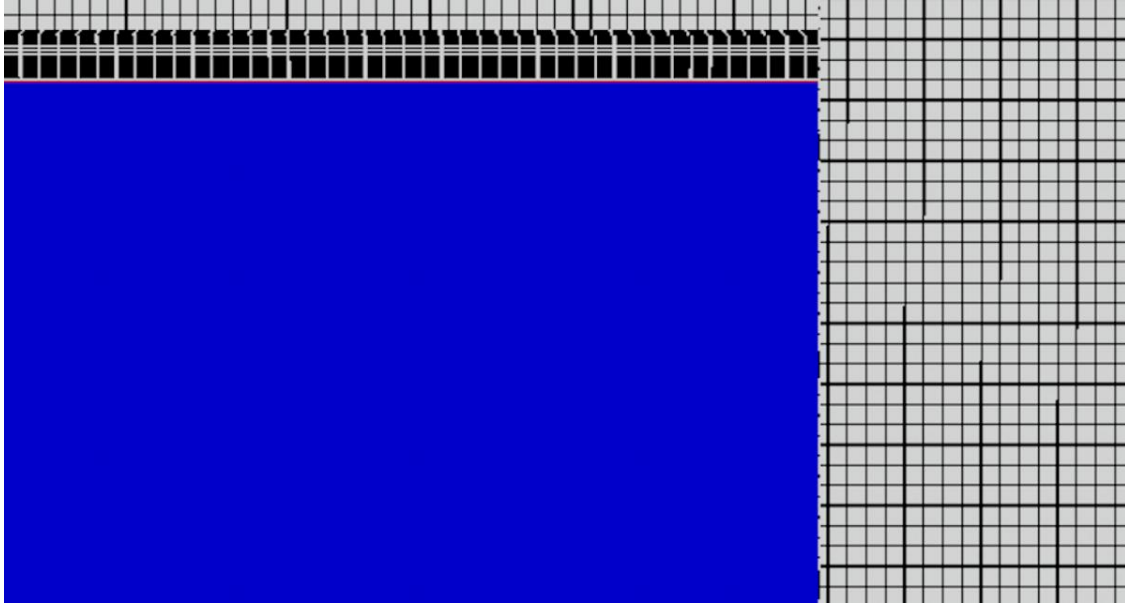# Art Matters Now — 12 Writers on 20 Years of Art: Paddy Johnson on How Digital Art from 2016 Foreshadowed Our Current Crisis

By Paddy Johnson • December 18, 2020

Whether or not [Tolstoy](#) was right in suggesting that only art is capable of setting violence aside, artists have long been uniquely positioned to rouse, revolt, speculate, complicate, tell the truth, and offer protest and possibility in polarized and violent times.

In collaboration with [Creative Capital](#), the nonprofit known for supporting provocative and progressive work, and which in 2019 celebrated its 20th year of funding and advising artists, LARB will publish 12 essays over 12 months on issues facing contemporary art in the United States. Each contributor focuses on a particular year of Creative Capital's history and/or on a specific artist, beginning with [Johanna Fateman's introduction](#) to the series, which reflected on the founding of Creative Capital (1999) in response to the subsequent decreases in federal funding for individual artists. In this essay, Paddy Johnson discusses how her current state of pandemic-induced isolation reminds her of two dystopic digital arts projects from 2016 and 2018.

Together, the essays in this series reflect the current state of arts writing as a field, just as they reveal the myriad ways that art matters now as much as ever.

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IN QUARANTINE, I have spent a lot of time feeling brooding and anxious. On social networks, my patience runs even shorter than usual. After two solid weeks of snapping at friends and picking

fights in my Facebook feed, I decided I needed to stay away if I wanted to keep any of these friends.

Between this self-imposed distance and the cancellation of most IRL exhibitions until further notice, the amount of time I have to look at digital art has grown significantly. Maybe my disenchantment with social networks has soured me on the miracle of technology, but in some ways, art that looks critically at artificial intelligence (AI) feels like the only relevant art form right now. Many of these works tend to imagine dimensions where people enchanted by technology find their worlds in ruins — which feels about right.

Chief among these is Peter Burr's 2018 *Dirtscraper*, an animated feature film about a planned underground utopia, and Zach Blas's *Contra-Internet*, a video installation that envisions a future destroyed by warring technology companies, from 2016. These works envision universes where the promise of technology fails to live up to its fantasy ideals; total collapse follows.

Dirtscraper defies an easy summary, but I interpreted the title to refer to a self-sustaining underground ecosystem. Basically, it is us, distilled into a joyless network of settler residencies, malls, mushroom gardens, and mining facilities — worlds run by competing Artificial Intelligences. Devoid of speaking roles and large visual events, the film progresses through a familiar panning pattern of the site. It often pictures residents either walking through the residences, or soaking in rays from the artificial light sources they refer to as "Sad Suns." Shops in the mall offer flu masks, oxygen candles, and dried 'shrooms.
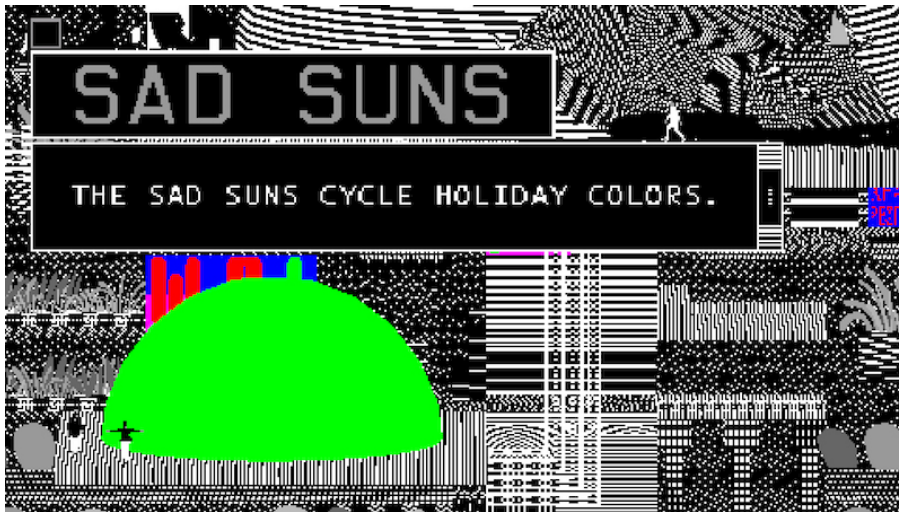
DIRTSCRAPER (livestream)
screen capture of the game window
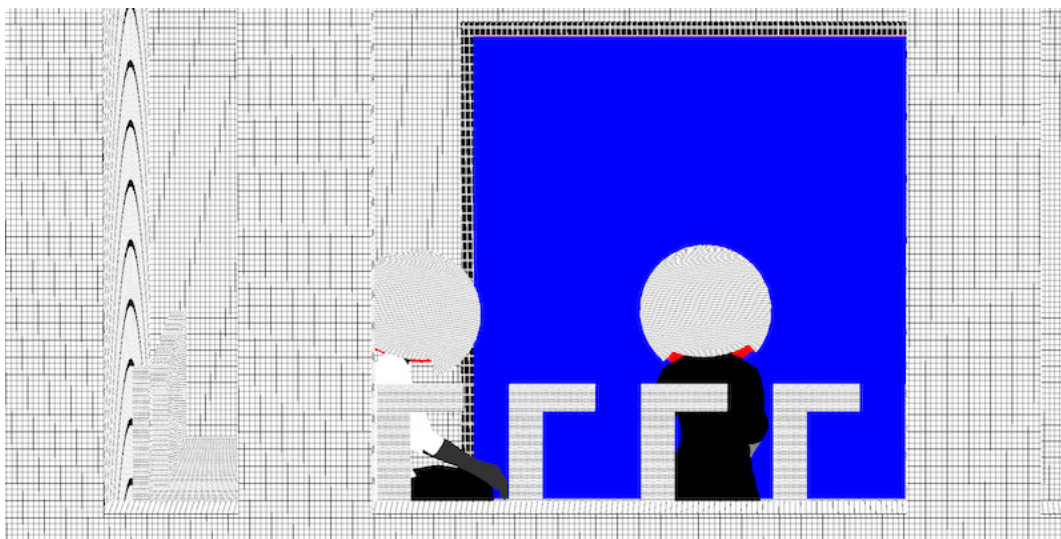*software for screen (color, sound)*
2020

Audiences have the same view of *Dirtscraper* as they would an ant farm — a flattened topological map, enlivened by the whirr of air purifiers and light tinkling of elevator music humming overhead. Video game designer Porpentine Charity Heartscape provides spare, characteristically bleak text — a loose narrative of a sunless society run by competing Artificial Intelligences told through a series of algorithmically arranged text boxes that float over the screen throughout the film.

In Peter Burr's world, overstimulation pervades both in the form of pulsating black-and-white

landscape, and narration that gives shape to the underground culture. "The Dirtscraper is a tower to another heaven," reads a bit of fragmented text moving across the screen, "toward a God that does not annihilate only gives more than you can possibly hear." The blinking neon signs in its underground malls are the "look-no-hands world" Rem Koolhaas uses to describe Junkspace in his famous, eponymous essay from 2001 — gimmicks rather than solutions to pressing problems.

Powered by Endite, a fictional black pearlescent material that drove an initial investment surge in the underground world, *Dirtscraper*'s economy relies on bubbles similar to subprime mortgages and Bitcoin. In this world, no one who invested in mining operations gets their money back. Fissures begin to plague operations, and AIs inch toward homogeneity, as the competition designed to encourage innovation turns to war. As spaces start to collapse due to overmining, "worm cubes" — homes with only enough space to hold a body — emerge.

DIRTSCRAPER (installation)
screen capture of 1 of 3 optical channels
software for projector (color, sound)
2018

From my current bedroom, Burr's world feels eerily close to my own experience: thanks to a severe hip injury, the only comfortable position I can take requires me to lie flat on the bed. In Zoom calls, my bedroom light shines behind my head like a Sad Sun — an artificial light source that bears little resemblance to the real thing. In a self-pitying moment, I realize that I, too, am "the worm cube." As I scan headlines meting out the collapse of our institutional structures, I worry that my body is miming what I see.

Inside *Dirtscraper*, no one can imagine a world outside. "The A.I. are in control of their own infrastructure," reads a small bit of crawler text. "This makes them the same as nature." Burr's animations picture a world unable to see itself. In an early vignette, two lovers wear spherical helmets to quarantine themselves from each other. Standing side by side, they gaze at manufactured sunlight alone.

DIRTSCRAPER (livestream)
screen capture of the game window
software for screen (color, sound)
2020

If *Dirtscraper* offers a grotesque caricature of the real world, artist Zach Blas's *Contra-Internet* imagines the contours of a complete collapse. The 2016 queer science fiction film installation imagines a future in which computers do all the work, and Ayn Rand achieves the status of demi-god. A network war erupts in 2033, and Adobe, Google, and Facebook go down in flames. Almost nothing from their large campuses remain except the detritus of mutilated hardware.

Within the installation, "Contra-Internet Inversion Practice #1: Constituting an Outside (Utopian Plagiarism)" gives shape to how overwhelming the internet has become. "Inversion Practice" takes the form of a desktop video for which Blas has assembled an essay using snippets of text by scholars such as Paul B. Preciado, Fredric Jameson, and J. K. Gibson-Graham writing about all-encompassing hegemonic forces. By using the find and replace function to exchange "capitalist" with "internet" and "economy" with "network," Blas shows the consistency of language within hegemonic structures.

For me, Blas's work brings forth a flood of sadness, and anger, and despondency. We are in the midst of a global public health pandemic that has triggered a worldwide recession. It requires long-term social distancing, yet half the time, I do not want to talk to anyone on social media. The socializing I once found fulfilling on legacy social media might actually be destructive — now nearly any interaction can be subverted as fodder for conspiracy theories. Yet ignoring these platforms, and all the dangers that come with them, may be just as perilous.

This dissociative experience echoes an unintentionally prescient line from a 2015 World Economic Forum speech by former Google CEO Eric Schmidt. "The internet will disappear," says Schmidt. "You won't even sense it." Playing like gospel in Blas's *Contra Internet: Jubilee 2033*, the artist points out the insidiousness of Schmidt's vision — not sensing it is the problem. How do you fix a problem you don't know exists, let alone can identify?

Blas draws on philosopher and curator Paul B. Preciado's ideas of rejecting all sexual norms by

casting transgender performance artist and bodybuilder Cassils as a silver prophet with a glowing dildo. Cassils performs pushups and other contortions, as their dildo sprays purple cum over the network. The act appears to mock tech bro manifest destiny — expansion, colonization of the digital world, but also suggests rebirth. A network born anew without any of the preconceptions of the last would almost certainly improve upon it.

The film tracks author Ayn Rand (Susanne Sachsse), painter Joan Mitchell (Lindsay Hicks), and economist Alan Greenspan (Dany Naierman) through an acid trip guided by an AI named Azuma. Like any psychedelic experience, the route is not entirely straightforward, but maybe any true challenge to hegemony should at times seem incomprehensible. The same can be said of Peter Burr's *Dirtscraper*, which offers a similarly fragmented narrative — broken, like the network from which it emerges. In *Dirtscraper*, that imbalance even gets a name — "consciousness rupture," though its causes are unusual. The term describes what happens when imbalanced consciousnesses contaminate each other with their thoughts: "It's like an A.I.'s mind compressed to the size of a human brain or a human forced to experience a mega-thought."

The current media environment may not count as anything close to a mega-thought, but I wish it did. In darker moments, I see *Dirtscraper* as prophetic. At one point, AI thoughts are described as comparable to our own — neurotoxins. *Contra-Internet* takes on the same poignancy: in its final scene, the network battles shred internet cables beneath the ocean bed, with all possibility for connection and disconnection buried beneath the sediment. This disruption feels particularly close to the paradox of pandemic, where no amount of isolation can distance us. It is a lonely existence, and almost certainly the beginning of massive social change. My hope is for a future that takes a better turn than the predictions in these artworks.

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