

Toying with the Future: AI, Fantasy, and Zach Blas's *Icosahedron*



Zach Blas's *Icosahedron* (2019), installed in the Walker's Bazinet Lobby. Photo: Bobby Rogers

For decades, large technology firms have collected data towards the project of predictive analytics. The number of romcoms you watch on Netflix helps their algorithms choose what to recommend to you next. How you swipe helps Tinder find you that special someone. Using a variety of statistical modeling techniques, tech firms manipulate metrics of the present in order to map more accurate cartographies of the future, whatever that future may be. But hidden behind the façade of preventative intervention, bolstered by public faith in scientific rationality, these companies have constructed increasingly pervasive networks of biometric governance and technological control.

Icosahedron, a new work from artist Zach Blas, responds to this technocultural milieu. The interactive installation simulates the office desk of an upper-level tech worker, inviting viewers to sit down and interact with a glowing crystal ball—an homage to both the Magic 8-Ball toy and the ubiquitous computer

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monitor on such exec's desks—inside which resides an artificially intelligent elf. Through dialogue with the AI, the illusion of a neat, knowable future is shattered, allowing viewers to see through the mysticism that surrounds predictive analytic technology. *Icosahedron* is as much a commentary on the acceleration and fortification of neoliberal techno-utopianism as it is on contemporary cultural expectations of technology's capacity to predict the future. Commissioned by the Walker Art Center and the Carl & Marilyn Thoma Art Foundation, the piece is on view as part of *The Body Electric*, an exhibition that explores the intersection of the virtual and the real.

In a recent conversation with author and VCU English professor Jennifer Rhee, Blas discusses some of his artistic choices, the current occupation of large tech companies with algorithmic prediction, and his reflections on the future.

JENNIFER RHEE (JR)

Could you speak a bit about prediction, since that's one of the ways that AI technology is being taken up now? It seems to operate like a kind of fantasy.

ZACH BLAS (ZB)

Prediction echoes this concept I came up with a couple years ago called "Metric Mysticism," which describes a broad trend in Silicon Valley of appropriating magic crystal gazing and other ideas of fantasy in order to conceptualize the work of prediction the industry is doing. I really wanted to interrogate what that phenomenon means—fantasy as a motivation towards something like predictive technologies—in a place like Silicon Valley. It's such a politically charged moment, where there's this really popular turn to fantasy to talk about how these technologies are working, and not only just the public but tech companies, too.

One of my interests in Palantir Technologies—a particular company with which this piece is in dialogue—is in how they've conceptualized so much of their predictive data analytics around *The Lord of the Rings*. "Palantir" is the name of the crystal ball in *The Lord of the Rings*, but I also have a bit of extra intel, and apparently the company has mapped out the entire world through the world of *The Lord of the Rings*. For instance, at Palantir, the Middle East is renamed Mordor, which is the evil land within that fantasy world, but of course *The Lord of the Rings* is essentially a fantasy of a race war. Which fits: if you dig deeper into something like predictive policing, you'll see that marginalized communities are the most negatively impacted by this type of stuff. Palantir is not alone in linking together magic, mysticism, and fantasy with prediction. *Icosahedron* is a

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bit subtle because not all of these layers immediately pop, but the choice of the elf in the crystal ball is very important because if you think about which race in *The Lord of the Rings* the tech elite are going to map themselves onto, it's pretty obvious. The elves are understood to be the most intelligent, and they're also immortal, which totally maps Silicon Valley's obsession with prolonging life.



Zach Blas's *Icosahedron* (2019), in an environment designed to mimic a Silicon Valley tech executive's desk. Photo: Bobby Rogers

The other thing I would say about prediction is that when you move from the crystal ball—from literally crystal-gazing—to these predictive technologies, the idea of prevention becomes way more active. It's a clear active coupling that revolves around prevention, where you attempt to predict one thing in order to prevent a whole other set of things from happening. It's about predicting the future in order to actually foreclose a whole host of possibilities of the future. That's an important dynamic that the work is also in a critical engagement with.

JR

Your work offers different visions of the future, and I wanted to ask you a bit about these different concepts of the future, but not in terms of their specific details. How would you characterize the future as your work is offering it? Is the future something deeply malleable and open, or is it something closer to what predictive AI technology talks about as something mappable and absolutely knowable in the present?

ZB

I don't think the artwork predicts the future; it actually shies away from pinning down the future. In terms of the work itself, the AI is not very smart, because in order to build a very robust artificial intelligence you would probably need to give it thousands and thousands of texts, but this one only has 20. Often sentence structures start to crumble; it could give responses that are kind of jargony and not make sense. Sometimes it's very apt and clear and kind of nails it, but I also think that's part of what the work is trying to unearth and push against, to expose the faulty and problematic premises of how the future is already being cast. A kind of underlying interest here is to keep the future open and porous and up for grabs. All of this experimenting and engaging with the elf is very much about an experimental engagement with the limits of a Californian view of the future. I always think California is the place where you can literally be a professional futurist: those are people's full-time jobs there. That's why the elf has this business card that says "futurist" on it.



A business card associated with Zach Blas's *Icosahedron* (2019). Photo: Carina Lofgren

JR

Humor seems so important to your piece, and one of the most accepted deployments of humor is the way that the elf does a rapid body turn before answering a question. That was such a wonderful collapse of the figure of purported authoritative prognosticator.

ZB

Yes. The elf has a series of emotions as well; it's a little dramatic. I think that drama, paired with a machine-generated voice, is kind of funny to encounter, especially when the elf engages with things like finance and derivatives, student debt and terrorism. To me it was like, okay, if I'm going to do this kind of criticism, I want to do it in a kind of funny way and dish out critique at the level I think they deserve it. I used a children's toy [the Magic 8-Ball] to respond to the childish masculinity and bravado of someone like [Palantir Technologies co-founder] Peter Thiel, but also to play with these words of "toying" and "gaming." They're toying with the world's future.

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JR

In your description of the project, you talk about how the outcome is an artificial intelligence created by accentuating the often-overlooked condition that all predictive technologies are bound to material constraints and limitations. Could you say a bit more about what material constraints and limitations bind predictive technologies?

ZB

Sure. The work tries to dramatize the disconnect between the material substrate upon which predictive technologies actually work and the kind of grandiose fantasy around them, which is quite clearly not really bound by any kind of material concern about what is possible. I wanted to find a way in the work to draw attention to material constraint and configuration. Technology can't do everything, and that it's always going to have some limitations. Think of the physical object inside the Magic 8-Ball—the 20-sided die, the icosahedron—that's the material condition of the Magic 8-Ball. You've got 20 options to work with, and I just thought that that would be an apt to model artificial intelligence on because the work is also about the limitations of the philosophical-political worldview of the future, and 20 possibilities seem to sum up that narrow worldview.



Books included in Zach Blas's installation *Icosahedron* (2019). Photo: Bobby Rogers

JR

Let's talk about the text that you use to program the AI itself. I'm interested in the list of books that you use, and I have some questions about the text categories—"positive," "negative," and "neutral." What do these categories mean? What does "positive" connote? And, more centrally, positive for whom?

ZB

I guess the way that I programmed the "positive" category was using works of writing that align with a kind of Silicon Valley ideology—texts that are kind of pro-Silicon Valley. There are 10 of those, and I tried to incorporate a range, including writers like Ayn Rand, who obviously wrote before the existence of Silicon Valley, but whose writing is very much politically synched with the world view of the entrepreneurial spirit. Of course there's also some kind of pop writing, such as Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*. I also chose texts over a wide array of topics, so that, for example, Sandberg's text allows the AI to talk about feminism and women. "Neutral" was work that I thought could have been taken on by people in Silicon Valley and celebrated and cherished, but that itself is not necessarily aligned with that world view. "Negative" I just took to be critical, like books against prediction by a scholar like Bernard Harcourt.

JR

We've talked a lot about the kind of "Americanness" of California, you know,

futurism and ideology. I want to talk about the elf: it has a British accent, right? I'm just wondering about that now that we've talked about how grounded in Americanness this is.

ZB

That's very apt of you to pick up on. Of course, the elf does have a British accent. The very first thing I wanted to do with this project was to actually use a set of TED Talks by people who actually live in California since Californians are often talked about in America as not having accents. But there's a lot of different ways one can speak in California, and as I was gathering these voices to develop a voice, we realized that in an experiential capacity, it just wasn't working. I think the problem is it broke the fantasy of the work, and the work needs the fantasy to contrast other elements that the work is trying to throw into relief.

Ultimately, I decided, with the technical team that worked on this, to use a British voice because Tolkien—the author—has a British accent and it seemed to stay within the fantasy. But also, I cannot think of anything more American to create a fantasy world where everyone has a British accent.



The immortal elf inside Zach Blas's *Icosahedron*, an AI crystal ball commissioned for the exhibition *The Body Electric*. Photo: Bobby Rogers

The Magic 8-Ball is also a very American toy. That's actually really important. I've asked a lot of people in London if they know what a Magic 8-Ball is, and no one has any clue. I know Silicon Valley has gone global, but there is still something very American about all of this.

JR

One thing I keep coming back to is the plant that is sitting just adjacent to the desk. I understand that's part of the standard, anonymous office culture but something about that plant in the context of this work is so evocative to me. Can you talk more about the plant, in addition to just being part of standard office décor?

ZB

I actually thought a lot about the plant, as part of an interest in New Silicon Valley architecture that exceeds the bounds of this work. Particularly the use of glass paired with an obsession with folding nature back into these tech spaces. Obviously, I did a lot of research on what tech cubicles look like these days, and a plant or two is always part of the aesthetic—like the vernacular of how those things are set up. I went with an artificial plant for multiple reasons, one of which is another material gesture within the installation to prompt people experiencing the work into thinking about construction.



Zach Blas (left) with *Icosahedron* (2019). Photo: Carina Lofgren

JR

I watched the video of *Icosahedron* responding to the question, “What’s the future of healthcare?” and watching that interaction was deeply bleak, humorous, and despairing all at the same time. I was wondering if you had a favorite prediction that you’ve received from *Icosahedron* or if there’s an answer that really stands out to you?

ZB

I asked something about the future of the world once and it answered back with a question about bigger, brighter drag queens, which I thought was really amazing. That affirmative answer about more drag in the world sounded good to me.



For more on *Icosahedron*, watch Zach Blas’s artist talk with Ohio State film professor Kris Paulsen.

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