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Zach Blas

By *Elizabeth Fullerton*

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In the impressive show “Contra-Internet,” which debuted at Gasworks and opens late this month at Art in General in New York, the London-based artist and writer **Zach Blas** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/zach-blas/>) explores forms of resistance to the increasing hegemony of the internet. The title riffs on the feminist/transgender theorist Paul B. Preciado’s 2002 *Manifesto Contrasexual*. Blas, whose work often focuses on the overlap between queer culture and digital technology, takes Preciado’s premise that sexuality is a political construct of power relations and extends the idea to the internet, the dominant global network.

The exhibition’s centerpiece is Blas’s futuristic short video *Jubilee 2033* (2017), which envisions a heady post-gender time when the internet in its current form has collapsed, liberating the world from its sinister subjugation. The video pays homage to British filmmaker Derek Jarman’s 1978 queer punk classic *Jubilee*, in which Queen Elizabeth I is transported to a dystopian 1970s Britain where anarchy rules and girl gangs rampage.

Blas’s video begins in 1955 in New York, with Ayn Rand discussing her ideas of unfettered individualism and laissez-faire capitalism with the young economist Alan Greenspan and the Canadian painter Joan Mitchell (not the Abstract Expressionist), who were briefly married and real-life acolytes of Rand. The three of them take LSD and, with the help of an anime avatar named Azuma, travel forward in time to 2033, landing in a place called the Silicon Zone, which is modeled on today’s voraciously capitalist Silicon Valley. There, they find that the internet—after having been used for years as a tool for state and corporate control and surveillance, a co-optation that had been enabled by Rand’s neoliberal philosophies—has been overthrown. The hero of the ragtag countermovement is

Nootropix, a non-gendered, silver-painted artificial-intelligence prophet. Nootropix reads from Blas's book *The End of the Internet (As We Knew It)*—a conceptual work, on view in the gallery, that interweaves texts on Marxist, poststructuralist, feminist, and queer theory—and celebrates the internet's demise with a triumphant dance to a rousing operatic hit, "Con te Partirò," sung by Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli. Blas's message is that the internet is not invincible; resistance pays off.

Blas has taken aim at digital technology before, often with darkly humorous results. As part of his pseudo-corporate project "Queer Technologies" (2007–12), for example, he created a *Gay Bombs User's Manual* in response to a United States Air Force plan to develop a biochemical weapon to turn enemy fighters gay. For "Facial Weaponization Suite" (2011–14), he aggregated biometric data of multiple members of marginal groups to create amorphous masks that would thwart facial recognition technologies.

At Gasworks, his installation around *Jubilee 2033* similarly pointed to the increasing invasiveness of technological scrutiny. Flanking the screen were two crystal ball–like spheres on plinths. These sculptures are based on the seeing stones called "palantíri" in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and are also meant to refer to Palantir Technologies, a California-based data analytics firm (named after Tolkien's fantasy objects) whose software is used by corporations, government agencies, and other entities. In an adjacent room were three short videos that speak to the desire to circumvent the internet's control; one, for instance, shows how to remove your personal traces from social media posts.

Like much art related to digital technology, the work in "Contra-Internet" has a certain sterility to it and a densely referential nature. Yet Blas's cerebral, often playful investigations bear radical political intent. Focusing on autonomous mesh networks, the dark net, encryption, and other tools used by activists, Blas suggests it is possible to conceive a new utopian system where diversity can thrive.

