



BLOG
Artcetera

A giant glowing crystal ball and elf await Walker Art Center visitors

By Alicia Eler | APRIL 4, 2019 — 12:30PM



Above: "Icosahedron" by artist Zach Blas at the Walker Art Center. All images courtesy of the artist.

A giant glowing crystal ball with a shadowy elf inside of it sits on top of a sleek black desk that just arrived in the lobby of the Walker, outside of the Mediatheque. Next to it, a glowing pink rock, a stack of business cards with the text "Icosahedron" on them, books by Ayn Rand, Ray Kurzweil, and a potted plant. It appears as if the Walker is turning into a scene plucked from the TV show "Silicon Valley."

This is the new installation "Icosahedron" by artist [Zach Blas](http://www.zachblas.info/works/icosahedron/) (<http://www.zachblas.info/works/icosahedron/>), which critiques Silicon Valley's obsession with predicting the future of prediction. Blas, an international artist/filmmaker and lecturer at Goldsmith's College in London, is known for interrogating themes such as biometric capture, time travel, policing, surveillance and technology from a queer/feminist perspective. For "Icosahedron," his most technologically complicated project to date, he worked closely with a team of more than 10 tech folks, coders and fabricators to produce the artificially intelligent piece. "Icosahedron" was commissioned as part of "[The Body Electric](http://www.startribune.com/walker-art-center-plugs-into-the-body-electric-for-a-live-wire-new-show/507835502/)," (<http://www.startribune.com/walker-art-center-plugs-into-the-body-electric-for-a-live-wire-new-show/507835502/>) curated by Pavel Pyš on view through July 21.

The elf represents what Silicon Valley imagines as the "ideal man" – white, with a British accent, and immortal. Blas referred to the installation as "a high fantasy of a tech executive's desk" – more specifically, what he imagines as the desk of PayPal founder Peter Thiel, the right-wing friend of President Trump who founded PayPal and Palantir Technologies, a data analytics company that sells surveillance products to companies that want to spy on their own employees. Palantir is also responsible for [the rollout of highly problematic predictive policing in California](https://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-lapd-predictive-policing-20190316-story.html) (<https://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-lapd-predictive-policing-20190316-story.html>), a data-based operation that has been shown to oppress neighborhoods that are already under siege and struggling with heavy policing.



"What I am interested in this company which is one of the wealthiest companies in Silicon Valley, and also right-wing leaning, is actually the name of it," said Blas. "Palantir is the crystal ball that the wizards in 'Lord of the Rings' use to see other places and communicate across distances."

Blas, who spoke about his work last Saturday, encourages everyone to have voice interactions with "Icosahedron." Ask it a question, and it will respond based on a series of 20 texts by science-fiction and tech writers who see tech as positive (Ayn Rand, Sharyl Sandberg), negative (Bernard Harcourt) or neutral (Ram Dass, Isaac Asimov) that its AI is learning from. The project is modeled after the twenty-sided die inside the toy, the Magic 8-Ball, a favorite of teenage sleepover parties that offers 10 affirmative, five neutral and five negative responses.

But there are some things it systematically cannot grasp.

"I ask it about feminism everyday and it won't respond," said Blas. "It's prudish on swear words - it knows them but won't say them."

There are also some location-specific questions that "Icosahedron" may have trouble answering. Why is it in this weird high traffic area right across from the gift shop? Why are little kids touching it, since it is an obviously expensive work of art? If it is really part of "The Body Electric," why is it so, so far away from the exhibition itself?

