

When digital art channels ancient beliefs

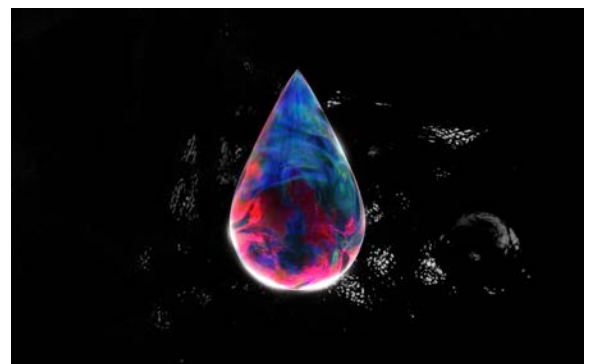
In three new exhibitions, artists are exploring the enchantment of advanced technology

By Tom Morton | May 14, 2026 | 4 min read

What does AI want from humanity? According to the digital artist Zach Blas, it is the tears that well from our all-too-organic eyes. The opening work in the forthcoming group exhibition 'New Rituals [for the End of the World]' at HEK (Haus der Elektronischen Künste), Basel, his *576 tears* (2022) takes the form of an altar to an AI god named Lacrimae. When we interact with its glowing screen, a webcam scans our faces, processing them through emotional recognition software, and overlaying them with an augmented reality animation of wet, ceaseless sobs. Next, we are prompted to offer up our pixelated tears to the algorithmic deity. In return for this libation, it grants us a boon, in the shape of a gnomic proverb. When I communed with Lacrimae through a web-based iteration of the work, it solemnly informed me that 'IN JOY, THERE IS MOBILE SORROW.' Was this profound spiritual wisdom, or word salad generated from the AI god's training data? Perhaps, disconcertingly, it was both.



Zach Blas, *576 Tears*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.



Zach Blas, *576 Tears*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

Curated by Anan Fries and Marlene Wegner, and featuring 14 international artists whose work explores the intersection of emerging technology and the sacral, 'New Rituals...' asks what fresh forms of ritualistic practice might help us navigate our current historical moment, in which old certainties lie dying, and cataclysm always feels like it's just around the corner. Discussing the exhibition with Fries and Wegner over email, they told me that its concept 'emerged from the observation that many contemporary artists are working with spirituality, adapting and renewing existing belief systems, or creating entirely new ones. Rituals offer a compelling portal to examine this trend, perhaps because they are more easily grasped than the cosmologies they stem from. To invent a new ritual is to tap into other, non-canonized knowledge systems that can offer comfort and orientation at a moment in time when canonized systems of knowledge and power are crumbling.'



S()fia Braga, Platform Workshippers, 2025. Courtesy of the artist.



Sian Fan, Lure, 2024. Commissioned by Art Exchange. Audio by Ben Dixon @ From the Deep Audio.

In the video work *Spit and Image 1* (2025), Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė revisit the séance, a practice that first emerged during the Industrial Revolution. Here, an androgynous blonde figure, suffering from mysterious injuries, consumes a meal inside a mirrored cube, while ritually doom-scrolling through AI-generated content on a smartphone. It is a highly unsettling, very 21st-century vision of making contact with an undead consciousness. Perhaps the protagonist of *Spit and Image* would benefit from the service offered by *Purgatorio* (2026), a gothic, black velvet sculpture by Fries (a participant in the show, as well as its co-curator), which promises to cleanse smartphones of what the artist terms the ‘technofascist energies’ that flow through their web browsers and social media applications.



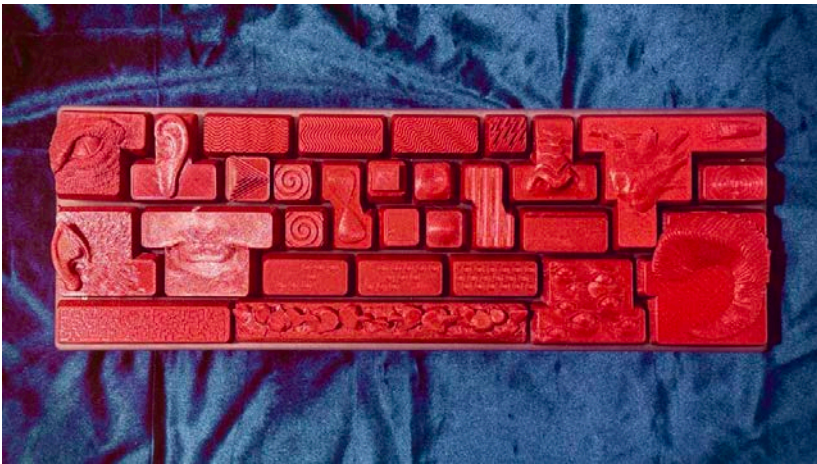
Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė, *Spit and Image 1*, 2025.
Courtesy of the artists.



Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė, *Spit and Image 1*, 2025. Courtesy of the artists.

Visitors to 'New Rituals...' will also have the opportunity to consult Auriea Harvey's *Idol.App* (2025), a digital oracle that produces prophecies at the pressing of its custom keyboard, which is embossed with arcane symbols and relief images of body parts, resembling the votive offerings placed at Greek Orthodox shrines. We might draw an analogy between using this Delphic art work to catch a glimpse of the future, and the way many individuals, corporations, and indeed governments increasingly throw themselves at the mercy of the knowledge and predictive powers of artificial intelligence – something that demands, at the very least, a leap of faith.

'New Rituals...' concludes with a new commission by Robin Meier Wiratunga, which as Fries and Wegner explained to me, stems 'from his research at CERN, Geneva, Switzerland, where he explored different theories about the end of the universe with theoretical physicists.' This immersive audio installation was 'conceived as a guided meditation, leading visitors to the most ultimate end imaginable. In a sense, the work expands the exhibition's scope by approaching apocalypse not only as a man-made condition, but also as something that could randomly happen on a planetary or cosmic scale.' For the curators, this is not the irredeemably bleak closing note it might at first seem. 'We understand "the Apocalypse" not as a singular event, but as a recurring phenomenon. We propose that the end of one world brings about the potential for new worlds.'

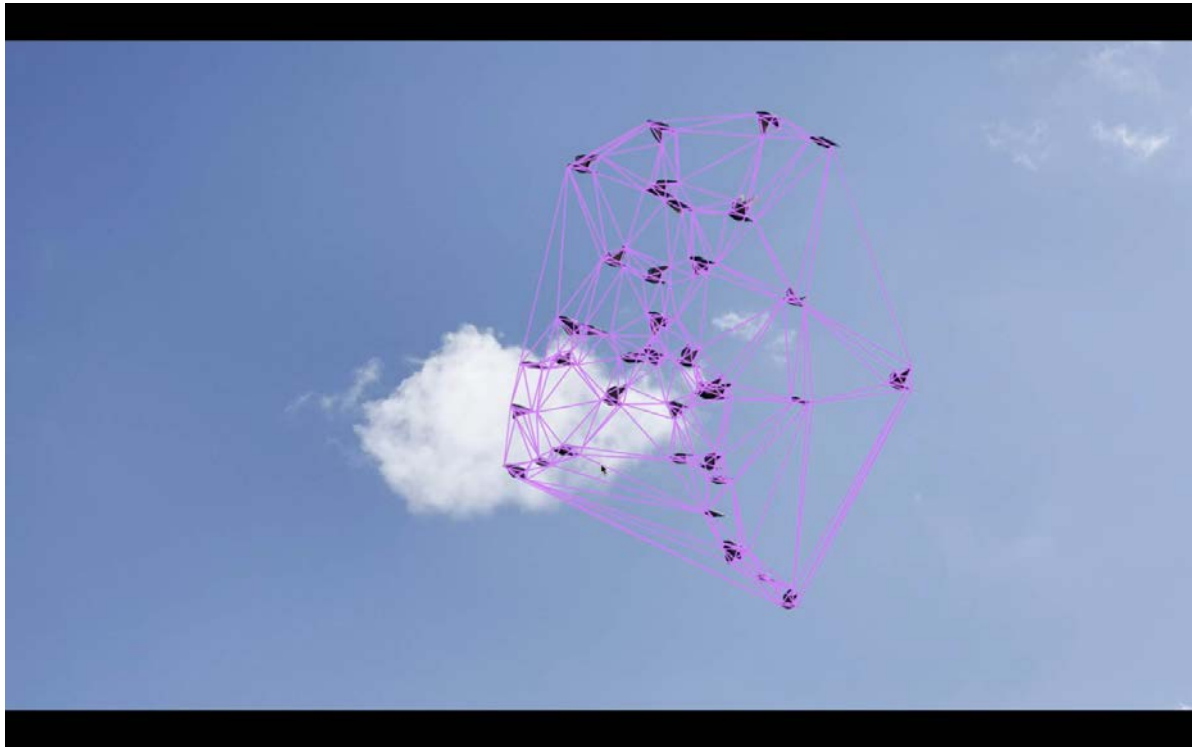


Auriea Harvey, *IDOL.APP*, Keyboard, 2025. Courtesy of the artist.



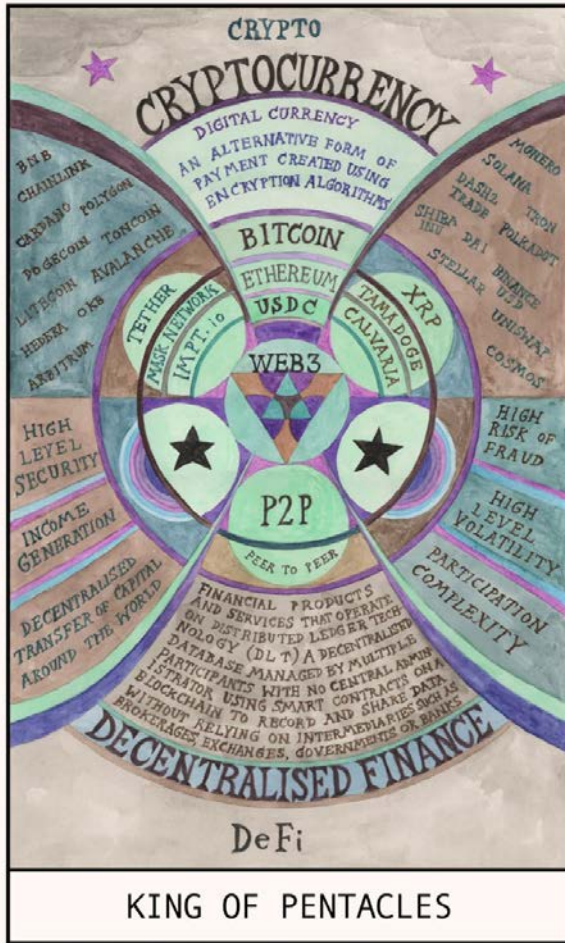


Teresa Fernández-Pello, *The Heart of the Hurt*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

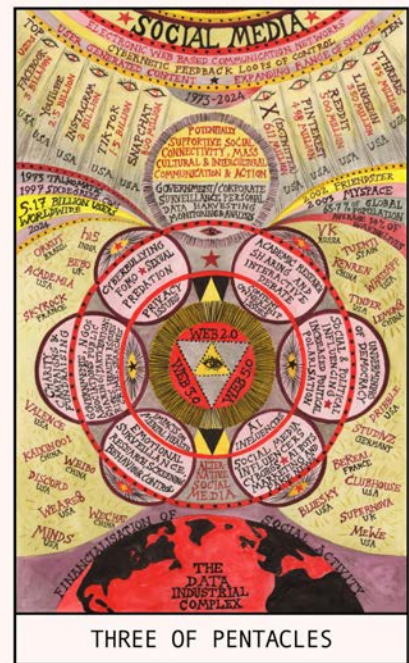


Robin Meier Wiratunga, *Apophenia – Meaningful Connections between Unrelated Things*, 2022. © Adapg.

Beyond Fries and Wegner's show, art that braids together cutting-edge tech and pre-Enlightenment forms of knowledge (among them religion, myth, folklore, and occultism) is gaining increasing institutional attention. Following her recent solo exhibition at Modern Art Oxford, the British artist ***Suzanne Treister***, an early adopter of digital and web-based practices, is currently participating in the major group show 'Pixel Pioneers' at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Taking the form of a tarot deck, a divination aid invented in the 15th century, her celebrated work *HEXEN 2.0* (2009-2011) explores the often-shadowy Postwar origins of our contemporary digital terrain, from cybernetics to the early Internet, government surveillance to military research. Complemented by alchemical diagrams, photo-text pieces, a video, and a website, Treister's tarot cards are, she has said, 'meant to be used as a tool, allowing thought to take unexpected turns and directions, and perhaps result in "positive" action in the world.'



Suzanne Treister, HEXEN 5.0, Tarot, King of Pentacles - Crypto, 2023–2024. Courtesy of the artist, Annelly Juda Fine Art, London, and P·P·O·W Gallery.



Suzanne Treister, HEXEN 5.0, Tarot Three of Pentacles – Social Media, 2023–2025. Courtesy of the artist, Annelly Juda Fine Art, London, and P·P·O·W Gallery.

At the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, the curator Sean Ketteringham is preparing to open his group exhibition 'Phantasmagoria: Folkloric Sculpture for the Digital Age'. Over email, he tells me that 'a substantial group of contemporary artists, mostly young and very online, are making work that brings to light how embedded and intertwined older, folkloric narrative structures and systems of belief are with our approach to contemporary digital culture. The aim of the show is to open up an understanding of how we carry the past with us into even the most brutal technological ruptures.'

An exhibition that defines 'sculpture' in the broadest possible sense, 'Phantasmagoria' features everything from a CGI shapeshifting wood spirit (Rustan Söderling's film *Virus Meadow*, 2022), to an investigation into the English yeoman William Kett's 16th century rebellion against land enclosure, and the echoes it finds in contemporary online political discourse (Steph Linn and Philip Speakman's project *After the Vale*, 2026). A key work in the show is Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's *PIRATING BLACKNESS / BLACKSEATRANSEA.COM* (2021), which as Ketteringham explains 'gives participants the chance to play a computer game that rewrites the history of the slave trade [...] Narrative itself is magic, here. Like an incantation or a line of code, it changes the way we think and the way the world works in an instant.'

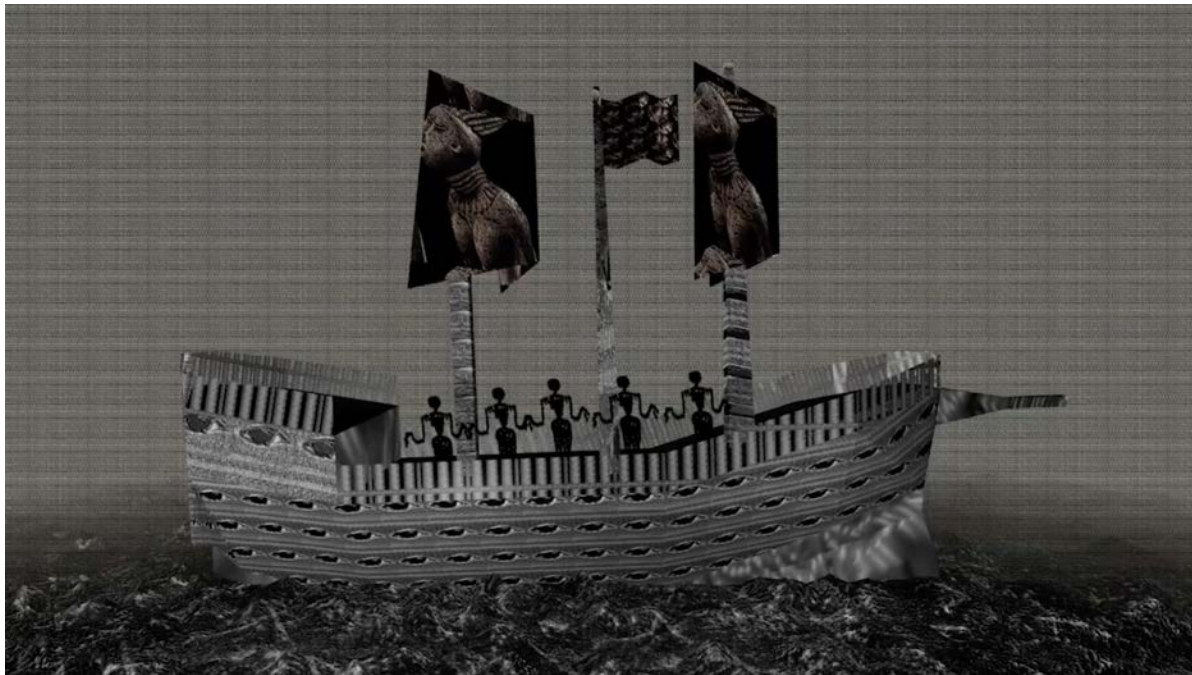


Rustan Söderling, *Virus Meadow* 2022. Courtesy of the artist.





Steph Linn, *Zero Days Since Last Incident*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.



Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, *PIRATING BLACKNESS/BLACKTRANSSEA.COM*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Public Gallery.

Joey Holder, meanwhile, is showing her video installation *The Woosphere* (2025), in which visitors encounter a group of AI chatbots – presenting as a philosopher, an alien, a golem, and a synthetic brain – each of whom has been algorithmically constructed to adhere, with absolute conviction, to a different and frequently absurd belief system. In an email exchange, the artist describes how the chatbots’ ‘narrative unfolds within the fragmented, polarized hellscape of the ongoing culture wars,’ where ‘conspiracy theories and pseudoscience circulate through digital networks with the same authority as verified information. My proposition is that “WooWoo Land” is where we live now online: an entropic territory of incompatible reality tunnels.



Joey Holder.



Joey Holder, The Woosphere, 2025.
Courtesy of the artist.

Holder's vision of our current information landscape is both terrifying and difficult to dispute. While the digital revolution sold itself as a rational project, it has given rise to widespread delusion, and to the emergence of new gods. In 1962, the year that an American astronaut first orbited the Earth, the science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke famously observed that 'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. For many artists mapping the digital realm – a locus of myth and lore, of enchantments and hauntings – his words still surely resonate.

Credits and captions

Tom Morton is a writer, curator, and regular contributor to Art Basel Stories, *ArtReview*, and *frieze*, based in Cambridge, UK. His forthcoming exhibition, 'You Must Change Your Life' will open at Grimm, New York, in June 2026.

'New Rituals [for the End of the World]', Haus der Elektronischen Künste (HEK), Basel, Switzerland, May 9 to Aug 9.

'Phantasmagoria: Folkloric Sculpture for the Digital Age', Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, UK, May 15 to Aug 30.

'Pixel Pioneers', Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Holland, to Sept 13.

Caption for header image: Joey Holder, *The Woosphere*, 2025. Courtesy of the artist.

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