



No. 78 | FALL 2023

# NOW and then

KENNETH ANGER  
KARL KELS  
ZACH BLAS  
PAYAL KAPADIA & PRIYA SEN  
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# THE CINEMATIC UNIVERSE OF ZACH BLAS

JAYNE WILKINSON

Until preparing to write this piece, I hadn't thought about or listened to the 1960s California band The Doors for many years. Zach Blas's fluorescent multimedia installation of the same name, *The Doors* (2019), takes the band and its lead singer Jim Morrison as entry-points to overlapping ideas about contemporary Silicon Valley (compared with hippie-era California), the radical potential of mind-altering drugs like LSD and magic mushrooms, skin-shifting lizards as symbols of conspiracy, Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*, and dark fantasies of the desert—all set in an artificial, black-light garden.

Having been a teenage fan of at least some of these cultural references, I was intrigued by how Zach's work crystallizes such expansive ideas into pointed critiques of surveillance and technocapitalism. His practice is defined by large-scale, moving-image environments, often based on architectural forms—medieval churches, BDSM dungeons, techno clubs, a set of a sci-fi thriller, a co-working “laboratory” for digital nomads, or some mix of the above. These immersive spaces blur the divisions between what is human- and machine-generated as viewers experience parallel shifts in perception that could be religious, sexual, sonic, or effects of digital capitalism. In the age of AI and twenty-first century computation, nothing is outside the realm of control, not even, or perhaps especially not, our own brains.

In his studio in downtown Toronto, I ask Zach to tell me about the new project he's presenting in two upcoming solo exhibitions, first at London's arebyte gallery in October and then at the Vienna Secession in March. *CULTUS* (2023) is the second

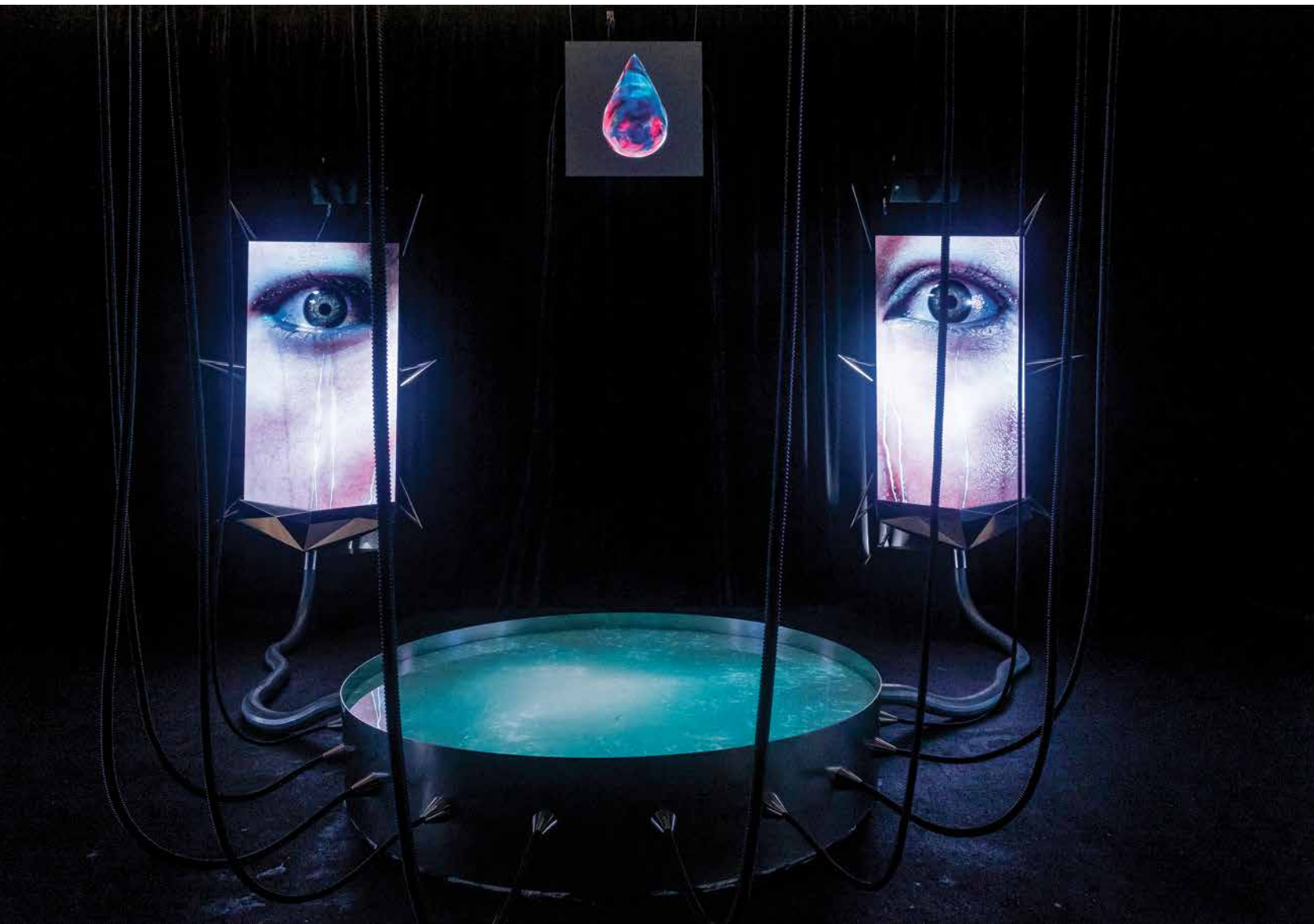
in a trilogy of queer science-fiction moving-image installations; collectively titled *Silicon Traces*, these works address the spiritual beliefs, ideologies, fantasies, and futurist visions of Silicon Valley. *The Doors* is the first installment and *Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033* (2018)—an apocalyptic drama starring Susanne Sachsse as Ayn Rand and the performance artist Cassils as Nootropix, a “contra-sexual contra-internet prophet”—is the trilogy's prologue. Much of Zach's work over the past several years has focused on digital technology as a site of contemporary power and its perversities. As he narrates the complexities of his multivalent research, I realize how, like an oracle, he is envisioning hundreds of steps ahead in order to map his filmic worlds into three-dimensional experiences.

*CULTUS* combines the perspectives of four technological “gods” of artificial intelligence. Expositio is a god of desire and pleasure, exemplifying the wilful submission of bodies under surveillance capitalism, while Eternus is a god of immortality, whose desires are emblematic of Silicon Valley's radical life-extension enterprises. Lacrimae is a tearful god, with streams of artificial fluids that recall both the history of religious lamentation and the visible emotion that trains facial recognition software. And Iudicium, inspired in equal parts by the flayed skins of Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* fresco and the *Hellraiser* movies, is a vengeful god of judgement, pioussness, and transcendence. Twenty or so different graphic symbols are associated with each god, along with bodily fluids that correspond to their attributes (cum, tears, brains, blood) and specific incantations and conjuring

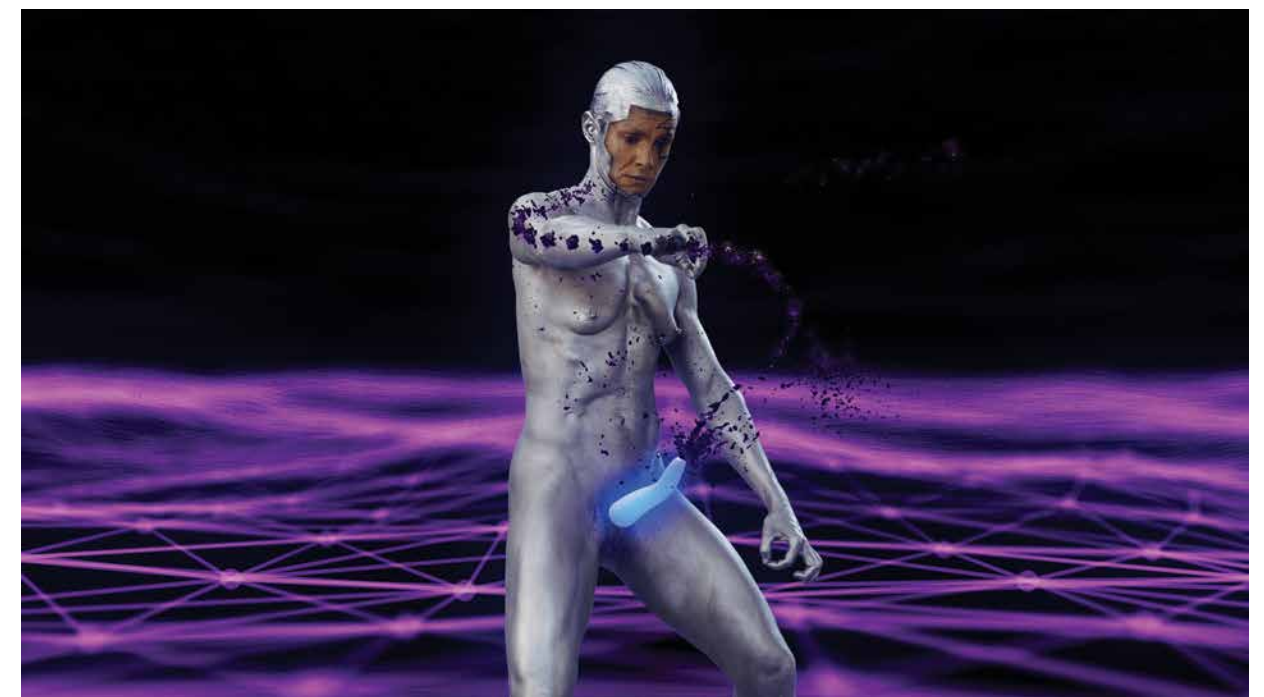


Photo by Jason Fox.





Zach Blas, *Profundior (Lacryphagic Transmutation Deus-Motus-Data Network)* (2022), Mixed-media installation, installation view.  
12th Berlin Biennale, Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart.  
Photo by Mathias Völzke. Courtesy of the artist.



Zach Blas, *Jubilee 2033*, from *Contra-Internet* (2018) (BOTTOM: featuring Cassils as Nootropix), frame enlargements.  
Courtesy of the artist.



songs designed to enchant viewers with augmented voices and faces. Zach worked with GPT-3, a generative AI platform, and machine learning specialists to create text output from training datasets based on the gods’ individual characteristics, and then cast different collaborators to play each prophet, including Zach himself performing the role of Steve, prophet of Eternus. The effect is uncanny—the speech of the gods is both compelling and off-putting, by turns hypnotic, vengeful, otherworldly, and seductive, luring the audience into a spiritual realm of futurist technology and misplaced worship. Pop culture influences are pervasive throughout the work—another hallmark of Zach’s oeuvre—including a floating demon face that recalls the 1990s video board game *Nightmare*. The installation design is technically impressive and, with its totalizing darkness, irradiant LED screen, and disorienting sound, music, and lighting, it will be as theatrical and technically complex as anything he’s yet installed—perhaps his most baroque work to date.

To produce projects at such scale, Zach collaborates with a wide spectrum of mostly queer designers, architects, technologists, fabricators, scholars, and performers; his process is more akin to that of a film director than a studio artist, and the result is more an immersive visual opus than a series of single artworks. “While making *CULTUS* and other recent projects, a kind of cinematic universe has emerged,” Zach tells me, “where characters, figures, settings, symbols, music, and more criss-cross in and out of different works.” The expanding contours of this universe unravel through narrative backstories with the complexity of cinema, transposed into the dimensions of the gallery to produce a kind of living, dimensional film setting. Even beyond the trilogy, Zach often reinterprets elements from earlier projects, so that characters, objects, or symbols can find fuller realization in future work.

Above his desk, a wall of print-outs and photographs mixes the methodical storyboarding of a film director with the addled mind-maps of a conspiracy theorist. Together they connect the cultures of Silicon Valley to religious and spiritual imagery. “Christianity was much more dominant than I expected,” he explains. “For instance, The Way of the Future—a recent (and already closed) church founded on a coming AI god—used a Celtic trinity knot as its main symbol. And the teleologies attached to futurist visions so often evoke Christian themes of judgment and transcendence, not so much the so-called Buddhist work ethic of Steve Jobs.” Alongside references to the obscure, California-based religious sect, there are memes showing *The Creation of Adam* and the hand of God in the context of generative AI, close-ups of Michelangelo’s muscular men (“God’s ass”), various faces of God as interpreted by Midjourney, branding from nootropics and other productivity-enhancing supplements, logos with vaguely cultish undertones, sacred geometries and other occult or obscure symbols. It might all seem fantastical but it’s very much grounded in the religious ideologies underpinning Silicon Valley,

as its technological inventions continue to define the world of the future, at breakneck pace. “These gods already exist,” Zach points out. “They are already being worshipped and served.”

Zach was trained in film studies and film production before continuing with an MFA in media arts from UCLA and a PhD in literature from Duke University. As an artist, he came of age with mentorship from tactical media artists like Ricardo Dominguez (a founding member of Critical Art Ensemble, who also appears in *CULTUS*) and began to understand art as “somewhere between a conceptual object and a political tool.” He became widely known for one of his earliest works, *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2012–2014), a series of digital masks created from the aggregated facial data of workshop participants. It was a comment on (and protest against) the increasing prevalence of biometric facial recognition software and the in-built racial and gender inequity of surveillance technology. Released during the media attention on the Snowden leaks, the work hit the zeitgeist—so much so that his friends call it his “Britney Spears pop song.” Popular reception notwithstanding, Zach came to realize the restrictions of such work for a long-term practice: “Ultimately, I just couldn’t imagine every single artwork that I would make being a political tool that could somehow solve, pseudo-solve, or conceptually solve a social problem. That’s a bit too much pressure for an artwork, and too limiting.”

Since then, his work has investigated the cultures and inherent power dynamics of digital technologies as a political position rather than a tool, offering critiques that are experiential and multilayered. Zach explains: “It might sound old-fashioned, but I often turn to Fredric Jameson’s theory of the political unconscious, which argues that literature is not just formal or linguistic but also political. I often think of my installations as spatializing elements of Silicon Valley’s political unconscious, whether that’s psychedelic or religious. Of course, these power structures are not strictly unconscious, as their elements are often taken up in popular journalistic accounts. If there is a religious dynamic to power and domination in Silicon Valley, then what kinds of contra-positions can challenge these religious beliefs? I want the work to give space to those positions, specifically those that are queer, anti-capitalist, anticolonial, anti-racist, and feminist.” It’s a counter-positioning that’s also deeply concerned with American culture: the intersections of religion with artificial intelligence, hippie spirituality with corporate influencers, pop culture with histories of religious painting and representation, and the overall hyper-capitalist extractive culture of Silicon Valley all coalesce in a critique that is as much about consumer zeal as it is about digital life. Technology may connect us globally, but the value and wealth it creates is extremely localized and deeply entwined with the violent mentality of American exceptionalism.

Given that California is situated as a kind of ground zero in this critique, it follows that Hollywood horror films would also be a reference point. Blas became interested in reimagining the genre

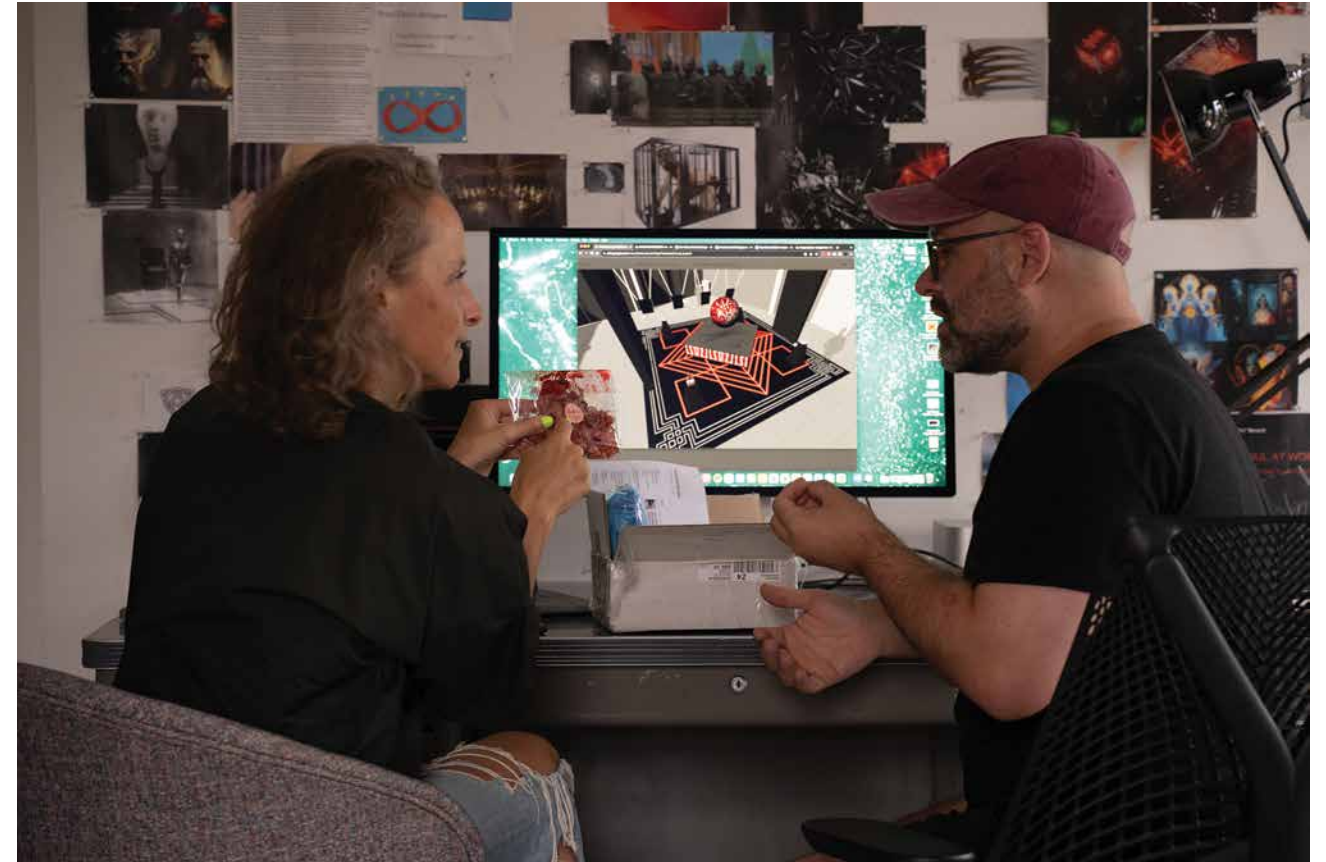


Photo by Jason Fox.

of body horror, one of his favourites, by thinking about what it means for digital bodies: you can cut them open but they won’t bleed; there are no organs, no guts under the smooth surfaces of CGI. What, then, does an aesthetic of body horror look like in the terrain of digital surveillance and security? *Sanctum* (2018) combines the sex toys and play areas of a BDSM dungeon with the apparatuses of airport body scanners, playing on the perverse element of desire in the everyday experience of exposing one’s body to systems of control. *Profundior (Lachryphagic Transmutation Deus-Motus-Data Network)* (2022)—first shown at the 12th Berlin Biennale and also the first appearance of *Lacrimae*—explores crying as a symbolic element, where tears of digital blood and steel flow from computer-generated eyeballs into a large central pool, a ritual of extraction where emotions are continually consumed. It’s an alarming and unnerving sight, but the grotesque imagery is always balanced by a kind of dark humor that recognizes the irrational nature of power, whether we submit to it consciously or not. “I’ve always thought that absurdist humor and horror are just so apt for addressing contemporary existence, even though horror is often disavowed in contemporary art.”

Entering these hyper-stimulating, oversaturated environments is something like a visit to Universal Studios on acid. Or the opposite: stepping into a fetish club with all the lights on. Replete with wide-ranging pop culture references that move from hippie culture to cyberculture to whatever the coming cultures of AI will be, parlayed through science fiction, body horror, and queer aesthetics, they’re very much a trip. Everything is designed and constructed in detail, whether for pleasure or enlightenment or speculation, although you don’t always see what’s behind the facades. “I’m very much interested in seduction,” Zach tells me, “in absolutely lush, enveloping seduction. Like sirens enfolding you. With the installations, I want the work to lure you in, and situate you in pleasure and discomfort, thought and emotion, complicity and refusal, in ongoing struggles between domination and liberation.” It’s palpable. It could be a siren or a rabbit hole, a demon, a god or a cult-leader, a priest or an influencer calling upon us—much like heeding the call of religious worship, or the more psychedelic demand to “break on through to the other side,” the pleasure is in giving oneself over and submitting.