

Postdigital Camp

Zach Blas' "Too-Muchness"

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As if I had run out of steam at the end. As if, after pacing through Zach Blas' video *Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033* (2018), I reached a state of exhaustion that made it impossible for me to finish my essay "Queer Aesthetics of the Algorithmic"¹ by concluding my readings and breaking them down to a thesis on the queer aesthetics of Zach Blas' postdigital art. The too-much of descriptions, analytical insertions, and cross-references culminated in the last paragraph in an almost desperate enumeration of aesthetic approaches. "Future in the moment of prophecy can thus be kept open in all its potentiality,"² as the final sentence claimed, can barely be read otherwise than as meandering into the slightly trivial. Thus, the piece seemed to be unlocked for follow-up readings, because in this form of summary it was strangely unfinished and hardly condensed.

Later, when Blas in one of my seminars,³ in response to a student's question, mentioned that he thinks and works in a mode of "too-much," it dawned on me. Or rather, I realized that I wanted to come back to his work again to ask whether his method and aesthetic expression can be described as camp, or whether in his installations, videos, performances, and sculptures, we are dealing with a postdigital *note on camp*.⁴ This text thus represents a revisit, in the literal sense of rethinking, but

1 Katrin Köppert, "Queere Ästhetiken des Algorithmischen in Zach Blas' *Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033*," in *Queeres Kino / Queere Ästhetiken als Dokumentationen des Prekären*, ed. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky and Philipp Hanke (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 149–176.

2 Ibid., p. 176. (Translation by Katrin Köppert).

3 Özlem Altın and myself invited Zach Blas to join the seminar *Perverse Fotografie*Queer Photography*, summer term 2021, Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig.

4 In reference to Susan Sontag, *Notes on "Camp"* (London: Penguin Books, 2018 [1964]).

also in terms of a queer methodology, which does not pose as its starting point the sovereign subject, but a post-sovereign stance that is permanently and contextually re-questioning itself.

For a postdigital concept of camp, the term digital camp first needs to be clarified, in order to argue subsequently that camp as an aesthetic as well as a political notion can be used to bridge the gap between queer perspectives on art history and current postdigital art.⁵ The breathlessness mentioned at the beginning—as will be seen—certainly plays a role in this. I argue that in Blas' work we are dealing with a “materialistic side of camp”⁶ translated into the postdigital present, which expresses itself as an intensified physical experience. This materialist side of camp has been described by Juliane Rebentisch in reference to Jack Smith.⁷ I will turn to this description as a point of departure. However, my understanding of the “materialistic side of camp” in relation to Blas' work will differ from Rebentisch's deliberations on Smith's camp sensibility. For in Blas' video installations, a focus on materiality goes hand in hand with other aesthetic procedures of using objects and material surfaces. The extent to which these procedures are contextual and attributable to the postdigital age of art will be the subject of this paper. Throughout my argument I will focus on *Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033* and its sequel *The Doors* (2019), an installation that in turn is also the first part of another trilogy of queer science fiction works.⁸ After I pinpoint the most crucial aspects of both works in terms of content and form, I will develop a concept of what I call “postdigital camp,” for which

5 Kristin Klein and Willy Noll, “Postdigital Landscapes,” *Zeitschrift Kunst Medien Bildung* special issue *Postdigital Landscapes*, ed. Kristin Klein and Willy Noll (2019), pp. 9–15, <https://zkmb.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Postdigital-Landscapes.pdf> (accessed January 23, 2024).

6 Juliane Rebentisch, “Über eine materialistische Seite von Camp. Naturgeschichte bei Jack Smith,” *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 5, no. 8: *Medienästhetik* (2013), pp. 165–178, <https://dx.doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/800> (accessed January 23, 2024).

7 Ibid.

8 <https://zachblas.info/works/the-doors/> (accessed January 23, 2024).

Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033 and *The Doors* can be regarded as paradigmatic examples.

Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033 and The Doors

Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033 is the prologue to Blas' *Silicon Traces* trilogy, a series of moving image installations that explore the fantasy world of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and their influence on current technology.

The half-hour video work *Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033*⁹ follows author Ayn Rand, played by Susanne Sachsse, and members of her collective, including economist Alan Greenspan, on a LSD trip in 1955. Guided by an artificial intelligence and holographic assistant named Azuma, they are transported to a dystopian Silicon Valley of 2033. Rand, who learns during this time travel that she has become a prominent philosopher to the tech leadership elite as her writings spur their entrepreneurial spirit, is confronted with the consequences of her philosophy: the Apple, Facebook, and Google campuses are on fire and the companies' leadership is taken out of commission by a militant group. In a Palantir Technologies office occupied by this group, the supposed leader, Nootropix (alluding to the performance-enhancing drug Nootropika, and played by the artist Cassils), reads from the book *The End of the Internet (As We Knew It)*¹⁰ and then performs a dance to the song *Time to Say Goodbye* by Andrea Bocelli (Elon Musk's favorite singer).¹¹ The poses they

9 Zach Blas, "Contra-Internet 2015–2019," zachblas.info, 2018, <https://zachblas.info/works/contra-internet/> (accessed June 1, 2021).

10 Zach Blas told me in an email conversation that the title of the book is meant to be understood as a "utopian plagiarism" of different books and texts, i.e. works by Paul B. Preciado and J. K. Gibson-Graham's *The End of Capitalism (As We Know It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

11 Patricia de Vries, "Zach Blas – The Objectivist Drug Party \\ Heather Dewey-Hagborg – Genomic Intimacy," *mu*, 2018, <https://mu.nl/en/txt/zach-blas-the-objectivist-drug-party-heather-dewey-hagborg-genomic-intimacy> (accessed June 1, 2021).

strike during the dance allude in a parodic manner not only to the Greek Titan Atlas, according to Rand's book *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), but also provide a hint to the title of her equally pivotal book *The Fountainhead* (1943). The parody consists of the fountainhead being transformed into a queer, countersexual dildo tectonics loosely based on Paul B. Preciado's book *The Countersexual Manifesto* (2000),¹² in which the head—among other body parts—functions as a sex toy. The world collapsing on the protagonists after this orgiastic scene marks the transition to the last scene. In search of recovery, Rand and the collective find themselves on Silicon Beach, where chunks of polycrystalline silicon wash up: a reference to the ocean as the grave of network wars and electronic waste.

The video work can be understood aesthetically as a high-resolution glittering world of protocol-defined interactions from the pens of Californian valley dwellers, cleansed of dirt. Accordingly, the LSD trip is narrated in a meditative-narcotic rather than euphoric-hallucinogenic manner, and the hallucinogenic effect is visually translated into fairy dust and rotating cuboids. In this respect, the work significantly contrasts with Derek Jarman's film *Jubilee* (1978) invoked in the title. Queen Elizabeth I's time travel into the late twentieth century in Jarman's *Jubilee* is pictured through the aesthetics of excess and trash. This punk aesthetic, unusual even for Jarman,¹³ in Blas' video can only be loosely associated with the members of the anarchic group dressed in army green pantsuits. Moreover, there are numerous borrowings on the level of content,¹⁴ but aesthetically the film undertakes a journey through time to somewhere else, which—as I will show—is related to the concept of postdigital camp.

12 Paul B. Preciado, *Kontrasexuelles Manifest* (Berlin: b_books, 2004).

13 Julian Upton, "Anarchy in the UK: Derek Jarman's *Jubilee* (1978) Revisited," October 1, 2000, *Bright Lights Film Journal*, <https://brightlightsfilm.com/anarchy-uk-derek-jarmans-jubilee-1978-revisited/> (accessed June 1, 2021); Steven Dillon, *Derek Jarman and Lyric Film: The Mirror and the Sea* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), p. 75.

14 Köppert, "Queere Ästhetiken des Algorithmischen."

If *Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033* is still clearly narrative, *The Doors* is presented as a multi-media assemblage dealing with psychedelia, drug use and artificial intelligence. *The Doors* is the sequel to *Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033*; however, it does not retell the narrative. It takes up partial aspects of the narrative and transfers those into a science fiction arrangement that aesthetically works differently. Designed as an artificial garden, it features a 7.1 surround sound design and six video channels composed of computer graphic sequences and psychedelic images generated by machine learning. The sound is composed by an artificial intelligence based on data sets consisting of literature on nootropics, substances used to enhance performance, and writings by Jim Morrison, lead singer of the band The Doors. The band, or rather Jim Morrison, aka The Lizard King, is emblematic of a time when the counterculture of the 1960s met the early phase of Western cybernetics. The unifying element of both cultures was—to a certain extent, as insinuated by Blas—drug use. For if the thesis is that “the communal ethos of hippie culture in California ... anticipated the organizational, ideological, and entrepreneurial interests of the network society,”¹⁵ it is reasonable to assume that drugs may have always played a role in the technological history of the Internet. At least they clearly do in terms of the widespread consumption of nootropics in Silicon Valley nowadays (fig. 1).

Through *The Doors*, Blas tries to imagine the extent to which it is possible to have a psychedelic trip “that bends the mind ... toward the left, the queer...,”¹⁶ contrary to “smart” drugs that have a performance-enhancing effect and work toward the profit motive of tech companies. As an aesthetic strategy of this imagining, he combines the aforementioned sound collages

15 Pamela M. Lee, “Als der Echsenkönig dem Echsenhirn begegnete: *The Doors*,” in Zach Blas. *Unknown Ideals*, ed. Edit Molnár and Marcel Schwierin (Berlin and Oldenberg: Sternberg Press / Edith-Russ-Haus für Medienkunst, 2021), p. 337.

16 Zach Blas, “Care Package 4: Psychedelic Vision,” April 2020, *Care Package*, <https://zachblas.info/writings/psychedelic-vision/> (accessed January 24, 2024).



Fig. 1: Zach Blas, *The Doors*, 2019, Mixed-media installation, Installation view Edith-Russ-Haus for Media Art, Oldenburg, Germany, Courtesy of Edith-Russ-Haus for Media Art and the artist

with AI-driven videos trained on image data from psychedelic rock posters, LSD blotter art, brains, glass architecture, as well as geometric shapes to which sacred meanings are ascribed. Blas arranges sound and images in an artificial garden in the pattern of a Metatron cube, which is a symbol of sacred geometry and often used in advertising for nootropics. The plastic garden is surmounted and illuminated by a green neon wall. The latter is reminiscent of a neural network, but actually represents an occult symbol. At the foot of this symbol is a small altar made of black sand, which features a watering hole and a heated rock for lizards. In the center of the space we find a glass case containing 65 vials of the nootropic substances popular in Silicon Valley. In short, the sheer abundance of objects along with their references is intoxicating, yet strangely contained. Whether the effect of this intoxication turns the mind to the left or the “queer” will have to be more closely examined.

Beyond the Internet: Postdigital Camp

With *The Doors*, and especially with Blas' statement that he was operating in the mode of "too much," a certain confusion I had already experienced when I first engaged with *Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033* settled in: How could it be that the excess of references produced in the video work, which I perceived as camp exaggeration, stood in such contrast to the less strident and meditatively narcotic aesthetic present in the video and the multi-media assemblage? Or, to put it another way: Why is the hyperbole confined to the abundance of references to corporate history, theory, popular culture, and film history, but the typically excessive and eccentric play of surfaces, objects, and sounds, typical of camp aesthetics, is stripped back—or at least slowed down—and muted by the esoteric sound-collages? Furthermore, *The Doors* is characterized by the containment of shrillness: The space is strictly structured by the geometries of sacred symbols such as the Metatron cube, plants do not thrive but are arranged as artificial plants, screens arranged like church naves show clips that slowly fade into each other, reminiscent of psychedelic patterns, controlled by AI and accompanied by an AI-generated soundtrack. How can we infer a camp sensibility from such an arrangement, when camp is typically associated with oversaturated, kitschy, grotesque, eccentric, even cheaply produced aesthetics, as seen with Jack Smith in the 1960s or Ryan Trecartin today?¹⁷ How are these aesthetics applied by Blas conditioned by the ubiquity of the Internet, and the related experience of no longer finding a way out of this totalizing digitality and an at best subcutaneously perceivable omnipresence of the digital?¹⁸ If art no longer stands outside of the Internet and—as Zach Blas demonstrates with the use of

17 Ricardo E. Zulueta, *Queer Art Camp Superstar: Decoding the Cinematic Cyberworld of Ryan Trecartin* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018).

18 Simone Browne interview with Zach Blas, "Beyond the Internet and All Control Diagrams," January 24, 2017, *The New Inquiry*, <https://thenewinquiry.com/beyond-the-internet-and-all-control-diagrams/> (accessed August 3, 2022).

AI—algorithms, i.e. if we find ourselves in a time “after art,”¹⁹ what does this mean for a queer sensibility of camp?

While camp once represented a gay sensibility and a creative expression that, based on the experience of oppression, turned against the mainstream and “good” taste,²⁰ queer camp was directed against the bourgeois notion of identity that was also embedded within gay politics.²¹ Queer camp emphasizes identity as performative and socially mediated²² and is therefore identified—especially and in a way that can be problematized by Susan Sontag’s popular and widely received publication *Notes on ‘Camp’*—with an “attitude that affirms the artificial.”²³ Here it is crucial to consider Judith Butler’s politicized understanding of drag and camp in order to problematize the naturalization of social norms.²⁴ Whereas Sontag previously wanted queer camp to be understood in opposition to nature, Butler does not highlight nature but rather naturalization as the point of departure for the queer critical potential of camp.

Possibly owing to the popular understanding of camp that evolved in the wake of Sontag being positioned as a celebrity representative of queer theories, Bruce LaBruce later complains in *Notes on Camp/Anti-Camp* that camp has been co-opted by popular culture and strangely normalized as a placeholder for the subversive power of performative irony.²⁵ As the misreading of camp, he observes, can be traced back to the 1990s, the Internet must be considered along with it as, at the time, largely a

19 David Joselit, *Nach Kunst* (Berlin: August Verlag, 2016).

20 Jack Babuscio, “The Cinema of Camp,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 118.

21 Morris Meyer, ed., *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 3.

22 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 9, 25.

23 Rebentisch, “Über eine materialistische Seite von Camp,” p. 167.

24 Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

25 Bruce LaBruce, “Notes on Camp – and Anti-Camp,” March–April 2014, *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, <https://glreview.org/article/notes-on-camp-and-anti-camp-2/> (accessed August 3, 2022).

naively invoked space of democratization and egalitarianism. The efficacy of the hopeful ignorance of cyberspace discourse²⁶ is also relevant to camp's politics. Aymar Jean Christian's study "Camp 2.0" demonstrates the extent to which the idea of liberation from oppression through the Internet and its possibilities for participation, which is closely intertwined with cyberspace, has become inscribed into the performance of queer subcultures online.²⁷ Camp as discourse in this context is said to be imbued with a neoliberal sense of individuality, emotional authenticity, and personal development. In the course of the neoliberalization of the Internet, personal expression became increasingly centered and the political dimension of camp was reduced to individual self-expression. In the process, de facto data and click counts became the currency of freedom restriction. Bloggers and Vloggers were no longer users, but workers for the profit of tech companies. These changing conditions describe the turn towards a discourse of postdigitality dedicated to the structures of inequality, exploitation, and extraction. Under the conceptual aegis of the postdigital, questions of labor resources, raw materials, and embodied experiences of digital violence now come to the forefront. The Internet is increasingly viewed critically in terms of its material effects on life, body, and landscape, as evidenced by the numerous publications on automated inequality,²⁸ extractive infrastructures,²⁹ and discriminatory data³⁰ in recent years.

Based on a queer understanding of camp, it could be assumed that it is necessary to find an alternative for the Internet, which, today, is as totalizing as a natural environment. Especially against

26 Wendy Chun, *Discriminating Data: Correlation, Neighborhoods, and the New Politics of Recognition* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2021), pp. 1–6.

27 Aymar Jean Christian, "Camp 2.0: A Queer Performance of the Personal," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 3 (2010), pp. 352–376.

28 Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

29 Nicole Starosielski, *The Undersea Network* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2015).

30 Chun, *Discriminating Data*.

the backdrop of the automated inequality and data-based discrimination of marginalized people associated with totalization, the desire for an alternative seems not only understandable, but urgent as a horizon of queer politics. At last, this is what the title of Blas' work suggests: With *Contra-Internet*, Blas is concerned with "the refusal of Internet totality."³¹ However, he continues that refusal does not mean a naïve notion of opting out. "Rather, it is a refusal of naturalization, hegemonies, and normalizations of the Internet."³² Thus, a queer sensibility of camp would critically refer to the Internet as a totality. In order to look for ways to resist naturalizations, hegemonizations, and normalizations, the critique would have to take place within the structures that brought an end to digitality's initial euphoria towards "democratization, egalitarian participation, and decentralization."³³

Now, did I make any progress in my analysis? I would first like to pause for a moment and say: Postdigital camp, that is, camp in the context of postdigital art, following Blas, is not simply directed against good taste, but against the forms of discrimination that accompany the Internet. With LaBruce, one could then say with some indignation that this would move away from aesthetic dimensions in favor of realpolitik and social issues, which would be devastating for gay experience and its formerly highly developed camp sensibility.³⁴ However, it would be fatal to claim that the aesthetic dimension is absent or irrelevant in Blas, just as it would be fatal to disconnect the aesthetic dimension from an ethical and even moral one. Therefore, I would now like to inquire further into the specific notion of form, which is "too much" in itself, and which, together with the social issues, links to the political dimension of camp, contrary

31 Browne and Blas, "Beyond the Internet."

32 Ibid.

33 Kristin Klein, "Kunst und Medienbildung in der digital vernetzten Welt. Forschungsperspektiven im Anschluss an den Begriff der Postdigitalität," in Klein and Noll, *Zeitschrift Kunst Medien Bildung* special issue *Postdigital Landscapes*, pp. 16–25.

34 LaBruce, "Notes on Camp – and Anti-Camp."

to Sontag's claim that camp is "disengaged, depoliticized, or at least apolitical."³⁵ For this, I would like to put the materialistic side of digitality that comes into focus with postdigitality into relation with the materialistic aspects of camp.

Materialistic Aspects of Camp

With regard to Jack Smith's camp aesthetics, Juliane Rebentisch argues that "the one-sided association of the phenomenon [camp] with irony, parody, and aestheticism"³⁶ obscures the meaning that it is an aesthetics that thematizes nature in history, that is, the transience of nature. Looking at the objects and textiles allegorically staged in Smith's films, it becomes clear that he was not only concerned with highlighting gender and sexuality as socially mediated and performative—against nature. He was also concerned with a relationship to nature, but understood in its historicity. Mortality as a reference point of camp aesthetics therefore means to design it not as an escapist line of flight, but as bound to fragility, decay, and downfall. It is precisely from this bond to transience that camp gains a critical consciousness and thus the possibility of a future.³⁷ The aesthetic program of this opening from history to nature in Smith's work is exemplified in baroque motifs of creatureliness, which is why skulls and death masks play a recurring role in his films. These objects are often staged amidst the ruinous landscapes of late capitalism filled with wrecked cars. The obsolescence that accompanies this late capitalism forms the vanishing point of desire in order to establish "a completely different relationship between subjects, or more precisely: between creatures and things, a relationship

35 Sontag, *Notes on "Camp"*, p. 2.

36 Rebentisch, "Über eine materialistische Seite von Camp," p. 168, my translation.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 170.

that cannot be adequately described as a practical or economic one, nor in terms of symbolic appropriation.”³⁸

Blas' works aim at such a “different relationship” and place it in the context of digital culture ruined by neoliberalism. A bond is established with the ruins of digital culture and with the transience of nature in the sense of finite raw materials and landscapes contaminated by electronic waste, in order to create, in this bond with natural decay, a space for relations that start from that which remains unfamiliar and undigested, that is, neither practical nor capable of being appropriated. The objects which in Blas' work evoke the unfamiliar, the undigested, the uncanny, and the improbable are, however, neither baroque in the sense of Smith's vanitas motifs, nor objects whose use value has been lost, and which, although decoratively staged, touch on the ephemeral. In this respect, I would like to refer to the materialistic side of camp in Blas' work, but within the framework of an aesthetic whose objects are only slightly morbid. And yet their glamour should not tempt us to be blinded by a utopia that is decoupled from transience.

Shimmering Surfaces, Uncanny Vertigo: Camp as Embodied Perception

In *Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033*, in the final sequence Azuma picks up a silicon crystal stranded on Silicon Beach, which she strokes with her holographic finger and asks: “What is the secret of minerals?” The zoom on the mineral that follows this question may suggest that the point is to try to get to the bottom of the mineral, to uncover all its secrets, to use it as an oracle of the future of a postdigital era. The slow zooming in on the mineral, however, draws the beholder in, too (fig. 2 and 3).

It is seductive, not because it conveys the need to penetrate the surface it closes in on, but because we are led closer in order

38 Ibid., p. 171, my translation.



Fig. 2-3: Stills from Zach Blas, *Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033*, 2018, HD-Video, Color and Sound, 30:52 min, Courtesy of the artist.

to remain on the surface. This problematizes how much Silicon Valley succumbs to the seductive power of surfaces and deliberately obfuscates processes of algorithmization to protect the inside of the black box.³⁹ It also exposes the chaos of queer

39 Köppert, "Queere Ästhetiken des Algorithmischen," p. 170.

desire, the complicity with the politically incorrect. For “sometimes we desire bad objects,”⁴⁰ Blas writes, and smartphones with their seductively shiny surfaces are certainly among them. But the zoom also acts as a magnifying glass, blurring the view and creating a vertigo. This dizziness possibly introduces us to the uncanny flip side of the materials, the trauma that lies hidden within them, the violence that attaches itself to them, the death that articulates itself with them as raw materials of digitality. By addressing death and transience I come close to queer desire, which Rebutisch describes with reference to Jack Smith as the potentiality that lies in the relationship between subjects and things that is not a practical or economic one. What is striking here is that this potentiality is conceived in ways other than just visual markers of transience. Above all, it is also about an embodied perception of the indigestible for processes of exploitation. It is about malaise, dizziness, vertigo. For this, it is important to recall once again the context of the scene.

Shortly before Azuma lifts the crystal, she reflects on the fact that—although the Internet is already a thing of the past—the oceans are filled with electronic waste, looking ahead to the year 2033: “Beneath the shimmering water what is left of fiber optic lines, rests of fallen satellites and other debris of network war.” Fiber optic cables, satellites and Internet debris have been left to the post-Internet world. However, unlike what Rebutisch with Smith describes, economically unusable materials that are invoked as debris and leftovers are not included by means of visual metaphors of scrap and rust, but in the form of shiny minerals. This does not create a contradiction, instead we are dealing with a different aesthetic of the materialistic side of camp.

Death has been inscribed in the gloss of minerals and raw materials since colonization; the death of landscape and peo-

40 Övül. Ö. Durmuşoğlu interview with Zach Blas, “In das Tal ohne Wiederkehr: Ein Interview mit Zach Blas,” in *Zach Blas. Unknown Ideals*, p. 351.

ple, to whom, equally racialized,⁴¹ the seductive power of gold and of money has been assigned. The transience of the Internet is thus once again more clearly traced back to a constellation that emanates from the desire for the shiny crystals and the crystalline brilliance of Black bodies. The magnification of the shiny surface of the mineral consequently forces us viewers to look at postdigitality not through the lens of decaying remnants, but of the beginning of a colonial history in which the ephemerality of nature and what had been declared nature—raw materials and Black bodies—was not feared as a threat, but coveted as a profitable resource.

Blas consistently forces upon us the discomfort of colonial violence manifested in the seductive glamour of surfaces. Without seeing, because the magnification in the zoom sequence blurs everything, or without having the perspective, we can sense the violence because of the vertigo created by blurring. This foreboding is an inversion of the visionary that is central to Blas' engagement with the counter-Internet. Rather than establishing transparency as a slogan for overcoming inequality guaranteed by black boxes through automation, it is the opacity of the mineral that, while remaining enigmatic, vague, and hazy, points to the catastrophic and dizzying ecological, economic, and physical effects of colonization: "the vertigo of a question mark."⁴² Opacity as vertigo, however, not only articulates the violence of (digital) colonization, but can also help us approach the power of decolonization. Following Frantz Fanon, Samira Kawash argues that decolonization is

an uncanny violence in excess of any instrumentally conceived ends, a violence that cannot be contained or comprehended within social reality. The absolute violence of decolonization is outside agency and

41 Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

42 Frantz Fanon in Mark Macey, *Frantz Fanon. A Biography* (New York: Picador, 2000), p. 159.

representation; rather it interrupts and erupts into history and wrests history open to the possibility of a justice radically foreclosed by the colonial order of reality.⁴³

Decolonization is an uncanny force insofar as it transcends any conceived purpose. Outside of action and representation this force interrupts or breaks into history, namely wrests the possibility of justice from history. In this sense, the shiny mineral would not simply be a marker of colonial violence, but the possibility of another history of nature, one not oriented toward purpose and usability. From such a history, a more than precalculated option for the future can also emerge.

The shininess of the mineral's surface as a dizzying force is what I want to describe in rejecting psychoanalytically-informed interpretations of the fetish as a materialist site, following, but also departing from, Rebentisch. For the indigestible moment that is desirable in the attachment to natural decay from a queer perspective emerges not from visual metaphors of decay, but as an embodied perception of the feeling of falling triggered due to vertigo. In the free fall of decolonization, we are "in excess of any instrumentally conceived ends,"⁴⁴ we are in the mode of *too much*.

Biohacking Aesthetics: Camp as Synesthetic Intoxication

Using the name of the character Nootropix, Blas in *Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033* invokes the labor productivity-enhancing nootropics, smart drugs that are part of everyday work in Silicon Valley and are the best example of narcocapitalism, that is, a capitalism based on keeping emotions in balance through

43 Samira Kawash, "Terrorists and Vampires: Fanon's Spectral Violence of Decolonization," in *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Anthony C. Alessandrini (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 239–240.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 239.

chemical stimulation and thus enabling productivity. Laurent de Sutter, in his book *Narcocapitalism*, speaks of the age of anesthesia, which does not intensify desire and consciousness in a potentially transgressive sense, but increases productivity by throttling emotions.⁴⁵ Blas now contrasts this anesthesia with the figure of Nootropix. With reference to the etymology of the Greek term, which alludes to the overwhelming and threatening potential of drugs,⁴⁶ he finally elaborates the aspect of consciousness expansion and thus the potentially toxic nature of nootropic substances, which by definition are supposed to only have a positive cognitive, i.e. neuroprotective, effect. Thus, by shifting from nootropics to nootropix, he points at the side effects that are counterproductive from the perspective of capitalist exploitation. By alluding to these incalculable side effects, he turns against corporations that are so dependent on their staff's functioning. He thus poisons the Californian ideology, what Blas himself calls "queer mind-bending."⁴⁷ In terms of this contesting inebriation, he addresses the substance of the nootropic as subversive, insofar as it acts "contrary to its medical intention" and is itself performative.⁴⁸ Blas enacts the substance nootropic in the context of a theatrical act of dancing, through which the character Nootropix articulates how materiality is also performative or drag. Paul B. Preciado refers to the performative power of substances as "biodrag," illustrating that substances are involved in the production of somatic fictions and, to that extent, can be a hack.⁴⁹ The contingencies and

45 Laurent de Sutter, *Narcocapitalism: Life in the Age of Anaesthesia* (Oxford: Polity, 2017).

46 Jasmina Tumbas in conversation with Zach Blas, "The Ectoplasmic Resistance of Queer: Metric Mysticism, Libidinal Art, and How to Think beyond the Internet," February 6, 2018, *ASAP Journal*, <https://asapjournal.com/the-ectoplasmic-resistance-of-queer/> (accessed June 1, 2021).

47 Ibid.

48 Kathrin Peters, "Political Drugs: Materiality in *Testo Junkie*," in *Ecologies of Gender: Contemporary Nature Relations and the Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Susanne Lettow and Sabine Nessel (New York: Routledge, 2022).

49 Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie. Sex, Drogen und Biopolitik in der Ära der Pharmapornographie* (Berlin: b_books, 2016), p. 191.

uncertainties of the chemical efficacy of a drug like nootropic articulates that every body, every mind is fictional—science fiction so to speak. As fictionalizations, neither body nor mind can be fully calculated, or predetermined.

In *Contra-Internet: Jubilee 2033*, the idea of the biohack is aesthetically elaborated within a four-minute dance sequence. The dance sequence, which in films usually provides a moment of interruption, slowing down, or transforming diachronic narratives, here specifically connects with queer desire. The scene is a celebration of the dildo, which glows and sparks. With this celebration, “contrasexuality can be unleashed, a sexuality that opposes or runs counter to the enforcement of the one ‘natural’ sexuality.”⁵⁰ Every celebration includes music, which we can read as an expression of camp trash insofar as the dance sequence is enacted to Andrea Bocelli’s kitschy song *Time to Say Goodbye*. However, with regard to the materialistic side of camp, I am not only concerned with the symbolism of kitsch, which is invoked qua content-related referentiality, but also with a synesthetic dimension, which comes to the fore especially with the dance sequence rather than in the rest of the video. I consider synesthesia relevant to the question of a performativity of substances that goes beyond the predictability of the use of drugs. Synesthesia here refers to the hallucinogenic effects of psychedelics, which were central to earlier experiments with LSD and centered around ego dissolution and the hope for a “psychedelic communalism”⁵¹ (fig. 4).

Seeing sounds as colors and blurring shapes is a typical phenomenon of psychedelic states of intoxication, which are also addressed in *The Doors*. The machine-generated sound collages, which merge into intoxicating noise, combined with the psychedelic blurring of pictorial forms, refer to the hallucinogenic aspect of expansion of consciousness. They are an

50 Blas, “In das Tal ohne Wiederkehr,” p. 346.

51 Mark Fisher, “Acid Communism,” in *K-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher* (London: Repeater, 2018), pp. 751–753.

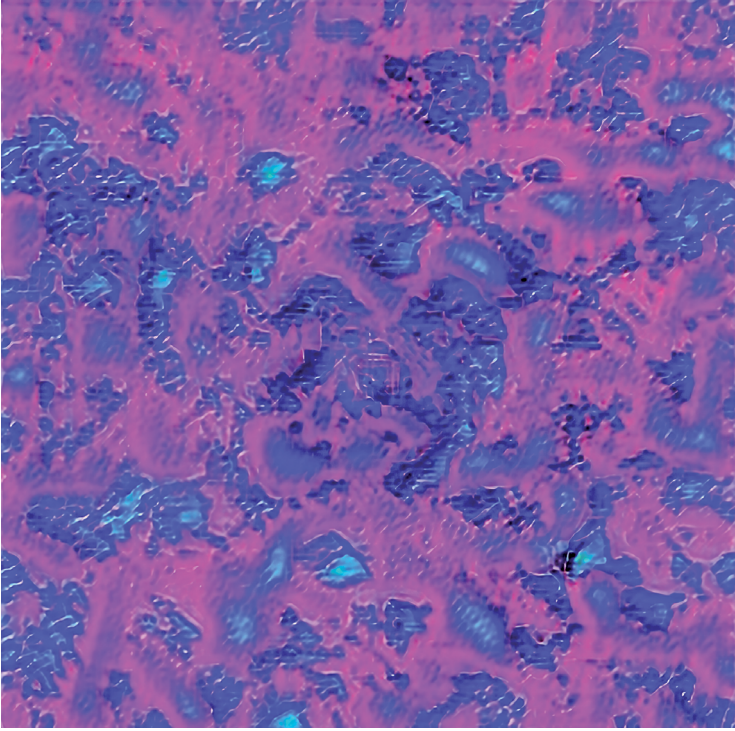


Fig. 4: Zach Blas, *The Doors*, 2019, HD-Video still (machine-learning generated image), Courtesy of the artist.

attempt to reestablish the “non-transmissibility” of an intensified bodily experience, which qua ego dissolution touches on death, not however as a threat, but as a potentiality to look beyond “the individual as the sovereign ruler of a neoliberal worldview.”⁵² With the bodily experience of dissolution intensified through synesthesia, we find ourselves in free fall and able to connect to things and subjects in ways other than merely purposeful. Without glorifying or trivializing drug use, Blas plays with the notion of a reconfiguration of a consciousness without function and co-produced by materials, sounds, colors, things

52 Lee, “Als der Echsenkönig dem Echsenhirn begegnete,” p. 339.

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and substances. I understand this as the materialistic side of camp—the postdigital camp—, only including an aesthetics involving the senses, the body: a dizzying, hallucinatory aesthetics.

ambivalent work*s

queer perspectives and art history

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