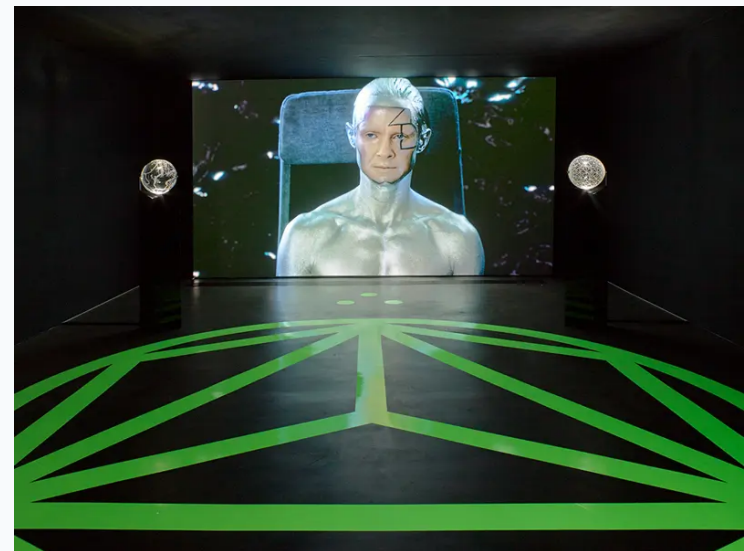


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Escape from the Internet Swamp: ZACH BLAS with Iván Zgaib

This starts with a paradox. I'm sitting in a small café in Berlin without Wi-Fi connection, worried because I can't communicate with Zach Blas. I want to WhatsApp him: "I'm here, waiting for you on a lost table at the end of a narrow hallway." But he finds me easily. He sits down and immediately starts speaking out against the internet. He says it is like a big musty swamp in which our dreams of a different world are drowning. And everything that Blas is saying beats in the bright heart of *Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033*, the film at the centerpiece of his exhibition showing at Art in General.

So here is the thing: Zach Blas tells me about CIA drug experiments and about the use of LSD to increase people's



Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033, installation, Gasworks, curated by Robert

ability to work. The bearded waiter looks askance at us while he brings a cup of coffee. Blas's words might just sound like a paranoia lecture on a Monday morning. Nevertheless, Blas consistently vindicates the use of dystopia as a narrative and aesthetic device to observe the present.

This new work of the American artist and filmmaker crosses multiple materials and temporalities: the space of the gallery, cinematic narrative, feminist theory, dystopian science fiction, and *Jubilee*, Derek Jarman's 1978 film about the punk scene in England. In Blas's re-invention, Ayn Rand travels from 1955 to 2033 to find her worst nightmare has come true: the Silicon Valley ideal that she had fought for is in crisis. A group of rebels has taken over the city and threatens to destroy the global hegemonic order held by the internet.

"Can we even imagine a world beyond the control of the internet?" Blas asks me as he takes a sip of coffee to wake up. And this vision of the universe of virtual networks also implies a question about cinema: if films can create audiovisual forms to bring different perspectives on the world, what are the possibilities they open to imagine the unimaginable? Thus, Blas's proposal operates in an expansive sense: it tries to create images where the capitalist values promoted by Ayn Rand and her followers are confronted by an alternative.

The possibility of the internet's disappearance—much less capitalism's—seems far beyond the horizon of contemporary discussion. But Blas is trying to erase those limits.

Iván Zgaib (Rail): One of the things I found interesting is your take on *Jubilee*, because that film came from such a specific political and cultural context: the punk scene of the '70s in the UK and that moment before Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. What is the context that influenced *Contra-Internet* in 2018?

Zach Blas: The context for me is California in Silicon Valley. And basically a certain kind of tech development that is having deep political effects across the world and that is pushing for the kind of governments we are living under. Since I lived in California for a long time, I thought this couldn't be a film about England. The narrative structure of *Jubilee*, if you strip that bare, is really about a political figure from the past that time-travels into the future and sees the wreckage of society that that person is complicit with. And I think that is

interesting: moving this confrontation with a political figure into the future to explore the material conditions of our present.

What was interesting for me was to think: OK, Jarman's version was very much about nationalism. It is all about England. But we live in a world where politics and nations are much more complex. Globalization has happened, and a really interesting way to think through that is global infrastructure, like the internet. So my film is about a figure who inspired a certain kind of political and philosophical way in which these infrastructures are developed, innovated, and managed.

Rail: So how do you come up with the character of Ayn Rand?

Blas: Maybe this is more in America, but there are a lot of articles, like in *Vanity Fair*, about all these Silicon Valley entrepreneurs that are influenced by Rand—the real Ayn Rand, who lived in the 20th century. There is actually a documentary on it. Many people openly talk about this: they are naming buildings and children after her. So there is this link between the kind of philosophy and ideals of living that she put in her writings and the Silicon Valley culture that is embracing her. I also wanted to make a film that is about philosophy. You can say that she is the proto-philosopher for Silicon Valley.

Rail: And what is also interesting in your film is that she sees a rebellion in the future. So it makes me think about how the end of capitalism is so rarely addressed in culture and cinema. It usually seems to appear in the form of dystopia and utopia. Could you talk a bit more about how dystopia, anti-utopianism, or utopianism is expressed in your work?

Blas: One main theoretical inspiration for me is two feminists who wrote under one name: J.K. Gibson-Graham. The book read by one of the rebels in the film is like a plagiarized and reconfigured version of *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It)*, which was written by J.K. Gibson-Graham in the mid '90s. They make this beautiful argument: often, male Marxist philosophers choose to theorize capitalism as that which has no outside. And they say the problem with that is that it forecloses the possibility of arriving at an anti-capitalist alternative. They have these beautiful phrases where they call these thinkers “capitalist-centric.” So they say the first thing we have to do is an intellectual-theoretical project where

we understand that capitalism does already have outsides, and they look at different economic practices that they call non-capitalist.

Rail: And how are these ideas manifested in *Contra-Internet*?

Blas: What is so incredible about this feminist work is that it snaps so beautifully onto the question of the internet today. Because the thing with the internet is that you can't untwine it from capitalism, governmental control, or global surveillance. So if you follow J.K. Gibson-Graham, the question now is: how do you think beyond the internet? What is outside of it? And what is so interesting is that if you ask people that question, their eyes roll over. People can't even register that question. What would that be? And when you hit something that is "unthinkable" it makes you realize it is becoming a totality. And it is not a totality.

Rail: But it is sensed like that.

Blas: Exactly. So I wanted the rebels' lecture in the film to be very poetic. But the core is when they say: "There are heroines within the infrastructure." And this refers to this alternative network activity that is really happening around the world—where you have people in Hong Kong during pro-democracy protests using autonomous networking infrastructure to communicate when they are not connecting to the commercial internet. These examples around the world reveal horizons about what we desire politically. And what I want is to connect queer politics to those questions. Because so often queer politics stays at the level of the body, sexuality, and identity. Which is fine, but I want to show that those politics can be engaged in these pressing questions of the contemporary.

Rail: You are talking a lot about the importance of imagining an alternative to capitalism. And I was thinking about the formal approach of the film, in terms of how you picture visually and sonically a future that sometimes is unthinkable.

Blas: I think there are some things that come out more in the installation. The installation pulls out these questions of psychedelics and mysticism a lot more. But I guess I just wanted to make this queer sci-fi film. And I think there is something at the level of the image that is very libidinal. It is one thing to talk about these ideas, but when you see the passion, the

bodies, the sexuality, the burning, the destruction, the critique hits at a different level. It is so much more visceral. I wanted it to be lush. I wanted it to feel indulgent in its aesthetics: I wanted it to be colorful; I wanted the images to be intense, rich, and exaggerated. And part of that is thinking that technically this is all an acid trip. That is why it needed to be very heavy on CGI. This is an acid trip from 1955 to the future, and it has to happen through computer graphics. It has to happen through the material engine that these people are developing. That is why I felt very strongly about the last scene at the beach. That was the scene where no CGI was allowed (except for the character of Zuma), because I wanted the beach to be the counterpoint. It is this very material moment where I present a different idea of nature. So if you were going to think: what would be an abstract expressionist painting that could represent Silicon Valley today? I think it would literally just be a network fiber. For me these are aesthetic representations of Silicon Valley's taste. The world has been stripped of everything except networks. That is all there is.

Rail: How does Nootropix (the rebels' leader) break that capitalist Silicon Valley representation?

Blas: I think it is about Nootropix's physicality. Her embodiment is the counterpoint to that.

Rail: Because it is more material?

Blas: Yes, exactly. For me the funny thing about Ayn Rand is that she is this completely rational philosopher. She is all about rationality. But then she sees Nootropix wearing a dildo and she is so entranced by this phallic object that she doesn't realize it's attached to a gender queer body. And she just can't help but touch herself. For me that is the moment where the rationality of Ayn Rand gets undone by the libidinal desire.

Iván Zgaib

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