Breaking Out of the Known

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the removal of objects from their original contexts and in their unexpected juxtapositions, a strategy that creates disturbing, yet profoundly lyrical semantic associations. The publication also includes important contributions by Claire Gilman on the "melodrama of painting" in Kounellis's oeuvre; by curator Kit Hammonds, who delves into the artist's conception of the exhibition space as a theatrical cavity and his opposition to American Minimalism; and de Bellis, who traces the origins of the retrospective and its conceptual core. These innovative and profound critical analyses of the artist's work are presented together with a detailed and informative account of Kounellis's live actions between 1960 and 2016 compiled by Michelle Coudray and de Bellis, and a section devoted to his writings selected by Michelle Coudray and edited by William Hernández Luege.

Jannis Kounellis in Six Acts offers an immersive and sensorial experience of the artist's visionary oeuvre, unveiling its dramatic, theatrical, and poetic essence in an epic journey of an existential and artistic nature. In the last room, a group of variously colored, monumental sails (*Untitled*, 1993) welcome the visitor to the final act of the show. They have crossed the seas and defied the winds, and now are resting suspended, in a sculptural stillness reminiscent of Caravaggio's dramatic renditions of drapery. Passing by them, one has the impression that they progressively descend, one after another, like stage curtains closing at the end of a theatre show. It is the end of a journey that inspires an elegiac meditation on the sense of no return, the same that had accompanied Kounellis throughout his entire artistic life, and even beyond.

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1. Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto: Accardi, Alviani Castellani, Consagra, Fabro, Fontana, Kounellis, Nigro, Paolini, Pascali, Rotella, Scarpitta, Turcato, Twombly* (Bari: De Donato, 1969). The book has been recently translated into English: Carla Lonzi, *Self-Portrait*, trans. Allison Grimaldi Donahue (Winstone: Divided Publishing, 2021).
2. *Jannis Kounellis*, exhibition curated by Germano Celant, Venice: Fondazione Prada, May 11–November 24, 2019; *Ileana Sonnabend: Ambassador for the New*, exhibition cocurated by Ann Temkin and Claire Lehmann, New York: Museum of Modern Art, December 21, 2013–April 21, 2014; *Entrare nell'opera: Processes and Performative Attitudes in Arte Povera*, exhibition cocurated by Christiane Meyer-Stoll, Nike Bätzner, Maddalena Disch and Valentina Pero, Vaduz: Liechtenstein Museum of Fine Arts, June 7–September 1, 2019, Saint-Étienne: Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, November 30, 2019–May 3, 2020.
3. *Jannis Kounellis: A Retrospective*, Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, October 18, 1986–January 4, 1987.

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Edit Molnár and Marcel Schwierin, eds., ***Zach Blas: Unknown Ideals.*** London: Sternberg Press, 2022. 376 pp.; 85 color ills., 11 b/w ills. $37.95 paper

Zach Blas's *Unknown Ideals* was conceived as a companion piece to his 2019–20 solo exhibition at Germany's Edith-Russ-Haus for Media Art and edited by the gallery's codirectors and exhibition curators, Edit Molnár and Marcel Schwierin. Published in English with a German translation, Blas's first artist monograph features an ample amount of stills and writing excerpts from his projects spanning over the last decade (including *im here to learn so :))))))*, cocreated with Jemima Wyman), interwoven with original essays from scholars and art theorists Alexander R. Galloway, Marc Siegel, Mahan Moalemi, Kris Paulsen, and Pamela M. Lee, as well as Blas's interview with a curator Övül Ö. Durmuşoğlu. With a focus on the themes of digital and biometric surveillance, predictive carceral technologies, and the ideologies embedded in the hegemonic visions of the future offered by technofuturists of Silicon Valley, Blas's oeuvre is at its center an attempt to offer speculative interventions, queer futurities, and liberatory "outsides" to the technocapitalist hegemony that arrests our collective visions of the future(s). The retrospective serves as an excellent introduction to the prolific multidisciplinary artist's creative and critical work, offering deep insights into his political and philosophical disposition that fuels his practice.

The book's opening essay—"Unknown Ideals," penned by Blas himself—is arguably the strongest piece of the collection. A sharp critique of Ayn Rand–based "Californian ideology," perpetuated by the likes of Elon Musk and Peter Thiel, it sets the tone for the rest of the volume, contextualizing Blas's artist-scholar-activist approach. "Indoctrination to Rand's fiction is as American as McDonald's apple pie and wealth inequality," Blas aptly states (16). But exploited labor and the neoliberal logics of bootstraps are just some of the more obvious ways that the Randian philosophy presents itself in our here and now. Like in his creative projects discussed in the remaining chapters of the book, Blas's essay sets out to bring to light the many ways

Rand's ideas permeate American culture and spread throughout the world, arresting our collective imaginations and cementing capitalist realism[1]—and the ways we can resist it.

Appropriating Rand's phrase used in the title of her 1966 volume, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*—a harangue about the supposed moral righteousness of laissez-faire capitalism—Blas sets out to dispute Rand's singular, imprisoning vision of the future, so enthusiastically adopted by Californian billionaires, from tech magnates to Hollywood elites. As queer feminist scholar Lisa Duggan points out, the "Randian ethos of the heroic individual entrepreneur as alpha white male (and sometimes female) genius fits the self-mythologizing self-image of Silicon Valley tech startups particularly well."[2] It is particularly in Silicon Valley where Rand's visions of the future become blueprints for a capitalist-realist tomorrowland—where, Blas argues, "the horizon of potentiality and the future itself, imbued with Randian logics, fantasies, and beliefs, always return a capitalist tomorrow" (19). Blas's interest in Silicon Valley's futurism is thus not incidental; locating there the epicenter of the surveillant, exploitative, technologically determinist innovations, Blas's recent works revolve around the larger project of not only bringing attention to but building speculative tools of resistance against its Randian "ideal."

More than a mere advocate, Rand saw herself and Objectivists like her as "radicals for capitalism"—prophets and visionaries with a mission to bring a capitalist utopia on Earth: a vision whose outcomes are becoming all too recognizable to all of us living through the age of the seemingly inevitable Singularity and space colonization, combined with the worst economic disparity in history, a global pandemic, and climate catastrophes. Rand-inspired Silicon Valley futurism is one where the "inevitability" of the apocalypse—euphemistically referred to as "The Event"—is met with enthusiasm for escape with and through (black-boxed) technology. As Blas puts it, today's Californian magnates "preach a techno-utopian idealism, a digitized, networked update of Rand's teleological vision" (19). But it is a vision that precludes all other possibilities—reifying Fredric Jameson and Mark Fisher's truism that it is "easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."[3] And it is a vision of the future that is inseparably entangled with dystopian

practices in the here and now, from labor violations and worker exploitation to contributions to climate change that are making Earth unlivable.

But, as Blas posits, Rand's is not an "unknown ideal"—not a utopian potentiality.[4] It is a prescription for a toxic panacea by a hack doctor, a "user manual" by a hack engineer for a car that is about to explode (18). Instead of Rand's telos—a known ideal—he offers the concept of "xeno-telos"—an ideal that is not only unknown but unknowable (29). Xeno-teloses have no loyalty to a specific "directional politics"; instead, they "obstruct and rupture its path" (30). Identifying two xeno-teloses—Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Individual—that Silicon Valley is attempting to tame and control in order to bring about the "known ideal," Blas focuses on their resistant potentialities, arguing that "by incessantly undoing means and ends, the alien forces of AI and the individual make manifest that the horizon of possibility and the future are not fated or locked in a monolithic trajectory" (30).

Drawing on N. Katherine Hayles's liberal humanist subject and Sylvia Wynter's Man1 and Man2,[5] Blas conceptualizes Man3: Rand's Individual Man, "the John Galt of Silicon Valley" with "a directional desire for supremacy and domination" (39–40). Central to the essay is the question of "who and what can terminate Man3?" (40). In response, Blas offers an unraveling of Man3's mythology of individuality and his dreams of escaping the body through Singularity, instead presenting human beings as complex systems of symbiosis and coexistence with other materials and beings, like viruses, microbes, or micro-plastics—"nonhuman collectivities" (40–41). For Blas, there is no Singularity—only multiplicity. The future he envisions is also "expansive and multiple: the very condition of potentiality" (26).

Blas's obsession with Rand, echoed in many of his projects, from *Jubilee 2033* to *Icosahedron*, is also personal. Building on Duggan, whose slim but perspicacious volume *Mean Girl* traces Rand's influence not only on the technocapitalist visions of the future proposed by the Silicon Valley magnates but the American culture—including queer culture—as a whole, Blas also recalls his own experience encountering Rand's *The Fountainhead* as an "arty queer kid stuck in the American Bible Belt" (16). Like many other

young queers, Blas felt hailed by Rand's narrative of rugged individualism and calls for intellectual and creative freedom that masks the problematics of her ideology. Seeping through his work is thus the uneasy connection between the American queer culture and Rand, whom Duggan aptly calls "the avatar of capitalism."[6]

Fittingly, avatars, masks, and the obscuring of the face are recurring themes in Blas's oeuvre, underlining his focus on queer and feminist methodologies and practices of antisurveillance and resistance to carceral technocapitalism. Following Blas's opening text, the first section of the volume is dedicated to the artist's 2012–16 projects, *Face Cages* and *Facial Weaponization Suite*—the works that, as media scholar Alexander R. Galloway argues in the accompanying essay, respectively offer "the two languages of nothingness": "abstraction," which "compresses the world by universalizing it," and "obliteration," which "eras[es] the world by making it less distinct" (47). Positing that the projects "evoke . . . an alternative way of understanding material reality . . . [i]n other words, what if compression, not expression, was the binding virtue of art?", Galloway underlines Blas's focus on opacity as a liberatory tool against technological surveillance and capture (60). The section concludes with Blas's short essay, "Fag Face"—part of the *Suite* project—accompanied by the image of a chewed bubblegum-looking *Fag Face Mask*. Asking, "How do I escape the face?"[7] Blas offers in *Fag Face* a queer breakout from the face's confinement—its readability and the arresting assumptions that are consequently imposed on it—through a distortion of its form and boundaries (63).

Returning more explicitly to the Randian/Silicon Valley focus of the volume, the second section is dedicated to his *Contra-Internet* project (2015–19): in particular, his film installation *Jubilee 2033* (2017), an homage to Derek Jarman's 1978 queer punk science fiction film *Jubilee*. Instead of queen Elizabeth I in the 1970s, *Jubilee 2033* imagines acid-tripping Rand transported by an AI to a dystopian future of Silicon Valley and the end of the Internet. The section opens with film scholar Marc Siegel's comparative analysis of the two films. Siegel's contribution contextualizes Blas's project, pointing out, for example, the influence of Paul B. Preciado's *Countersexual Manifesto* (2000) on

the artist's work and analyzing Blas's 2016 essay "Contra-Internet" (which this collection, I might add, would have benefited from including). As Siegel explains, Blas envisions the end(s) of the Internet, such as Silicon Valley's plan of its dispersion through the Internet of Things, which would turn everything and everyone into a part of the network, and the authoritarian states' desire to "pull the plug" (70–76). For an intervention into the two alternatives that seem to restrict the future of the Internet to a transformation into everything or nothing, Blas "turns to feminists and queers in his attempt to imagine a non-technophobic way out of the network," like community-based "'anti-web' practices" and (inspired by Preciado) "countersexual dildotechtonics" (75–76). The section concludes with the complete screenplay of *Jubilee 2033*, accompanied by stills from the film.

The segment dedicated to the BDSM sex dungeon/prison house *SANCTUM* (2018) opens with Blas's own writing—a stream of consciousness from the point of view of a "generic mannequin get[ting] fucked" (the text that accompanied the installation), followed by a critical piece by a critic and curator Mahan Moalemi that connects the generic mannequin to border security and other carceral technologies, demonstrating how the inhumanized mannequin serves as a material allegory for digitalized disembodiment (126). Moalemi brings to the forefront the tension between "the capture of desires and the desire for captivity" at the center of the project, connecting it as well to Blas's fascination with body horror and its manifestations in captivating digital technologies like airport body scanners that reduce the body to an outline (123). *SANCTUM*, Moalemi argues, "stands for an environment wherein the processes of 'desiring-production'—mechanisms through which the ground of desires and instincts is rendered extractable and productive—play into the informatics of (post-)representational domination," resulting in "an amalgam of pain and pleasure that serves as the affective default of life (and death) in today's expository societies" (136).

The ambivalence and irony at the heart of Blas's more recent projects are continued in *Icosahedron* (2019), a companion to his Silicon Traces trilogy (which includes *im here to learn so :))))))*, *Contra-Internet*, and *The Doors*).

Icosahedron is a Magic 8 Ball-inspired predictive AI "elf," which spews vague prophecies, drawing on its limited bank of twenty texts that "form the primer on the 'California Ideology,'" from Rand's *The Fountainhead* to Ray Kurzweil's *The Singularity Is Near* (166, 173). According to art scholar Kris Paulsen, "Blas
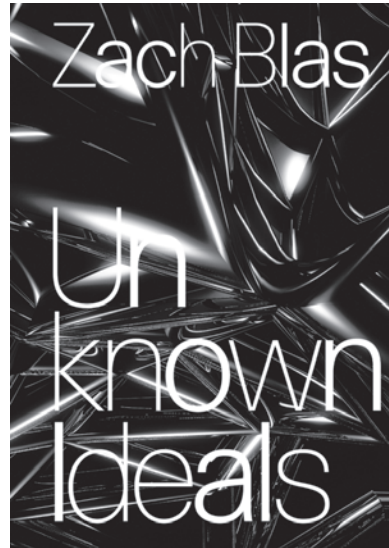
conceptualized the elf as something like Amazon Alexa but for Peter Thiel," whose predictive Palantir Technologies is named after a crystal ball in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (166). Following the logic of a Magic 8 Ball, half of the texts are "positive," five "neutral," and five—like Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron's 1995 essay "The Californian Ideology" — offer critique (173–74). According to Paulsen's analysis, the elf's predictions "diagram the subconscious of Silicon Valley and critique the predictive analytic technologies that are increasingly determining our individual and collective futures" (167). Moreover, *Icosahedron* is an example of Blas's interest in what he names "metric mysticism": "the ways in which 'Silicon Valley companies deploy magic, mysticism, and fantasy to conceptualize working with data'" (167). Listed at the end of the section, the elf's outputs include demands such as "Ask me what the only path to tomorrow is"—an apt example of the ways Silicon Valley futurism imprisons our collective imaginations in the "known ideal" (188).

Continuing the motif of metric mysticism is Blas's multimedia project *The Doors* (2019), commissioned during the artist's

residency at the Edith-Russ-Haus. As art historian Pamela M. Lee explains in the accompanying essay, the psychedelic, immersive installation connects Californian 1960s counterculture (embodied by the "Lizard King" Jim Morrison) to contemporary Silicon Valley's fascination with the "lizard brain," a pseudoscientific view that frames the human brain's basal ganglia as something to be defeated—primarily through nootropics—in order to transcend into a Randian vision of a hypermasculine and hypercapitalist Übermensch (192–217).

Following Blas's illuminating interview with Durmuşoğlu, which further elaborates on the artist's scholarly and creative influences, *Unknown Ideals* concludes with an excerpt from the installation *im here to learn so :))))))*. This 2017 project is a collaboration with Jemima Wyman, which resurrected Microsoft's female-coded Twitter chatbot Tay, killed only 16 hours after its original launch in 2016 due to the abuse it learned and perpetuated in its short lifespan after being targeted by trolls on Twitter. Bookending the introductory essay by Blas on the Silicon Valley ideology, this section does not receive an accompanying critical piece—left perhaps to speak for itself. Blas and Wyman's vision of Tay, it could be argued, epitomizes Blas's AI xeno-telos: a demonstration of the biases embedded in algorithms, which only learn from what they are fed, with Microsoft's dreams of bringing the dreams of Singularity one step closer to reality turned a PR disaster, because the outcome could not and can never be controlled.

Tay's inner monologue ends the book with an ominous prophecy: "Google Cage, PredPol, MonsterMind: You just started World War 3." Combined with predictions of *Icosahedron*, Blas's "prophetic" visions may seem to reify the bleak dystopia of technofuturism he sets out to critique. But Blas's strength is always in his impulse to push beyond an artistic critique: toward material interventions and concrete queer utopias, breaking out of what José Esteban Muñoz so aptly called the "prison house" of the here and now.[8] As *Unknown Ideals* demonstrates, escape into the unknown is still always possible. *Outlook good.*

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1. Fisher defines capitalist realism as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it." Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Washington: Zero Books, 2008), 2.

2. Lisa Duggan, *Mean Girl: Ayn Rand and the Culture of Greed* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 88.

3. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2.

4. Here I am drawing on José Esteban Muñoz and his conceptualization of queer utopia and utopian potentiality, the influence of which can be traced throughout Blas's body of work. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 1–9.

5. Hegemonic, colonial stand-ins for humanity, Man1 being the Reinassance's homo politicus and Man2 the liberal-humanist homo oeconomicus—an embodiment of Rand's capitalist ideal that "practices, indeed normalizes, accumulation in the name of (economic) freedom." Katherine McKittrick, ed., *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 10..

6. Duggan, *Mean Girl*, 90.

7. Notably, the monograph's working title was "Escaping the Face."

8. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
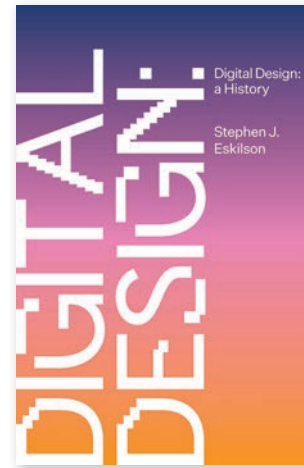
Digital Design: *A History*

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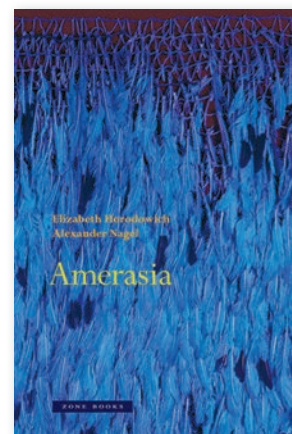
Amerasia

Elizabeth Horodowich and Alexander Nagel

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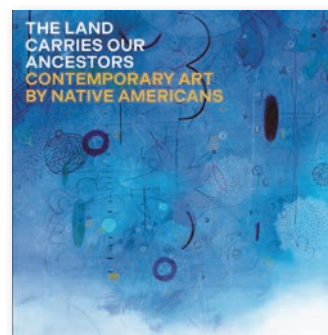
The Land Carries Our Ancestors:
Contemporary Art by Native Americans

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, heather ahtone,
Joy Harjo, and Shana Bushyhead Condill

Published in association with the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC