

Sculpted in our Image, Forged in our Minds

Curatorial essay written by Tristan Sauer for the exhibition *Sculpted in our Image, Forged in our Minds*, presented digitally by InterAccess in 2021 as a part of their IA Currents Curatorial program.

The first stories of the golem stem from tales found in ancient Jewish folklore. The most famous of which tells the story of Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the Rabbi of Prague, who created a golem out of clay to protect the Jewish people from anti-semitic attacks. In the Talmud, the central text of Rabbinic Judaism, Adam was originally created from clay, similar to how Prometheus in Greek mythology sculpted the first humans. Both of these interpretations link humanity's origins to that of the golem, sculpted in the image of the divine from river beds of clay. Centuries later, we reach the modern-day golem—the robot. The term “robot” was first coined by Czech playwright Karel Čapek from his 1920 production of Rossum's *Universal Robots*. Robots were narratively described as “workers who lack nothing but a soul. They couldn't love. They couldn't have feelings. But they could do all the work that humans preferred not to do.”¹ Similar to the golem, the robot was humanoid, created in our image, and designed for our servitude. Humans have replaced the divine in these stories, becoming sculptors and imbuers of life.

Though the golem and the robot are similar, they differ by what gives them life. The golem is said to have been animated through “mystic powers,” while the robot is brought to life by electricity and code. Though separated by time, humanity is still interested in projecting our dreams and desires onto our autonomous creations, building them as reflections of ourselves, and in service of our needs. This holds true for modern-day robots, such as virtual assistants and AI. Speculative science fiction has long questioned if at some point our creations will match our own intelligence. What then would differentiate us from AI? This narrative begins to erode the distinction between our tangible experiences in the physical world and the intangible programs that run the digital.

Sculpted in Our Image, Forged in Our Minds explores the juxtaposition between the natural phenomenon of dreaming and the computational process of simulation. The exhibition draws parallels between the two and, subsequently, our physical and digital worlds. Artists Sarah Boo, Mads Brimble, Benjamin Chang, Cezar Mocan, and Andy Wallace create spaces, narratives, and beings that question the distinction between digital and physical reality. In doing so, they attempt to imagine new methods of digital co-existence, with the aim of envisioning more equitable, diverse, and safe futures online.

In the hybrid experimental video and performance *Zoom Princess* (2021), artist Sarah Boo portrays the work's titular character as “a lonely girl preparing for the deep winter ahead by learning how to Zoom.” Having previously worked in a corporate setting, Boo recognizes Zoom as a tool for “corporate lingo and capitalistic efficiency.”² However, since 2020, Zoom has become ubiquitous, transforming from a simple business conferencing software into a primary method of communication. In this work, the webcam becomes a wormhole through which *Zoom Princess* traverses the seemingly neutral cyberspace created between two users. When we allow data-rich corporations like Zoom further access to our lives, we decrease our own

autonomy in digital spaces. To be ubiquitous is often to be unquestioned. We have seen the pervasive, unchecked power of tech corporations like Facebook and Google spread misinformation,³ willingly censor news content,⁴ and in extremes contribute to instances of violence and genocide.⁵ Zoom is already a household name, and may forever be tied to how we communicate online. Boo questions how the widespread use of the software has granted corporate entities a gateway into our minds, forever shaping how we interact with each other.

Speciation (2020) by Mads Brimble starts with a genetic algorithm that defies the preset rules of natural selection. Working under a set of rules that is “void of norms which restrict the growth and futurity of queerness,”⁶ the algorithm generates an ever-diversifying body of abstract shapes and forms that are then used to construct Brimble’s digital organisms. The method of selection has been described by Brimble as a form of ‘unnatural’ selection, ignoring the framework of conventional genetic algorithms which attempt to closely replicate the processes of evolution. These algorithms generally exist in a vacuum that only includes heterosexual relationships, erasing the existence of queer bodies from their simulations. Brimble’s algorithm alternatively employs the genetic information of three parents per child organism, with the potential that the child will reject its parents’ DNA and randomly produce itself. This alternative form of selection creates infinite possibilities as to how the final organism may emerge, giving way to potentially magical beings. Brimble’s colourful transparent organisms are viewable in AR, allowing the audience to interact with these digital beings in their own physical space.

Antechamber (2021) by Benjamin Chang explores choice, infinity, and the distinctions between digital and physical space. Presented as an interactive labyrinth, users are asked to traverse the corridors of the maze in a traditional choose your own adventure style, and are given three navigational options at each stop of their playthrough. Digital clowns inhabit the many halls of *Antechamber*, referencing the long history of the trickster, a character found in the folklore of many cultures. *Antechamber*, through its exploration of spatiality, proclaims that digital space and physical spaces are one and the same. The hallways explored by players are extensions of our own reality, while the infinite nature of space transforms the screen from a barrier to a window as we “reflect upon the space we embody and the spaces that surround us.”⁷ *Antechamber* concludes by challenging the audience’s freedom of choice, as no matter where you go, all paths converge, arriving back at the beginning. The perpetuity of the experience asks the audience to question the cycles we observe in everything from time to capitalism.











The fictitious online photography company *Arcadia Inc.* (2021), created by Cezar Mocan, is in the business of creating ethical landscape photography. Landscape photography is commonly used as a tool within the corporate world. The mountains, valleys, and forests that adorn desktop backgrounds and product presentations lose their historical and ecological contexts as they become props for corporate gain. The erasure of these contexts is an unethical compromise for *Arcadia Inc.* Mocan combats this loss through the creation of completely context-free landscape photography disconnected from the real world. Their AI employees traverse the simulated land by following the wind, finding the highest point, and always heading west, capturing desktop-ready images of rolling hills, natural phenomena, and weather events. The resulting images have no pre-existing history and have the potential to take on completely new contexts. The *Arcadia* employees, searching the land and *Arcadia Inc.* blurs the lines of

what landscape photography can be by operating solely within the confines of digital space and time. These images allow audience members to imbue these virtual landscapes with their own potential narratives and symbology.

Pac Tracer (2021) by Andy Wallace is a generative visualisation of the classic video game *Pac-Man*. Lines trace the interior of the 3D space, representative of the four ghosts and player-controlled Pac-Man. Each ghost takes a unique path to track Pac-Man, their various routes visualised in different colours, while Pac-Man's journey is denoted by a yellow line. In this context, the struggle for survival found in the original game is no longer present. Viewers are not players; they are simply observers of the choices and behaviour of these digital beings. The work shows that the ghosts in *Pac-Man* are not programmed to chase the player; rather, they make their decisions based on proximity to the player and each other. Removed from the limitations of the game state, these spatial movements are allowed to be fully visualised as the ghosts traverse the space however they wish. Taken out of the predator vs. prey narrative of *Pac-Man*, the visualisation reads "less like a hunt, and more like a waltz of attraction."⁸ *Pac Tracer* explores each of the ghost's unique programmed personalities and desires in a way that is unreadable in their original context. Though a very early example of video game AI, the *Pac-Man* ghosts are incredible examples of humans imbuing desire onto digital beings. In the world of *Pac Tracer*, these beings are free from their roles and are given autonomy for the first time in their programming. The ghosts of *Pac Tracer* mimic Rabbi Loew's golem, being free of the role inscribed in their programming and simply existing in their digital world.

The story of Rabbi Loew's golem ends differently through various interpretations. In some, the golem's spell is never revoked; in others, the golem finds love and is rejected.⁹ Across all accounts, the golem embarks on a murderous rampage against its creators before it is eventually dismantled. Science fiction has been quick to echo this tale through speculative works such as *2001 Space Odyssey* (1968), *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), and *Prometheus* (2012). All are stories where man's autonomous inventions eventually turn on us, and we are left to handle the wrath of our own creations. The past is in constant conversation with the future, and so is our physical reality with the one we have created online. In recent years we have seen the pervasive advancement of facial recognition technology, hyper-realistic deep fakes, and the rise of ransomware attacks. Our digital world, now more than ever, has become entrenched in our physical world. The screen is no longer a barrier. We must learn to navigate this new hybrid world safely, equitably, and with diversity as a priority. Cathy O'Neil, the author of *Weapons of Math Destruction* (2016), stated that "algorithms are only going to become more ubiquitous in the coming years. We must demand that systems that hold algorithms accountable become ubiquitous too."¹⁰ We have a chance to learn from the mistakes of the physical world, and to create a digital world in opposition to discrimination, wealth inequality, and late-stage capitalism. Digital coexistence is possible and it starts here, with how we imagine how the future will look.

Sculpted in Our Image, Forged in Our Minds explores how we may navigate the erosion between digital and physical spaces. Through simulating digital worlds, generating digital beings, and challenging the deep roots of capitalism in digital technology, the artists in this exhibition offer their collective gazes forward and towards our digital future. We must make it a good one; as O'Neil proclaims, "we can't afford to do otherwise."¹¹

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 3. Rachel Schraer & Kayleen Devlin, "Climate change: Facebook fails to flag denial, study finds", *BBC News*, November 4, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/59147659>.

 4. Jeb Su, "Confirmed: Google Terminated Project Dragonfly, Its Censored Chinese Search Engine", *Forbes*, July 19, 2020,
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 7. Benjamin Chang, Artist Statement, 2021,
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 8. Andy Wallace, Conversation with artist, 2021.

 9. Dan Bilefsky, "Hard Times Give New Life to Prague's Golem", *New York Times*, May 10, 2009.

 10. Cathy O'Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction* (New York: Broadway Books, 2016), 231.

 11. *Ibid.*
