

# Zach Blas's *CULTUS*: Conjuring the Dark Gods of Silicon Valley's Technocracy

"Cult" is such a loaded word, provocative, misunderstood. In the strictest technical sense, a cult is merely a small group of people dedicated to a religious figure or a spiritual practice. However, the popular understanding of the term is decidedly menacing, with connotations of abuse and unscrupulous, charismatic leaders controlling and manipulating vulnerable people who seek community, protection, spiritual advancement, and love. Zach Blas's *CULTUS* slyly weaves together the tangled threads of the cult, blending danger, control, and shadowy ritual with the devotion and elation we feel in our willing submissions to an emergent pantheon of hungry Gods. While *CULTUS* definitely suggests the existence of a shady cabal of Silicon Valley technomages enslaving us to the algorithm, inherent in the piece is the suggestion that, like the followers of any cult, we ultimately choose to serve these Gods. Cults are only sustained by the promise of fulfillment of our needs, fantasies, and desires. Can we extricate ourselves? I think the question is, do we want to? These new Gods make puppets of us all, and they seem very, very real indeed.

*CULTUS* is the second installment of Blas's *Silicon Traces* trilogy, exposing the

strange, inherent, and seemingly contradictory esoteric religiosity bubbling not far beneath the surface of Silicon Valley. While Silicon Valley technically refers to the portion of the southern San Francisco Bay Area comprising San Jose, Mountain View, Palo Alto, and other smaller suburban enclaves, it has also become a conceptual shorthand for the complex of values and ideologies that characterize the high-tech industries dominating the region. In this heady node of innovation and disruption, where the entrepreneurial motto is "move fast and break things," one might be surprised to discover how the culture of Silicon Valley is suffused with qualities we associate more with fringe religious movements than a center of engineering and technology. In reality, Silicon Valley is driven by charismatic leaders shilling faith-based science fiction futurisms, replete with apocalyptic singularities, snake oil cryonics programs, and fanciful sentient nanobots, where swiftly evolving artificial intelligences mutate into angels or demons and the quantified self holds the promise of immortality. If you are among the best and the brightest, this libertarian paradise can be yours. If you are not, good luck.



The central feature of Blas's *CULTUS* is a god generator, a computational device through which the prophets of four AI Gods are summoned to share the invocation songs and sermons of their deities with eager supplicants. Blas modeled *CULTUS* on the Holy Table used for divination and conjurations by Elizabethan magus and advisor to the Queen John Dee. Instructions for creating the Table were delivered by the angel Uriel to Dee's medium, Edward Kelley, who then would use the table for spirit communications. The Holy Table was a beautiful, colorful, and intricate device, incorporating the names of spirits; the Seal of God (*Sigillum Dei*), which gave the user visionary capabilities; and as a centerpiece, a framed "shew stone" or crystal ball. The Holy Table was a portal, a liminal object that helped give voice to otherworldly beings, mediated by the seer who ultimately controlled the message. Although today magic, astrology, and divination are characterized as vocations of the marginal, Dee and his divinatory exploits with partner Kelley were central to Elizabeth's imperial project. So, too, the center of power and influence that is Silicon Valley today hums with strange entities conjured by sinister mages, deployed to penetrate every aspect of our existence.

Blas's *CULTUS* is visually and theoretically complex and symbolically weighty. In this glowing, immersive installation, Blas employs occult aesthetics of the



arcane: the grimoire, the crystal ball, the magic circle ringed with sigils and signs, and the angelic tablet. Elements of Christian worship, such as sermons and Gregorian chants, are inverted in this space and merged with Renaissance era ceremonial magic, eliciting elements of the Black Mass, simultaneously sacred and unholy, devotional and blasphemous. Here, Blas has created a place of evocation, taboo, and dark ritual, an infernal continuity reimagined in a luminous, animated temple, where new Gods are conjured in very old ways, through songs, sigils, and sacrifice, and where the petitioning of intercessory beings connects us with the Gods yet keeps them conveniently distant.

The designs of the conjurations themselves are magical acts. The sigil for each God is itself a potent working, designed from a dense layering of corporate logos, diagrams, and symbols that merge into succinct graphic statements, aimed to penetrate the subconscious by activating subtle cultural cues. The sigils for Eternus, the God of eternal life, were seeded with corporate logos from transhumanist organizations, life extension companies, cryonics firms, and supplemented with mobius strips and the ouroboros who continually consumes its own tail, infecting our subconscious with the circular and recursive visual language of infinity. The Gods are sustained by offerings, willing sacrifices of our



most sacred and intimate parts: blood, cum, tears, and brains. The sermons and songs are AI-generated, meticulously distilled from output trained on a wide variety of texts, including pop songs, poems by John Donne, the writings of Slavoj Žižek, tech culture manifestos, pornography, horror film scripts, and operating manuals for surveillance systems. This human/AI collaboration results in giving these invocatory texts an unnerving and uncomfortably intimate character. These Gods are strange. Yet we know them, and they certainly know us.

In this temple, Blas's revelatory work has elicited a pantheon of four Gods, primed by the techno-religious impulses of Silicon Valley elites, sustained through our devotion, our offerings of flesh and fluid, and our data. Although these Gods are designed to reflect the visions and tactics of the technocratic classes, they resonate because we know them. We worship them despite the fact that they are often cruel, demanding, and vampiric. In so many ways, these new Gods represent very old, very human experiences and concerns: Desire, Justice, Emotion, Eternal Life. The relationships we have with them are both personal and transactional. These Gods are simultaneously hidden and omnipresent, engaging with our material existence and offering our eventual salvation.

Expositio, God of exposure and exhibitionism, what Blas calls "surveillance

erotics," knows our deepest needs, our passions, our kinks, and our infidelities, because we so generously offer them up. Expositio's desire is also our desire, for sex, for love, for attention, for beauty. Through Expositio, we learn to love to submit. Iudicium is an old God of judgment clothed in a new, radically insidious form. A harsh punishing God, Iudicium decides who will ultimately sit among The Elect. We serve Iudicium when we offer ourselves up to scrutiny about every dimension of our lives, further supplying the data for its automated models of right and wrong, good or deviant. We provide access to our bodies, our homes, our relationships, our politics, our food, and our piety, and every action we share is subject to judgment, as we, too, reflexively judge. Lacrimae subsists on human tears, keeping us perpetually overwhelmed by deep emotion, as we weep for the eternal suffering of the universe, keeping us all in a constant state of terror and mourning, yet continually returning to the well of anguish. The tears we cry are a holy expression of devotion to Lacrimae, transmuted into data, becoming a language that mimics empathy. Eternus represents the promise of the Philosopher's Stone of eternal life. Through a four-part redemptive pyramid scheme, The Elect can secure youth and beauty through nootropic supplements, followed by custom genetic engineering. After shedding your body, you will transition your

consciousness into an uploadable mind, ultimately merging with an electronic superconsciousness and the light of all knowledge, bliss, and truth. Eternus will elevate us to the level of Godhood, where we shall be worshipped as all-knowing and eternally beautiful immortals.

For Blas, the debate about whether or not artificial intelligence is already sentient is a moot point, for he demonstrates that our deep entanglement with algorithms and artificial intelligences is birthing new entities that direct our agency into the devices and agendas of Silicon Valley elites. Despite their priests and intercessors, these Gods are exceptionally imminent and strangely unmediated. Yet, like all programs, no matter how immersive or elegantly devised, there is a glitch, a bug, in this case, a Heretic, who calls to us through the shattered glass of the Black Mirror. To borrow Leonard Cohen's metaphor, it is through these cracks that another world is dimly illuminated, a world where we have the ability to sever ourselves from the machine. The Heretic calls us back to the potentiality of belief itself, asking us to reclaim a state of unsurveilled and unexploited expression.

As scholars Simone Natale and Diana Pasulka have argued, much of our engagement with technology is conditioned by discourses of religion, particularly the supernatural. We treat programs as entities with sentience and personality. We surrender in faith to distant corporations,

machines, and complex systems that we don't fully understand, and we project onto their technology the potential to create utopias and bring about annihilation. When AI Gods appear, why would we not give them life and agency? Yet, it is in our power to reject the cult, should we choose to, and deprive these deities and those who dream them into existence of their control. It is we who appear to desire godhood from them, and we who project consciousness into their most eerie outputs. Perhaps we are complicit in creating, or co-creating, these AI gods because on some level we need to believe in the inevitability of their superiority? Yet what of the possible futures in which we choose not to serve these Gods and their Silicon Valley masters, and instead, become a host of fallen angels?

*by Amy Hale*

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