of corporate brands and populated by commercial mascot characters. Centring on a bank robbery that becomes engulfed by a cataclysm, the narrative offers a morbid satire on the destructive trajectory of consumerism.

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By combining financial graphs with mountain imagery, *Black Narcissus* fuses economic index with ecological sign. Dr Paul Crosthwaite, one of the three academic investigators who commissioned *Black Narcissus* for *Show Me the Money*, cited Cross' work as the key "standalone representation" of the exhibition, saying "in the still from the work here, the downward trend on the left-hand-side, culminating in the vertiginous drop in the centre, corresponds to the global financial crisis of 2008. In other words, the market quite literally falls off a cliff" (*Meet the Curator: Show Me the Money: The Image of Finance, 1700 to the Present*, online).

Cross combined this reference to the financial crisis with simulations of total ecological collapse as a challenge to the notion of 'sustainability'. In *The Limits to Growth* (LTG) (Meadows, Randers, Behrens *et al*, 1972), the authors used computer simulation to test dynamic interaction between variables of global population, resource consumption and pollution, resulting in different scenarios.

The scenario 'Business As Usual' resulted in social and ecological collapse. In 'Is Global Collapse Imminent?' (2014), Turner observed a close correlation between the hypothetical scenarios modelled by LTG and the historically observed data. While global heating of 2°C above pre-industrial levels is widely acknowledged as the point at which uncontrollable climate breakdown is triggered, Mark Carney, Governor of the Bank of England, announced in October 2019 that international capital markets are currently financing activities that will cause global heating of more than 4°C above pre-industrial levels.

While political and economic policy uses scenarios based on unproven technologies such as carbon capture and storage, technocratic approaches include geoengineering the earth's atmosphere in experiments beyond democratic regulation or even scientific control. By pushing the figuring of ecosystems as 'natural capital' to its logical conclusion, *Black Narcissus* proposes that ecological collapse on

Earth is not simply driven by socio-political failures, but is also a symptom of deeper ideological misrecognition and psychological dynamics.

Questions

How can the abstractions of high finance be made visible in a work of art, and engage an audience in such a way as to critically reflect upon their relation to the artwork?

How can the Capitalocene be envisioned as a conjoined image of economic diagram and landscape?

How might an artwork invite viewers to test their assumptions and compare different perspectives on the ecocidal trajectory of global finance?

How might an intersection of indexical data and figurative representation yield insight into psychological and ideological contradiction?

Insights

Insights

Black Narcissus produces new insights by connecting the disciplines of art, economics and ecology. Linking the abstraction of financial data to the figuration of landscape, *Black Narcissus* combines rational and emotional responses to the climate and ecological crisis into a single image of the Capitalocene. It achieves this by joining the diagrammatic representation of financial and climatic science with a visual evocation of landscape painting after Romanticism.

By inviting viewers to embrace the complexity of the global ecological crisis simultaneously through the arts, humanities, social science and natural science, the work questions the extent to which the disciplinary frames of these areas of investigation themselves perpetuate a misrecognition of the climate and ecological emergency.

By focusing on financial data, the work represents the Anthropocene as the result of specific decisions made by an elite social group that directs investment into destructive activities in order to extract surplus value. In so doing, *Black Narcissus*

provides an image of the specific concept of the Capitalocene (Moore 2016).

In classical mythology, Narcissus is a hunter who becomes entranced by his own reflection and wastes away. In psychoanalytic theory, narcissism is a psychological condition recognisable by the destabilising habit of splitting the self from others, and opposing the two by the dual process of idealising and devaluing. Implicitly proposing that capitalist ideology splits the natural from the social, *Black Narcissus* invites viewers to recognise the repressive mechanism of instrumental thinking and also to allow the return of the repressed, figured as dead nature.

Methods

Methods

Black Narcissus was commissioned by Alistair Robinson, Director of the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, and funded with £6,000 by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). It was first exhibited in the touring exhibition, *Show Me The Money: The Image of Finance, 1700 to the present*, which opened at the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland (14 June–30 August 2014). Intending that the artwork should help enhance the public understanding of, and critical engagement with, the global social-ecological crisis, Cross gathered published material including:

- scientific reports (such as by the Grantham Institute, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change; UNESCO on climate change impacts on mountain regions of the world; and the World Resources Institute).
- company accounts and financial statements from global mining corporations (e.g. Rio Tinto, BHP Billiton and Glencore).
- economic and social analyses of the implications of the decline in net energy from

fossil fuels (including from Nafeez Ahmed; Banktrack; the Bank of England; Carbon Brief; The International Energy Agency; and the Oxford Stranded Assets Programme).

- publications by groups leading the global movement for fossil fuel divestment and the transition to a post-carbon society (including by 350.org; People & Planet; Platform; the Rapid Transition Alliance; and ShareAction).

- images of works from visual culture, including animations (François Alaux, Leo Murray), data visualisation (Edward Tufte, David McCandless), films (Arnold Fanck, Powell & Pressburger), paintings (Arnold Böcklin, Caspar David Friedrich, Gerhard Richter) and photographs (Edward Burtynsky, Richard Misrach).

Following initial conversations with Matthew Cornford, Cross made concept drawings to show the intersection between indexical information of financial graphs and the figurative image of mountain landscapes. Referring to Fredric Jameson's periodising hypothesis of 'Postmodernism' (Jameson,

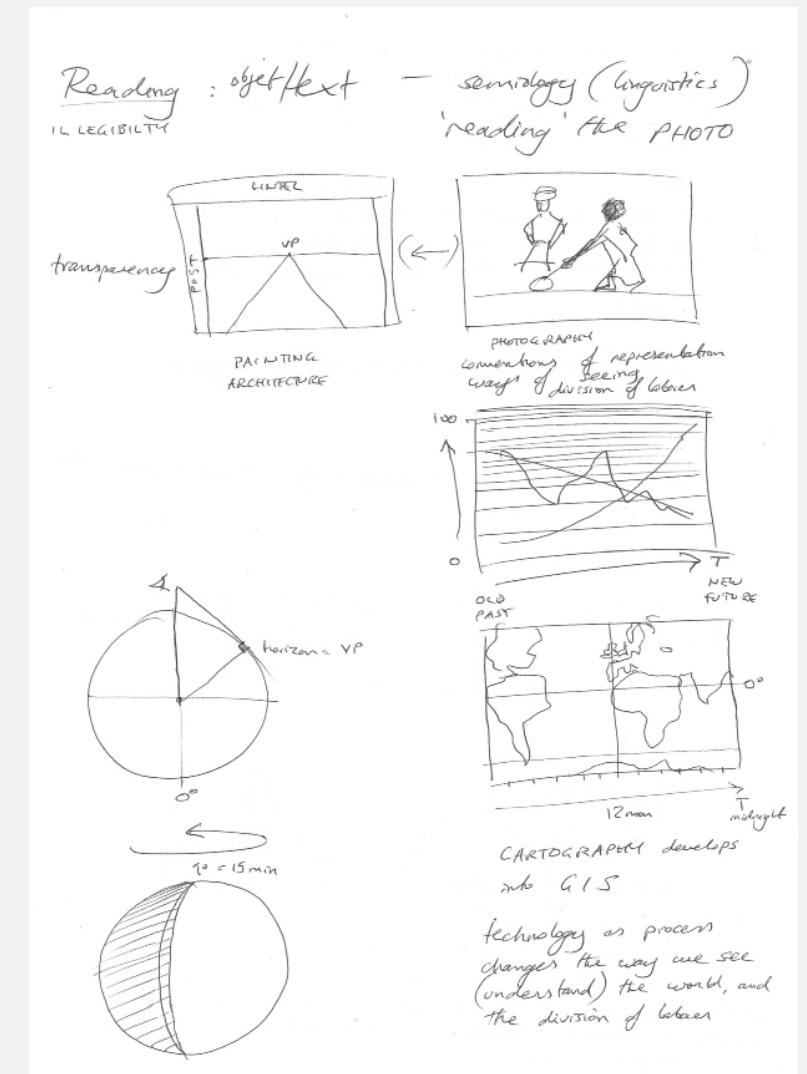
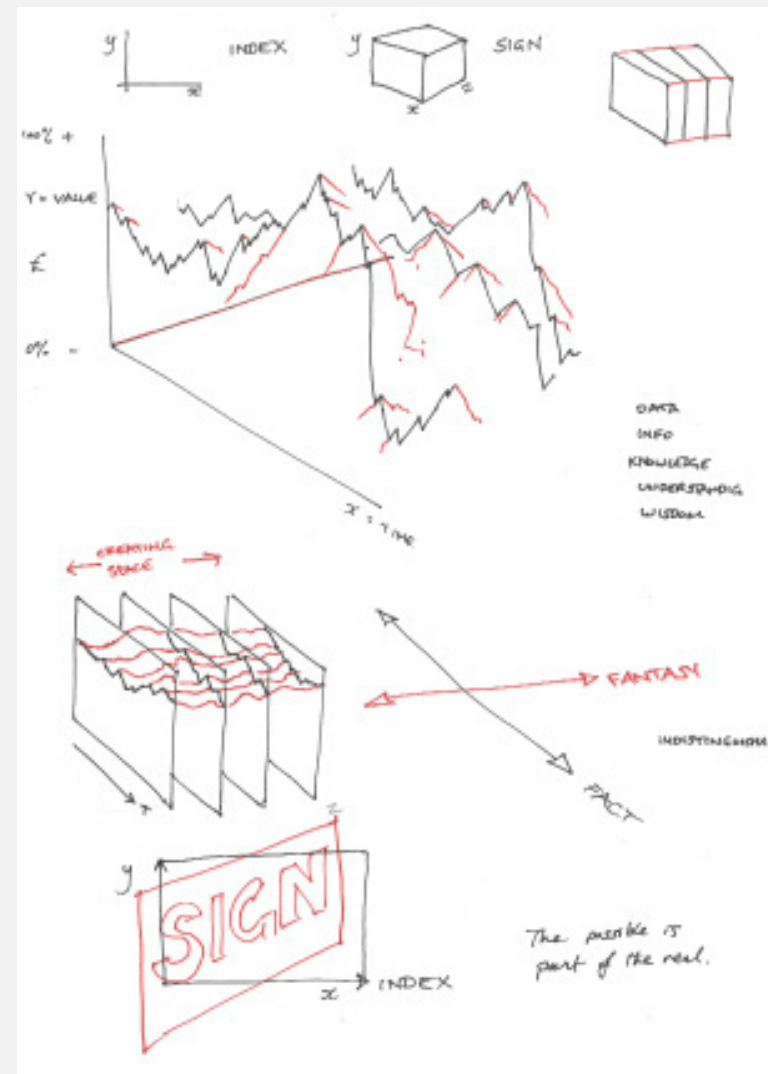
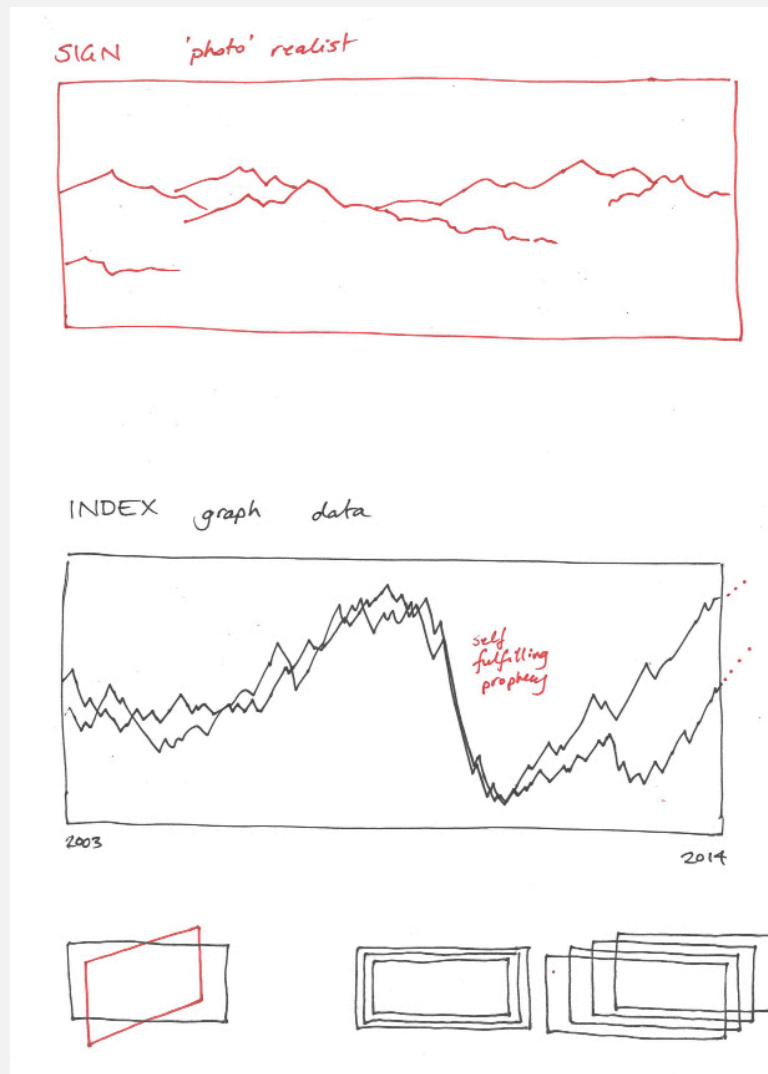
1982), which related technological developments to their cultural correlates, Cross extended Jameson's timeline to the historical period 2003–2013, defining it as a decade of trauma, chaos and revolution', including the US invasion of Iraq, the Global Financial Crisis, and the emergence of 'online whistleblowers'. Cross associated these social and political phenomena with economic, technological and cultural shifts. Cross sourced relevant financial graphs for each year, and set them to a standard vertical scale, which revealed the extent to which the vertical axes of graphs for the critical years of 2008 and 2009 had been compressed to fit the normal proportions, thereby downplaying the severity of the global Financial Crisis, and discursively normalising its consequences.

Cross sent the concept drawings and financial graphs to Massimo Verona (aka "Massi San"), a digital visualising professional based in Amsterdam. Cross briefed Verona and communicated with him online to model the terrain from the graphs. Once the physical form of the landscape

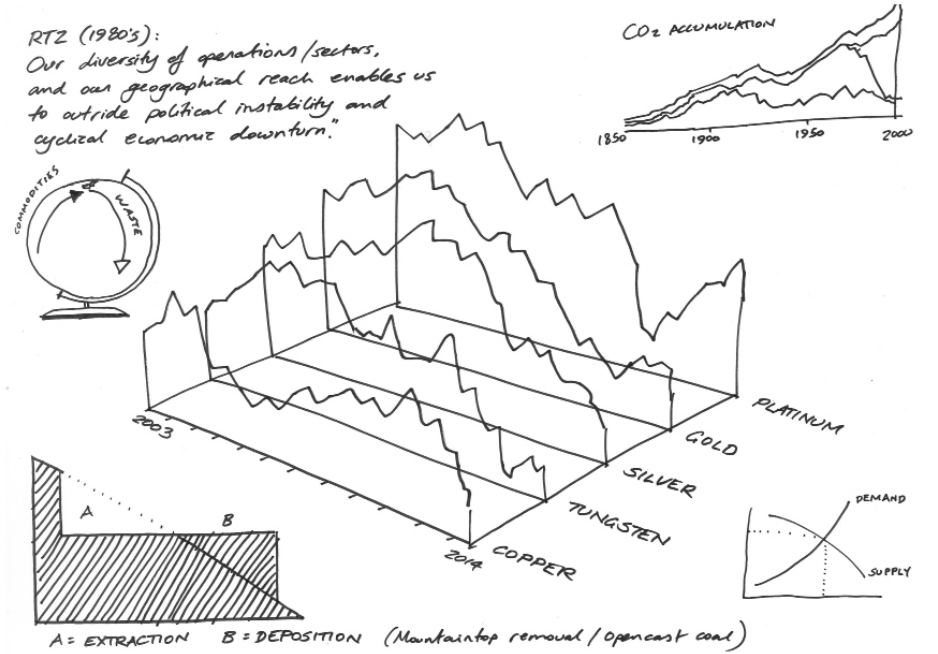
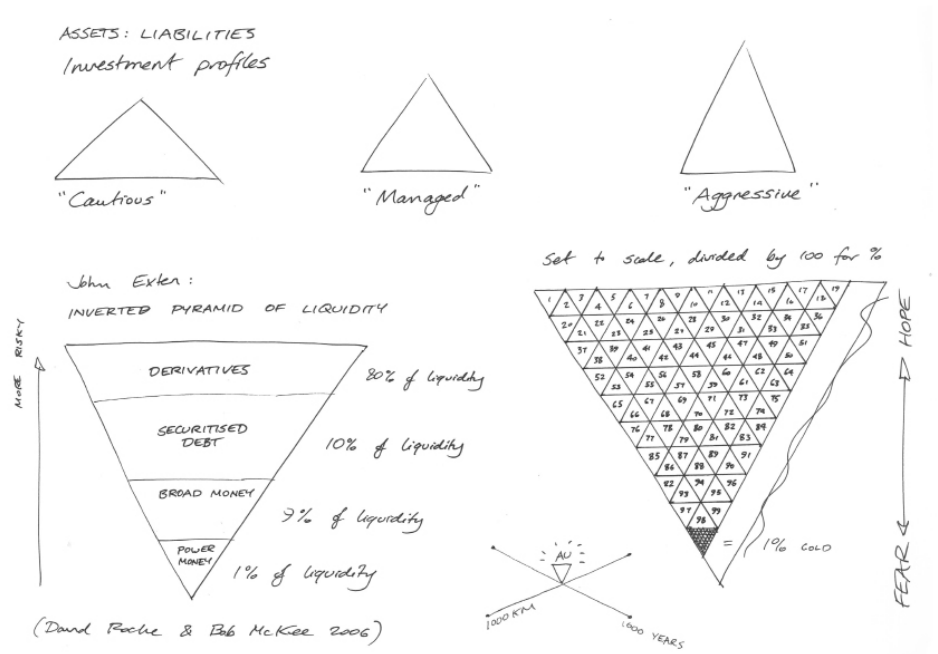
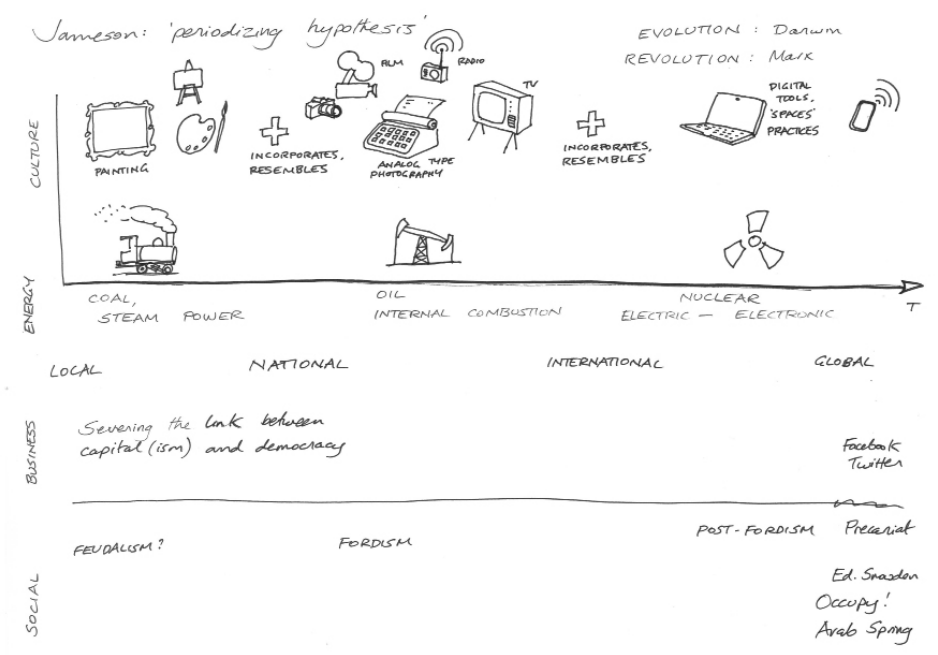
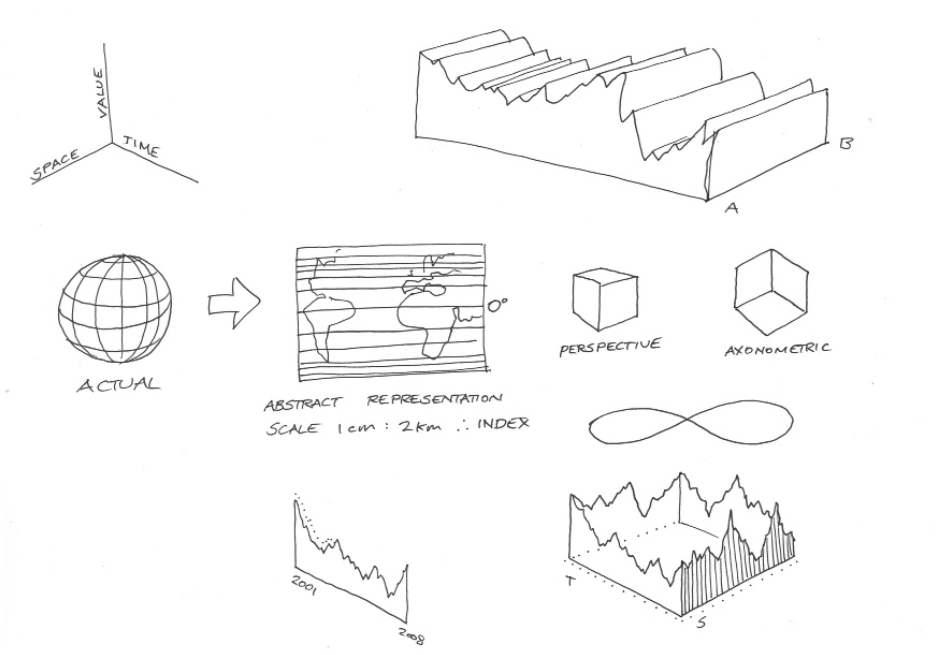
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had been modelled, Cross assembled a digital 'palette' of royalty-free photographs of ecologically damaged landscapes, including tar sands extraction sites, coal mine spoil heaps, oil spill zones, gas flare pits, and forests killed by acid rain. Massimo Verona used these images to render the texture, colouring and lighting of a mountain terrain following total ecological collapse.

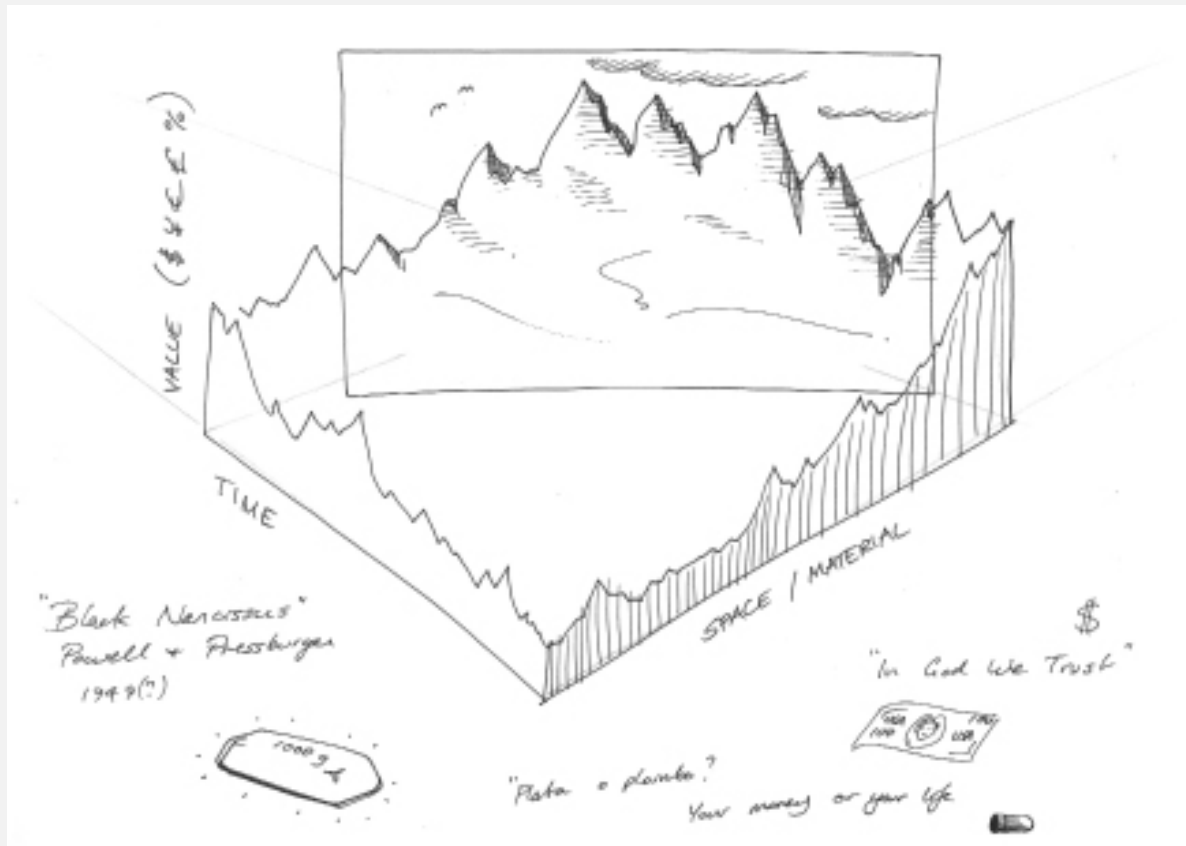
These 'virtual' working methods were conceptually appropriate to the project's aim of engaging with the digital economy's detached relationship to material space and embodied time.



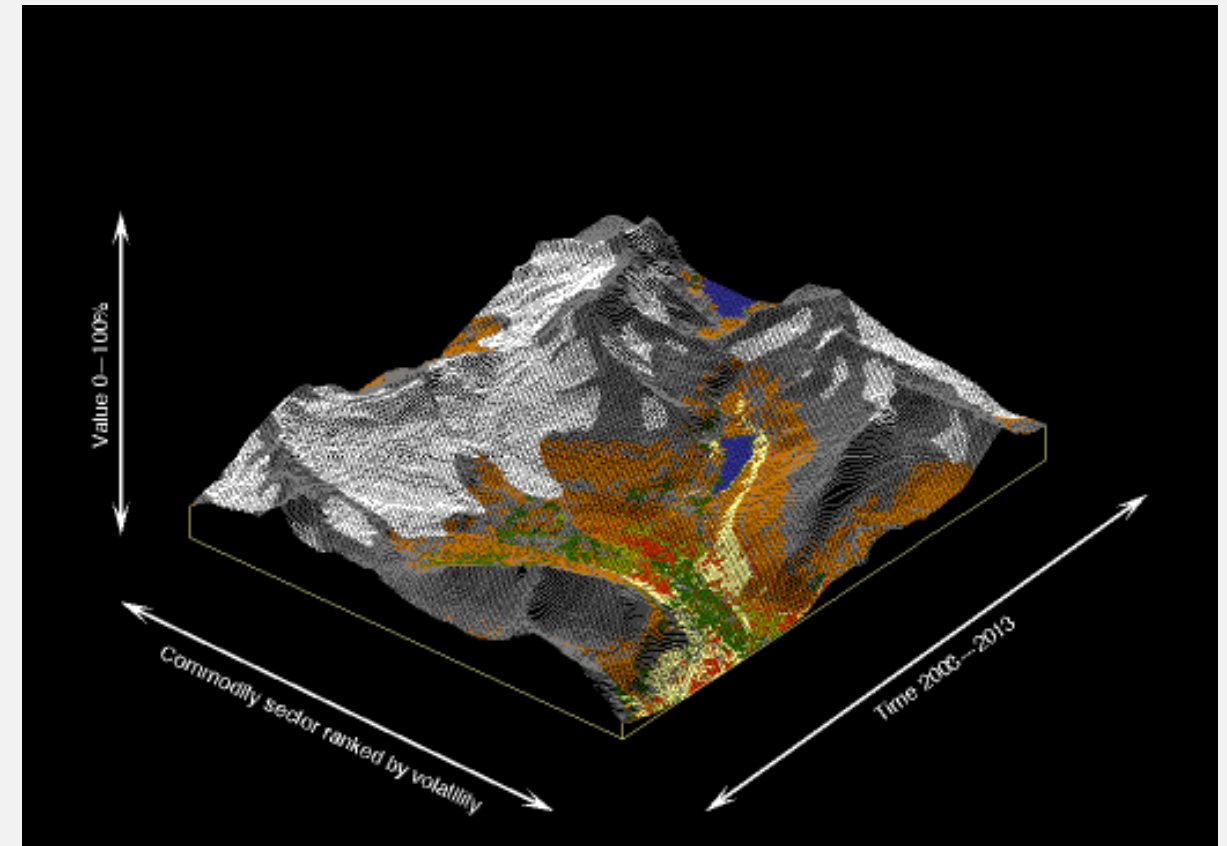
Black Narcissus development sketches



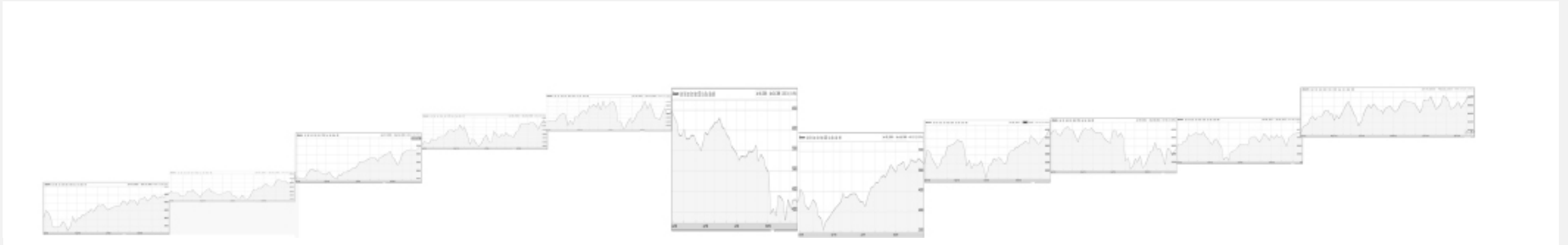
Black Narcissus development sketches



Black Narcissus development sketch



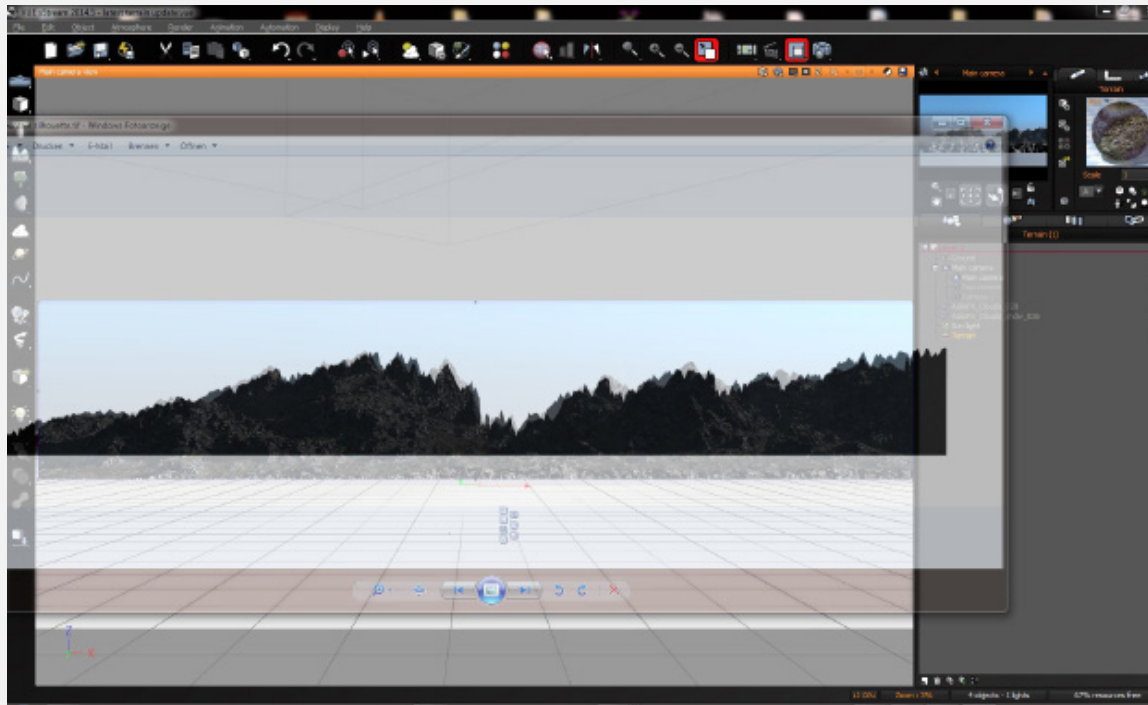
Black Narcissus landscape structure



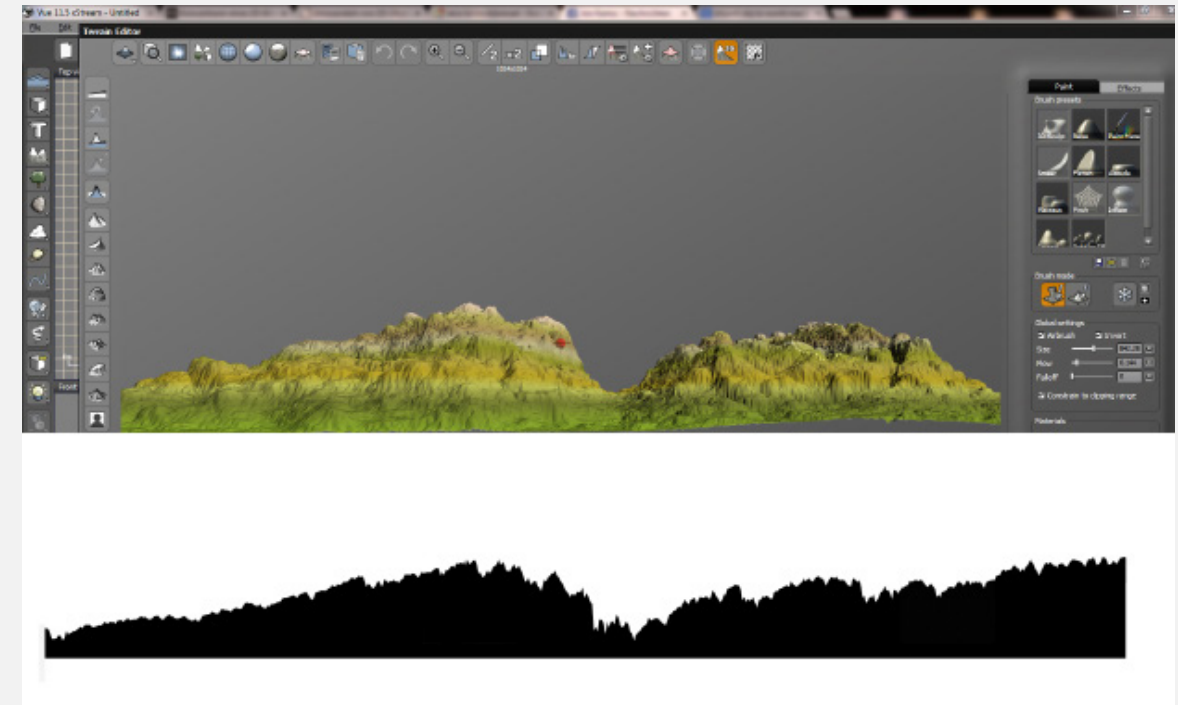
Black Narcissus financial graphs



Black Narcissus panorama



Black Narcissus render viewport



Black Narcissus terrain test

Dissemination

Dissemination

Black Narcissus was featured on the cover of *The Oxford Handbook of Financial Regulation*. (Moloney, N., Ferran, E. & Payne, J. (2015), Oxford: Oxford University Press.)

Show Me The Money: The Image of Finance, 1700 to the present, the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland, 14 June–30 August 2014.

[*Show Me the Money: The Image of Finance 1700 to present*](#), AHRC Vimeo, (Cross, *Black Narcissus*, at 2 min 33 sec).

Cross was invited by Marjorie Allthorpe-Guyton and Michaela Crimmin to present at the 2015 International Association of Art Critics (AICA) Symposium, “Value, Veneration and Criticality”, at the Royal College of Art, London. The symposium identity and publicity material featured *The Lost Horizon* by Cornford & Cross. Cross gave a presentation featuring *The Lost Horizon* (2003) and *Black Narcissus* (2014).

