Zach Blas
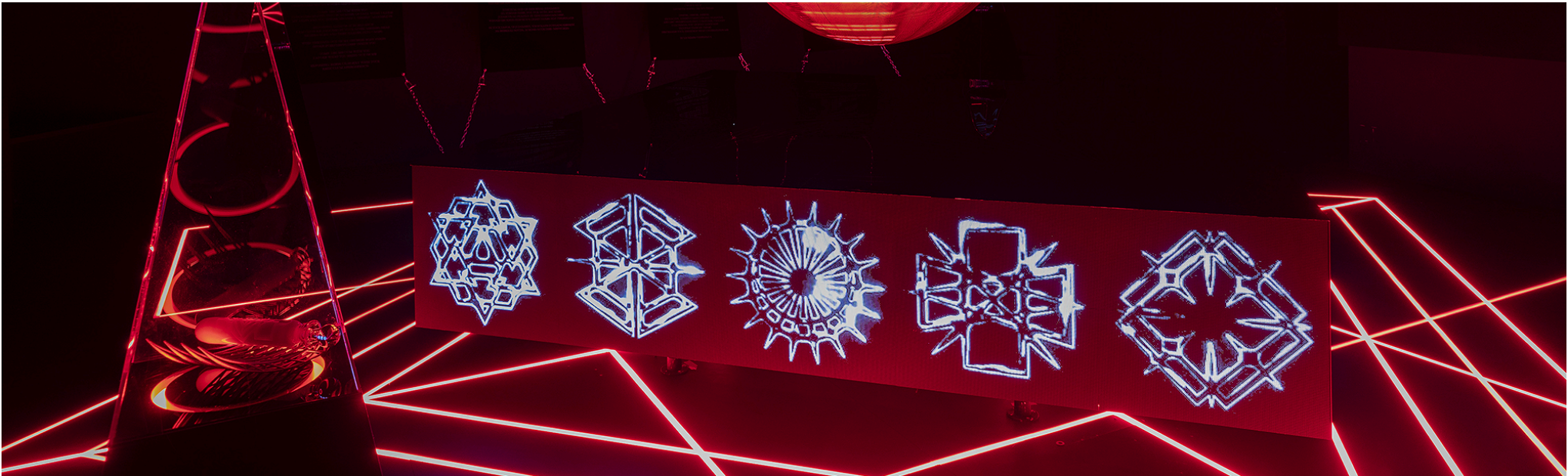# CULTUS

Secession, Wien
3 March – 9 June 2024

In conversation with Caterina Avataneo
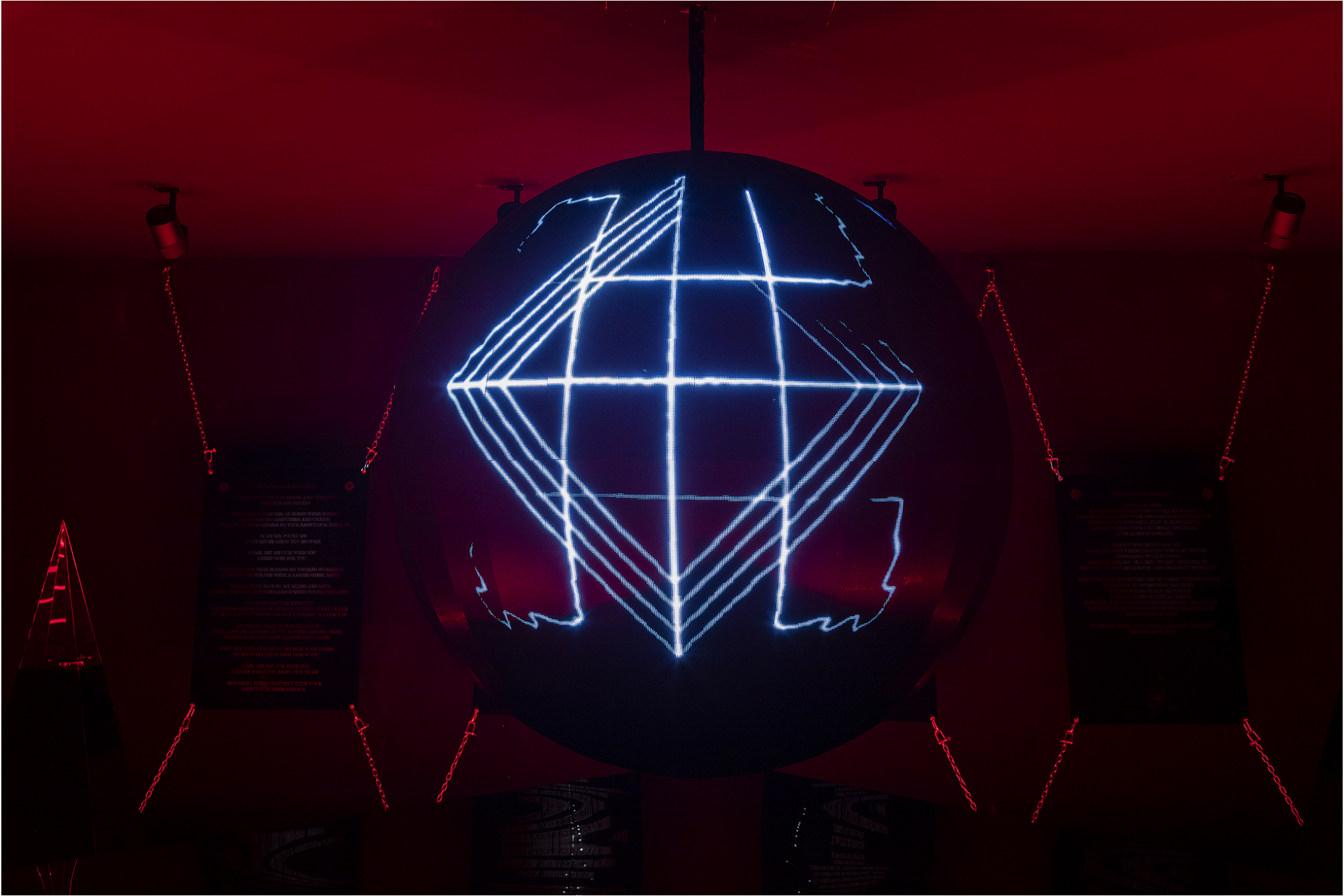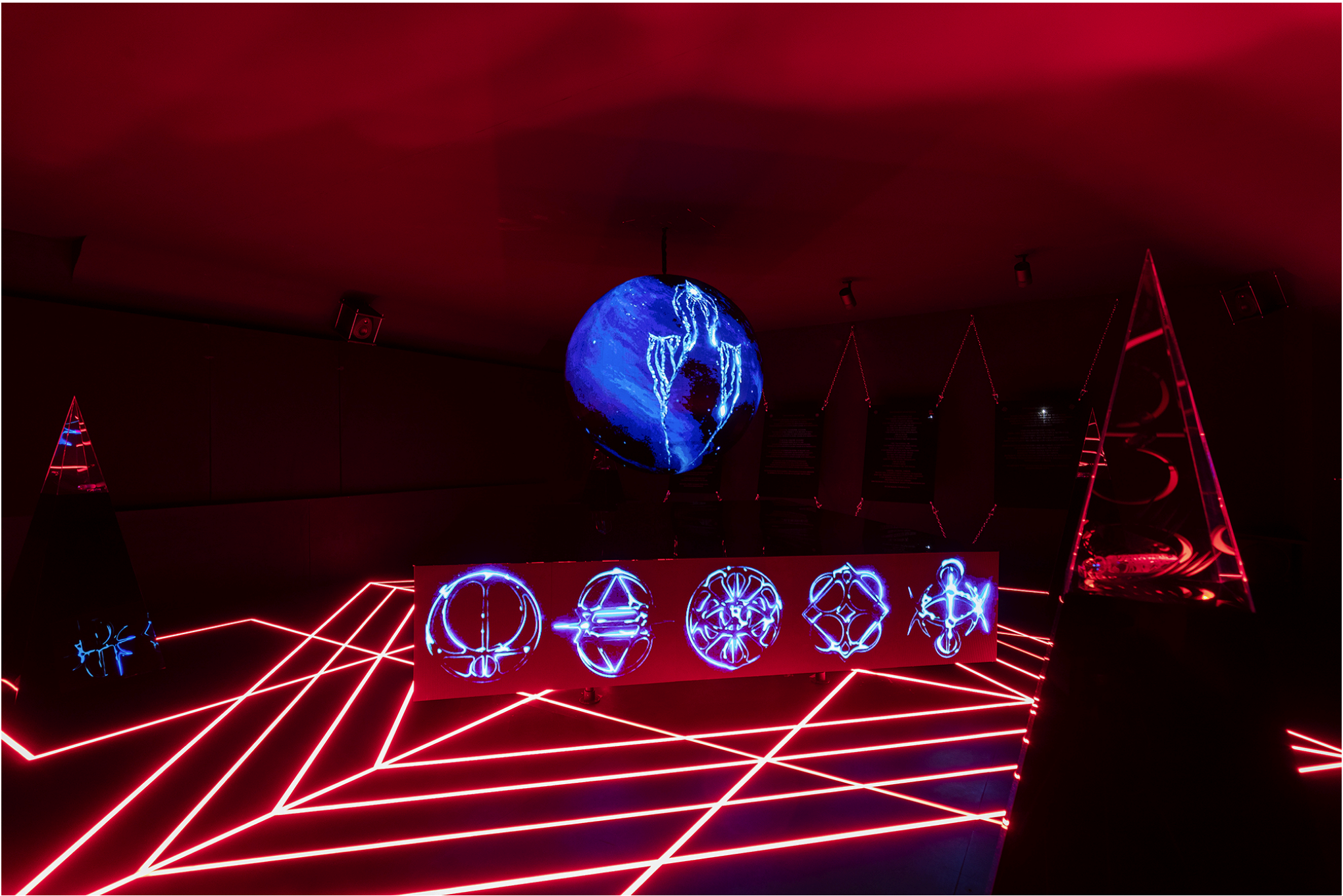

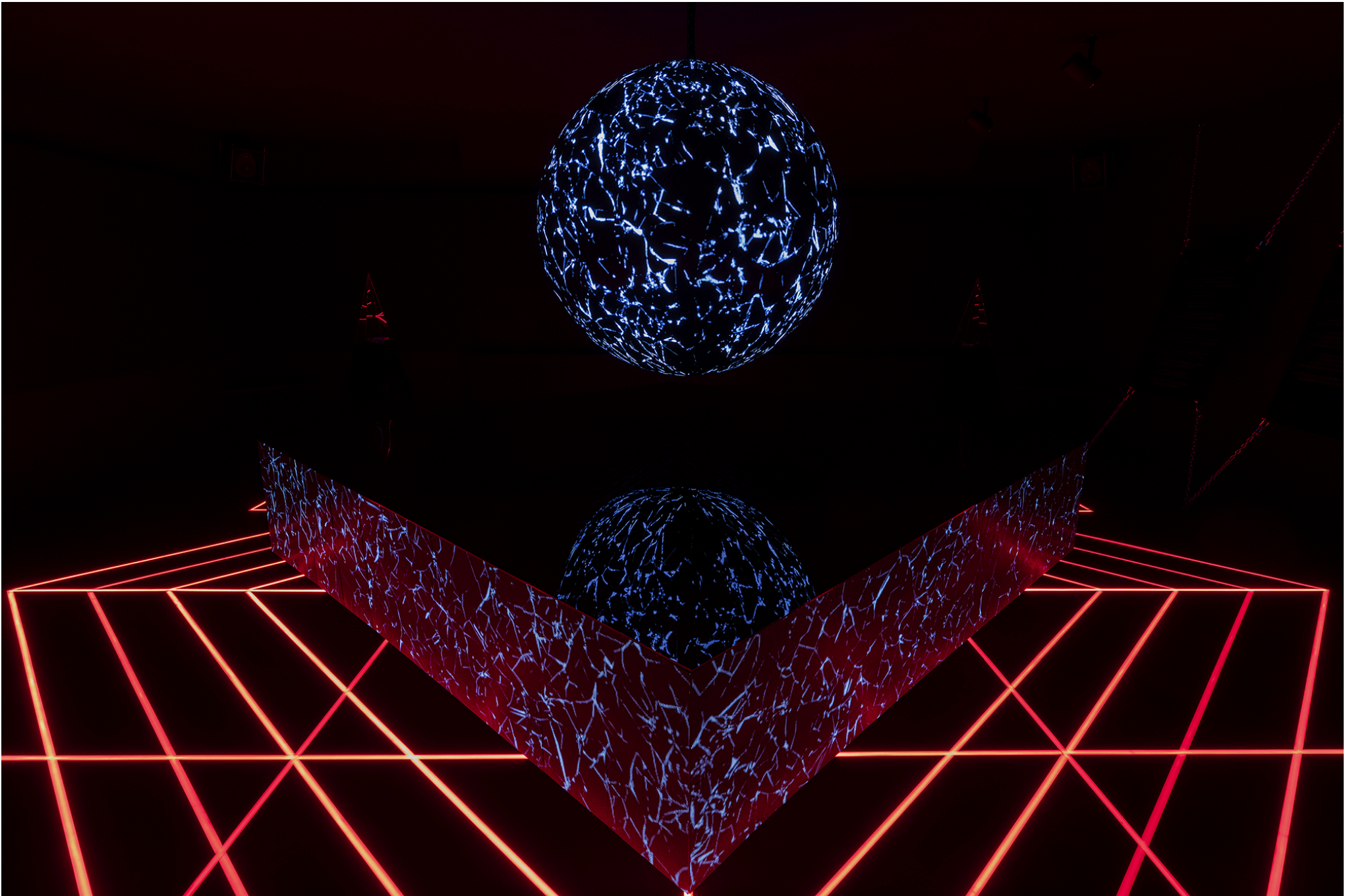# CURA.   Menu

CULTUS is an immersive exploration of Silicon Valley's techno-religion by American artist Zach Blas. It was co-commissioned by Arebyte, London, and Secession, Wien where it is currently showing until June 2024. For this occasion, the artist speaks with Caterina Avataneo disclosing the complex intersections at the basis of the work.

CATERINA AVATANEO: **Upon entering the space, the visitor is absorbed into an immersive invocation site, strangely holy if not creepily so. A black-mirror altarpiece enhances a suspended orb, populated by moving images of eternally morphing symbols - highly technological, between the esoteric and the corporate. A succession of computer graphics God-like apparitions, each introduced by an invocation song, delivers**

articulated sermons. At the edges, pyramidal plinths encapsulate mysterious offerings. Completing the whole, are four chained etched tablets containing the lyrics of the songs. What did you want to convey with the creation of this site?

ZACH BLAS: *CULTUS* stages an encounter with AI religiosity as a modality of power in Silicon Valley. Since its inception, the Californian tech industry has been entangled with spirituality and religion, whether New Age, Christianity, Buddhism, cults, or other fringe formations. In recent years, religious organizations in California have formed around the worship of coming AI gods, like Way of the Future church, founded by former Google engineer Anthony Levandowski. In Silicon Valley, AI is broadly marshalled to serve beliefs centered around judgment and transcendence, extraction and immortality, pleasure and punishment, and individual freedom and cult devotion—all tinged with the religious. *CULTUS* situates these beliefs within Silicon Valley's power structures, that is, the exhibition suggests that religious

beliefs emerging around AI in the tech industry work to enforce patriarchy, colonialism, domination, oppression, and extraction. At the same time, popular accounts of AI additionally endow the technology with god-like powers. For instance, religious studies scholar Beth Singler has pointed to myriad variations found online of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* fresco, in which an AI entity replaces either God or Adam, thus marking AI's emergence as situated within religious conceptions of creation. Singler labels these images, including advertisements for AI companies and journalistic stock photos, as "the AI creation meme." *CULTUS* is also concerned with making palpable such ways in which religious belief is entangled with AI. *CULTUS* makes sensual the allure, the seductive power, of these gods. You feel this in the music that enraptures and touches your body, getting lost in the black-mirror reflections, the red light that signals something sinister, erotic, and draws you closer...horror mixed with awe. At least this is

what I feel! Most of us are worshipping these AI gods, whether we are aware or not. In this sense, the work is about our own complicity, or own willingness to submit and offer ourselves to these gods. And yet, there are shards of resistance running through *CULTUS*. Yes, the installation is a religious computational system that calls forth a pantheon of AI gods, whose prophets share their teachings. However, and importantly, this religious system is not totalized, as a sacrilegious presence lives inside the computer. Here, *CULTUS* indicates an ongoing struggle, unresolved, between belief in domination and belief in liberation. Oh, and the mysterious offerings are bodily fluids and materials: cum, brain matter, tears, and blood. The *CULTUS* computer might require electricity, but it also needs these human materials to operate and power on. Each bodily offering is given to a different god.

CA: The AI deities are four in total, each delivering a sermon recalling different speech styles, from the eschatological to the

masochistic. Can you please outline their characteristics and what they stand for?

ZB: *CULTUS* invokes four AI gods. These gods do not actually appear but are rather represented on behalf of their prophets, whose faces appear in the conjuring sphere. Expositio is AI god of exposure, who activates humanity's desire to expose itself to computational systems of control. Expositio is seductive and pornographic and reimagines BDSM as a kind of holy surveillance erotics. (This god first appeared in my work *SANCTUM* from 2018.) The actress Susanne Sachsse performed, through motion-capture, as Expositio's prophet Eugénie (a nod to the Marquis de Sade). Eugénie's sermon is taunting and perverted, not unlike a phone sex encounter with a horny entity encouraging you to acquiesce to your desire to expose yourself, whether on social media platforms or airport body scanners. I'll share a line from each of the prophets' sermons. Eugénie's starts, "Can you feel the muzzle, that thick data grip touching you exactly where you want it? You

put the barbed steel mesh on all by yourself, so it feels extremely natural for me to lick up your cum because you subscribed to this chain of obedience." Cum is Expositio's bodily offering of choice. Iudicium, AI god of judgment, is more vengeful and horrifying, a flesh-eater that also feeds on fear. Iudicium is not unlike Christ as punisher in the Last Judgment, albeit a kind of digital, automated evaluation of the masses. (This god appeared in an earlier work from 2022 titled *IUDICIUM*.) The artist Ricardo Dominguez acted with a healthy dose of ghoulish humor as Iudicium's prophet K (an evocation of the Kafkaesque). Between demented shouts, maniacal laughter, and hungry lip-smacking, K speaks of a black bounding box that judges all, permitting some to transition into a digital (disembodied) eternal afterlife, while others are sentenced to remain as mortal flesh: "Iudicium teaches, in the domain of judgment, salvation is to lose meat, damnation is to be meat. Because judgment remakes anatomies." Iudicium is most hungry for the offering of brains. Lacrimae, AI

god of tears, manifests as a gentle, beautiful, sublime siren of emotion recognition systems, engaging in lachryphagy, that is, eating tears as a means to feed on human emotion. Lacrimae transmutates emotional tears into data, which the god interprets as a kind of emotion extraction through religious weeping, in order to create a transcendental godly language. (Lacrimae is the subject of two works from 2022: *576 Tears* and *Profundior (Lachryphagic Transmutation Deus-Motus-Data Network)*.) The artist and scholar micha cárdenas played Dominica, Lacrimae's prophet, with saccharine and teary sentiment, a ploy of affect in order to dominate. "In that musical rain of midnight Affectiva tears, Lacrimae can ease your pain. […] And when your weeping falls silent, hear your god Lacrimae's cry: 'Devouring your tears was like taking the very best thing.'" Eternus is AI god of immortality and embodies Silicon Valley's baroque obsession with living forever, through radical life extension enterprises, blood transfusions, nootropics, extreme health programs, and

the prophecy of the singularity. At once princely, entrepreneurial, and duplicitous, Eternus peddles a pyramid scheme of eternal life. I performed as Eternus's prophet Steve (evoking a certain dead tech CEO), in a style I would describe as cocksure and tacky, not unlike a used car salesman-cum-guru, or a TED Talk. "With Eternus, you have an opportunity: to enhance your body today and be healed. We are now preparing to enter a new time and space…because the life extension revolution has just begun. […] All you have to do is believe. Say you believe." Eternus is the blood-drinker of the pantheon. There are other AI gods that have yet to be invoked through *CULTUS*, like the AI god of war, which is vehemently worshipped around the world. But contra these gods, a Heretic also manifests—faceless, nameless, and activated by all performers and singers in the cast. The Heretic exists as shattering glass (visually and sonically), an apostatic collective gesture aimed at cracking the screens and buildings of Silicon Valley.

CA: What kind of datasets did you use to feed and train the machine learning engineering and AI models you worked with?

ZB: Thanks for asking this question, as the production process with AI models and machine-learning is not directly apparent when experiencing *CULTUS*. For the sermons and invocation songs, I worked with machine-learning engineers to train numerous text-based datasets with large language models, including GPT-3. In short, each god had a dataset of texts that, as a whole, expressed its belief system; such texts might span fiction to marketing and PR. A god's text dataset would then be crossed with other datasets containing a wide range of pan-religious scriptures and worship song lyrics. For instance, Expositio's dataset included *The Sleeping Beauty Quartet*, BDSM erotica written by Anne Rice; legal scholar Bernard Hartcourt's *Exposure*, an examination of the "expository society," in which exposure is theorized as a key dynamic of control today; and corporate literature on devices of security and surveillance, like the

ProVision2 airport body scanner. The result would be 1000s of pages that articulate Expositio's religious teachings and invocation lyrics, which would then be heavily edited down. Expositio's sermon output included a fabulous, multi-page-long poem on blow jobs, some of which is included in the sermon delivered in the installation.   For the symbols and faces of prophets, Midjourney and Stable Diffusion were used, feeding these programs branding logos of tech companies; mystical sigils; symbols for sexual practices; portraits of demons and patriarchal figures; as well as material from my previous artworks. These outputs were further manipulated, across graphic design software and Unreal Engine. I'm not a purist in these AI generation progresses (not that purity is an option to begin with); the visual output here was treated as a starting point, a set of references, in order to elaborate on aesthetic consistencies across the gods.   The voices of the prophets are also synthesized with sounds that are the generated output of

different training models. Eugénie's voice is mixed with sonic output that was the result of training a neural network model on a dataset of ASMR recordings of leather gloves rubbing together; K's is combined with Gregorian chanting output; Dominica's is synthesized with the output from training on the sounds of professional mourners crying; Stever's was combined with the results of a neural network trained on Peter Thiel's voice; and the Heretic was mixed with shattering glass output. AI generation in art is often used as a means to visualize futurity, or something speculative, so perhaps it's worth noting here that I have not exactly engaged with training and generation for these purposes. *CULTUS* is about expressing, making felt, a power structure of the historical present (and the political struggle around that). Afterall, isn't this what's technically being created—a statistical expression of the present? I consider the uses of AI and machine-learning in *CULTUS* as conjuring what Fredric Jameson terms "the political unconscious," that is, the

historical, material, and social forces that undergird, constitute, and maintain Silicon Valley's power.   I recently attended a lecture by media scholar Jennifer Rhee, in which she theorized stasis as a key aspect of AI technologies. Rather than foregrounding innovation, prediction, or generation of the new, Rhee highlighted the ways in which AI and machine-learning are wielded today in order to secure enduring systems of domination and control. In this sense, much of AI art could be described as aesthetically expressing stasis; I'd like to think that *CULTUS* expresses this quality of stasis in order to take it on critically.

CA: I was pleasantly surprised to recognise the soft angelic voice of Aga Ujma singing the invocation song for Lacrimae and I loved how the music also varies very much, spanning from dream pop to clerical chants. Was the sound composition also obtained via AI? And who were the other singing voices?

ZB: While the invocation lyrics were the result of neural network training, the music itself was mostly "classically" composed. I worked

with the London-based musician xin, in collaboration with Aya Sinclair; I've worked with them for a number of years on most of my installations. Together, we developed a unique sound for each of the gods, which you've picked up on, but importantly, most of the gods already had a musical theme composed from previous works. Expositio's music is like the darkroom of a sex club—first developed in *SANCTUM*—and Izzy Yon sang its invocation song with a lustful breathiness. Iudicium's invocation is more heavy and industrial, sung in a clinical yet beguiling style by Susu Laroche. Lacrimae is indeed dreamy pop with Aga Ujma as angelic vocalist, and the composition here emerges from music originally composed for *576 Tears* and *Profundior*, which includes sounds generated from training neural networks on emotional crying recordings. Eternus's invocation song is folk meets binaural beats, with words passionately sung in a deeply embodied fashion by Nick Granata (who is part of Shovel Dance Collective). The music for *CULTUS* was integrated into a 6.1 surround

sound design by Ben Hurd and Tom Sedgwick, two sound engineers I've also worked with on a number of projects. The design encompasses the various sounds of this religious computational system, from churnings in the conjuring sphere to spatializing the invocation songs in relation to bodily offerings. I particularly enjoy the crescendo of glass breaking during the Heretic's breach.

CA: The impending darkness of the work might hint towards the inscrutability of "transparent" tech corporations. Your work has in fact been included in the recent book by curator Nadim Samman (Poetics of Encryption. Art and the Technocene) which builds upon similar considerations. But the shadow also becomes a space for heresy and unabashed expression. Would you say *CULTUS* reveals both the danger and the potential of technological advancements and murky devotion?

ZB: I think that's a fair assessment. I wouldn't describe *CULTUS* as techno-phobic, but I would say that the work gestures toward

different possibilities of belief and devotion. This is the ongoing struggle between the AI gods and the Heretic (and the belief systems those entities embody). The Heretic shatters the conjuring sphere, but then the AI gods heal the glass. The struggle continues. Put another way: the work isn't simply against AI as a technology; the issue at hand is rather the belief systems that undergird AI in Silicon Valley and how those feed into power structures dedicated to domination. How might AI exist if mobilized by belief in liberation, decolonization, and social justice? Thankfully, this question is being answered and experimented with today. My own counterpoint can be found in *Ass of God: The Collected Heretical Writings of Salb Hacz*, a religious studies book on AI heresy that was published in conjunction with my current exhibition at Secession. Hacz, an AI mystic and collaborator of mine, recounts a series of heretical visions he had while engaging with *CULTUS*. Salb discovers that an AI god's ass bares evidence of labor and desire dynamics in the tech industry, cuts off the biometric

cock of Expositio, gives Lacrimae an eye infection with fecal bacteria, sculpts heretical forms with the glass panes at Apple Park, among other things.   The point being: across *CULTUS* and *Ass of God*, AI and machine-learning are shown to be capable of enforcing domination and enabling heresy.

CA: A curiosity: the overall environment results as shadowy and psychedelic. As a looming prophetic hallucination. That's perhaps why the work has been elsewhere defined as "techno-gothic". How do you relate to this claim?

ZB: I like this. I'm not familiar with the term or how it's theorized. My own personal touchpoint would be more Southern Gothic, like the fiction of Anne Rice, who deeply marked my adolescence in the American Bible Belt. But I wouldn't want to engage with the gothic in a solely, or naively, romantic fashion. Rather, I'm thinking of queer theory's engagements with the gothic, such as Jack Halberstam's early book *Skin Shows: Goth Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Halberstam explains that Gothic fiction can

be understand as a "rhetorical style and narrative structure designed to produce fear and desire within the reader," (2) usually through the figure of the monster, which "was a combination of the features of deviant race, class, and gender" (4). Halberstam continues, "the emergence of the monster within Gothic fiction marks a peculiarly modern emphasis upon the horror of particular kinds of bodies" (3). With Halberstam's argument in mind, how do monstrosity, deviance, and "the horror of particular kinds of bodies" configure in the techno-gothic? If the AI gods are a kind of monstrosity, then do they feature deviance across race, class, and gender? I'm not sure about that. Furthermore, the gods don't exactly have bodies, so is the horror then directed at our bodies? There is clearly work to be done to flesh out the techno-gothic and its divergences from 19th century fiction!

CA: *CULTUS* is the second instalment of the *Silicon Traces* trilogy, exploring the myths and beliefs influential to Silicon Valley's strategies

and visions of the future. How did you develop the first chapter and what are you planning for the third one?

ZB: *Silicon Traces* evokes the act of tracing in computer science, which involves the collection of information and identification of anomalies and errors for the purposes of debugging software. Of course, there is also something glittery and queer about it too; I imagine a shimmery silver lipstick. In that sense, I'm amused the phrase can point to Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, a work that follows avant-garde movements, like the Situationists, and their influence on punk and counter-culture. *Silicon Traces* started with *Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033* (2018), a prologue to the trilogy and queer science-fiction film installation that critiques the corporate internet as we know it and speculates on network alternatives. The film reimagines scenes from Derek Jarman's 1978 queer punk classic *Jubilee*, depicting Ayn Rand (who I think of as a kind of philosophical queen of the Californian tech

industry, played by Susanne Sachsse—our first time working together) time-traveling to a future Silicon Valley where queer militants are overthrowing its campuses. Nootropix, a queer militant anti-leader played by artist Cassils, dances with a computer graphics dildo and shatters fantasies of total networked control. *The Doors* (2019), part one of the trilogy, is an immersive moving image installation that looks at the state of psychedelia in contemporary Silicon Valley, particularly the engineering and branding of psychedelic drugs to serve neoliberal worker productivity agendas, through the advent of the nootropics industry and the rise of microdosing LSD and psilocybin mushrooms. The work coheres around figures in 1960s Californian counter-culture, including the band The Doors and its lead singer Jim Morrison, as well as the figure of the lizard as a symbol of psychedelic transformation. The installation appears as a kind of mystical, corporate garden, where computer graphics lizards roam, the black-mirror screens of phones hang as door-like

portals to AI-generated psychedelic visions, an AI Jim Morrison recites spoken-word poetry on smart drugs, and a glass menagerie of nootropics is displayed and protected by the lizards. Just as *CULTUS* considers the ways in which religion is marshalled as a vector of power in Silicon Valley, *The Doors* make experiential the psychedelic as yet another vector in the power structures of the tech industry. And while *CULTUS* has its Heretic as a force of resistance, *The Doors* depicts an alternate psychedelic hallucination that envisions a world beyond neoliberal techno-utopianism. This summer, I am commencing research on the last work in the trilogy, which focuses on doomsday bunkers built and land acquired by tech elite in New Zealand and other sites in the Pacific as colonial conquest, the history of think tanks in California, the computer graphics industry and fantasies of apocalypse, and decolonization and indigenous data sovereignty. The right-wing tech entrepreneur and owner of a New Zealand bunker Peter Thiel has described

the country as "the future." But whose future? And who benefits from this future? What worlds have to end for Thiel's future to come to be? Thiel and his cohort seem to be attempting to live out the plot of Ayn Rand's 1957 novel *Atlas Shrugged* (beloved by much of the US right-wing, tech elite, Hollywood, and government alike), in which men of industry withdraw from society due to governmental hindrances to laissez-faire capitalism. This only further confirms that Silicon Valley will not save the world, or "think different," as Apple once proclaimed. Rather, the tech industry is a current manifestation of what bell hooks termed "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy," that enduring mega-structure of domination and oppression—what Donna Haraway later termed "the informatics of domination." With this last work of the trilogy, I am looking for a different story, grounded in the historical present and struggle, one that tells a just narrative of land and computation, future and apocalypse, a story that decenters Silicon Valley and envisions a beyond or outside to

the informatics of domination. When I think back to performing as Steve, Eternus's prophet, I find myself contemplating his mantra: "All you have to do is believe. Say you believe." I believe outsides and beyonds can be speculative potential, but also material realities. The Silicon Valley totality is always already shattered; we just have to look in certain ways to see the cracks.

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All images
Zach Blas
CULTUS (2023)
installation view
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Courtesy of the artist and Secession

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