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PROJECTS

576 Tears by Zach Blas Launch Event Transcript

Lili-Maxx Hager 0:10
Hello everyone. I'm really pleased to welcome you to the launch event for *576 Tears* by artist, filmmaker and writer Zach Blas. I'm Lili-Maxx Hager, the Digital Commission's and Events Producer at UP Projects. I'm wearing a black blouse and my pronouns are she/her. *576 Tears* is our latest digital commission for *This is Public Space*, UP Projects' digital Commission's programme that works with artists to create highly participatory online work. Since launching in 2016, *This is Public Space* has used its title as a provocation to artists to consider the online realm as a site for public art and create space to investigate how we navigate between the online and physical worlds exploring the impact of digital media on our relationships between people and places. I was thrilled when Zach agreed to produce an online commission for *This is Public Space* and was excited to see what he would come up with especially as this work marks the very first time Zach has produced a commission for the home screen. Zach is an artist, filmmaker and writer whose practice spans moving image, computation, theory, performance and science fiction. Blas engages in the materiality of digital technologies while it's also drawing out philosophies and imaginaries looking at artificial intelligence, biometric recognition, predictive policing, airport security, the internet and biological welfare. This evening, we're excited to delve deeper into the themes behind and the making of *576 Tears*, a new digital experiment in emotional crying with an imagined artificial intelligence God. The project explores the religious beliefs and fantasies that influence popular conceptions of artificial intelligence and brings together research on Silicon Valley, spirituality and the extractive qualities of AI as technology and industry. *576 Tears* invites audiences to explore how and what an AI God might learn from the process of religious weeping and question, what tears might communicate, symbolise and express and teach in an era that fantastically imbues artificial intelligence with godly power. Alongside Zach, we are pleased to be joined by curator and cultural strategist, Julia Kaganskiy who is recognised as a leading voice in art and technology and helped launch several ground-breaking programmes in the field including The Creators Project and NEW INC. As an independent curator, Julia has worked with Superblue, Science Gallery in Dublin and London, the Barbican Centre, Mana Contemporary, Eyebeam Center for Art & Technology, Transfer Gallery and many many others. Tonight, I'm very much looking forward to hearing both of them unpack the themes behind *576 Tears* and how this project relates to Zach's wider practice. Tonight's event will be kicked off by a presentation by Zach followed by an in conversation between him and Julia. But before I hand over a little bit of technical information about The Hall to ensure you get the best experience possible from this event. If you experience any

technical issues, please use the chat function at the bottom of your screen to message with our dedicated tech support. On the right-hand side of your screen, you'll see a Slido sidebar where you can post questions using the Q&A function for our speakers. Feel free to write your name if you wish that your question is attributed to you as a Slido uses anonymous as its default. Please note that our moderator and speakers will only be picking up questions from the Slido Q&A and not from the chat function. So please do post your questions in the Q&A to ensure they get answered. We have British Sign Language Interpretation available for this event. If you need a BSL interpreter, please message us in the chat. And our tech assistant will give you a dedicated access link. If you would like to access closed captions, please select the CC button at the bottom of your conferencing screen to read along. And just one note that we will also be recording the event today. I do hope you enjoy the event. And once again, please contact us via the chat function below if you experience any technical problems. I'm now going to hand over to Julia, who will kick off the event. Julia, over to you.

Julia Kaganskiy 3:52
Thanks, Lili. I'm really excited to be here with you all today and to be in conversation with Zach about this exciting new work. Seems like some folks are having problems with the audio. I hope that that gets sorted soon. I know our crack tech support is on it and apologies for any inconvenience. But to get into the programme, Zach is going to take us through some previous projects of his that have sort of led up to *576 Tears*. So, we can introduce some of the key themes and ideas that he's been really exploring for quite a long time and you'll get to see that with that work. And you know, Zach and I, I think are united in some ways in our practice. I think we're both interested in exploring these technocratic systems and their mythologies and the ideologies and especially with the so-called artificial intelligence, right, which is a project to create intelligent machines by mimicking human cognition through computational processes that's been underway since the 1950s. But has arguably been part of the human imaginary for much longer, with figures like automatons appearing all the way back in ancient Greek mythology, and you know Frankenstein, and other kind of figures in fiction and popular culture. And Zach and I've had the chance to work together on a couple of shows over the years, including the installation *Sanctum*, which we'll be hearing a little bit more about later on. And, you know, I think we also share this interest in the materiality and the imaginaries of these digital technologies, and how they do and don't live up to their purported hype, and what their impact is on bodies, on communities, on the behaviours and social norms that are kind of dictated through computational governmentality. So yeah, we're excited to introduce you to *576 Tears*. And we're going to dig into some of the projects that have made up Zach's kind of ongoing investigation into AI over the last decade really. So Zach, I know you've prepared a wonderful presentation for us today. Maybe you can share it? [*laughter*]

Zach Blas 6:30
Yeah, of course. Hi, everyone. Let me go ahead and get this up. Make sure I'm sharing sound. Okay, great. There we go. So yeah, thanks, everyone, for coming. It's a pleasure to share this new work with you. And I haven't made the new work in about two years, because I had some major life events derailed me for quite some time. I'm sure plenty of people did on during what we've been living through. But yeah, I'm really happy to finally be back at it and to share this with you. Before I start, I just want to thank Lili, who was my producer on this project and we've been working together on this for months and it's been, it's been, it's been challenging. There's been many learning curves. It's the first work I've ever made that's, I guess, purely digital. And so yeah, that was exciting. And I'd also like to thank Moira and the entire team at UP Projects for commissioning this work, I also want to shout out just quickly to my entire production team, I won't go into all the names. But with complex projects like this, there's always a group of people behind the project. And it's a group of people I've been working with for years on all my projects. And I'm deeply grateful to all of them. If you want to see a list of names, I think that will come at the end of the presentation. Or you can also go to my website and look at the project page or UP Projects' project page as well. So yeah, I'm just going to dive right in. And this the work I've made, focuses on a few different things. It's about emotion recognition. It's about kind of fantasies, beliefs that might undergird the development of emotion recognition, and it kind of coupled with that it's looking at emotional crying and tears, artificial intelligence, what might artificial intelligence seemingly have to do with religion, it's looking at fantasies of artificial intelligence guides, I'm usually like most important of my work is rather baroque, and there's a lot going on in many layers. But yeah, I'm going well, I'll come back to that and talk through the project in more detail. This is just a kind of image when you get into the work, what you can, what you'll be encountered with, but I'll unpack that more specifically, after we talk through some of these older works. So, the first work I wanted to talk to you about tonight is called *Face Cages*, which I really started researching around 2010-11, but didn't really get into making it until 2014. And this work was a collaboration with a group of other queer artists that that you see here. And what we did, we were interested in trying to make a work that focused on the idea of algorithmic capture, which is a term that's a little bit different than surveillance. And at the time, I was really interested in capture in relationship to biometrics and facial recognition, which of course have just become so much more integrated into daily life in forms of governance, now that it was even back when I was making this work in 2014. Back in this period of time, this was before biometrics and facial recognition have even been really integrated with artificial intelligence. But with this one...

Julia Kaganskiy 10:12
...Sorry to interject, can you define biometrics? What is it?

Zach Blas 10:18
Sure, for those of you that aren't familiar with biometrics, these are digital technologies that basically attempt to calculate different types of kind of identity markers of a person, this could be their gender, this could be race. And, and you know, other factors, just essentially trying to figure out who you are. And the way that it works is usually primarily some type of calculation of the surface of your body. So, this could be a digital technology that scans the surface of your face in order to, you know, go through a database and see if your identity matches. It could be your fingerprints, it could be irises, and your eyes. And, you know, we of course, we're living with more sophisticated forms of biometrics now, that can also detect certain types of gestures, walking, for instance, and like the motion recognition, the ways in which you're moving your face to that, you know, create certain types of emotional expressions. But with this look, I was really interested in thinking about this way in which biometrics attempts to calculate identity, and how this is quite reductive, basically, by attempting to develop a kind of universal algorithmic standard of calculating identity. What you discover and what we've seen more and more, as these technologies have gained more attention in the public press is that a wide range of minority carrying subjects often fall out of recognition from these issues, or are mis recognised? And so, this was this kind of idea of capture, thinking about how does a biometric technology capture identity? Capture is a technical term, right? So, the way that it's capturing is, it's using an algorithm that is attempting to standardise a reading of identity. And the way that this happened at the time that I was really taken by was looking at these different types of biometric grids that go over faces that basically attempt to calculate different types of, you know, facial structure or geometry. So, you have all these different plotting points and lines moving across faces in an attempt to calculate a face and I decided to work with this aesthetic, because I was really interested in it. But I wanted to take these facial diagrams, which we often experience in kind of fun, colourful ways on computers. And there's a kind of lightness to this when you see this on, on a computer. And I wanted to give this some type of weight; kind of political weight, material weight, historical weight. So, I worked with these other artists, and we took readings of our faces. And basically, we took that reading and turned it into a 3D model, keeping the measurements the same. And then these biometric readings of our faces we've been fabricated in metal. And, you know, what we were interested in here is when we put these objects back on our faces, they didn't fit very well. So, it was about this performance and incongruently of the kind of reductive reading of a biometric; measurement of a face versus the kind of fleshy embodiment of a human subject.

Julia Kaganskiy 13:40
And I think one of the things that this work tries to emphasise is the way that these forms of standardisation of reductive abstraction, have a kind of dehumanising quality about them, where in trying to create these norms that people must fit into.

It potentially erases individuality, but on the other hand, also creates ways like ratios of entire communities that are seen as other.

Zach Blas 14:21
Yeah, I mean, definitely. And I think there's just this whole question of, you know, I think one thing this work was trying to do is shift the conversation of surveillance at the time where when you use this word surveillance, you start thinking about cameras watching you; Big Brother. But when you start talking about algorithmic capture, and you start asking questions about how is a biometric facial recognition technology, failing to recognise one face and not another? That's a different type of question where you're thinking about how does the technology know how to identify some people why can identify some people better than others? What are the real world political, social consequences of, you know, that technology kind of being automated? And I think this was the questions really driving the heart of *Face Cages*, which I definitely kind of see as like a queer and feminist. A question and maybe it's worth saying that the title, I took inspiration from the feminist communication scholar named Shoshana Magnet who wrote a book a number of years ago called *When Biometrics Fail*. And she once called biometrics a cage of information. And I remember that just really struck me at the time, because this idea of a cage of information, you know, on the one hand, it makes the clear connection, for biometrics in relationship with the prison industrial complex and just policing in general. But also this idea of freezing materiality, that we're all kind of living, dynamic embodied subjects. And, you know, our faces actually do change over time and the biometric reading is a reductive reading and a static one.

Julia Kaganskiy 16:03
Yeah, and has become a sort of marker of ageing, unfortunately, when your phone no longer recognises your face. [*laughter*] But anyway, let's move on to the next project...

Zach Blas 16:16
Yeah, sure.

Julia Kaganskiy 16:18
Sanctum - where these face cages will kind of reappear in a different reimagined form.

Zach Blas 16:25
So *Sanctum* was a work I actually made with Julia; Julia commissioned this work for me in 2018, as part of this festival called Tentacular, which took place in Madrid at this venue called Matadero. And with *Sanctum*, I wanted to make a work that was looking at, you know, kind of another element of security and capture today, which was airport security, but maybe more specifically, really is kind of zoning in

on the airport body scanner. And I became really fascinated with this particular machine, the ProVision2, which is kind of standard body scanner that you'll find in most airports in western countries these days. And this machine works, you step inside, you know, you raise your arms, I'm sure many of us have done it. And there is a form of radiation that you're exposed to, that is able to calculate an image of your body on one image of your body that is then interpreted through an interface, this interface. And I became really, really taken with this interface. And, you know, as you can see, it's, surprisingly, maybe not surprisingly, extremely simple, because when you think about a security agent, working this interface, you've got two buttons, you have blue and pink, which we can infer as two options for gender: male and female. I think it's also important to note that there's no buttons for race or ethnicity, although we know so much racial profiling happens at airports. But these figures that you see, these kind of strange looking, but yet generic figures are actually called generic mannequins by the corporation that produces this machine. So the kind of official corporate term for these figures is "generic mannequin". And they just started to think of the generic mannequin as a really disturbing kind of universal symbol for what it means to be human in times of global security, surveillance and capture. And I wanted to make a work, that the kind of unpacked the world that this figure lives within that really kind of intensifies or makes felt more kind of complications of desire around surveillance and security. And I can get into that more. But um, basically, I started looking at airport security, and thinking about the dynamics that were happening, the different kinds of plays of power of submission, of exposure. And more and more airport security started to look like that, whether unknowingly or not that certain dynamics of BDSM kind of sexual subcultures had been appropriated within the structure of power. So, I started researching different types of BDSM settings to kind of think more about these relationships. And at the same time, I was also really interested in thinking about reimagining the genre of body or cinema with this project. So maybe some of you have heard of body horror cinema was quite popular in the 80s still popular today. And it's usually a type of horror film that is quite gory and graphic where you have, you know, very kind of fleshy things that are like getting ripped open or exploding, it's a very embodied, visceral, kind of gory horror. And I interested in thinking about that from a really different perspective and thinking about what is a digital body for where you have these figures that don't look like kind of monsters or strange, fleshy things like this, but rather, you have the generic mannequin, this incredibly kind of non-fleshy thing. Do you want to jump in and say anything at this point Julia? Or should I just show the doc?

Julia Kaganskiy 20:38
Um, I mean, I guess let's go into the video. But one thing, you know, you're - there's two things that I wanted to ask. One is, I know that this idea of the political unconscious was really important to the way that you were thinking about this

work, in terms of what it is that you're trying to capture and speak to. So, I was going to prompt you to talk about that a little bit, or just to really quickly define it?

Zach Blas 21:07
Yeah, sure. I mean, I think with this, this work, you know, and a lot of the newer work I've been making, including *576 Tears*, a lot of this work is interested in the belief systems and fantasies that are motivating and kind of influencing these systems of power, even if they seem quite unlikely. So here with airport security, I was interested in teasing out a dynamic of desire, desire, yeah, and power that strangely looks like BDSM, even though of course, it's not, it's not like a one-to-one conflation and making a work that explores that. So, you could call that the political unconscious of something, which is a concept that was developed by the theorist Fredric Jameson, if any of you are interested in this idea, there's, there's a, there's an entire book on it, but just thinking about, there's some kind of political way of looking at a system that might not be fully present. And the work is about trying to kind of pull that out. And particularly with this, with this work, and the other works, I'm going to show on it's it's very much about fantasies, beliefs, and desires that are kind of undergirding and influencing these, these systems. So, oh, yeah, please do go ahead Julia.

Julia Kaganskiy 22:27
Oh, I was going to say the other thing that I think, you know, feels important to mention with this work is that even though it's sort of using the airport and airport security as the sort of site of exploration of these power dynamics, of submission, exposure, desire for domination of some kind, it seems to me that it's also commenting on things that play out in other aspects of our life, right? So, I know social media and the way that we expose ourselves continuously to the algorithm, out of a desire for some sort of validation and confirmation, even though we know that it's kind of exploiting us in the process is something else that we talked a lot about in the making of this work.

Zach Blas 23:19
Yeah, that's a good point. I mean, I've been thinking for quite some time about, yeah, this this tension around exposure, with digital systems about, you know, after the Snowden revelations, we have this broader public consciousness around the workings of surveillance on digital platforms. And yet, you know, we continue to expose ourselves to those systems. So thinking about this kind of, you know, knowing that something might be attempting to dominate us, you know, in, you know, in terms of power, but yet, we still kind of submit to it and take pleasure submitting to it, you know, that's a kind of disturbing, dynamic, but I also think it's a dynamic that that something like clearness, to be very attuned to and when I was making this work, I was always reminded of a drag king performance I saw when I was living in the San Francisco Bay area of an airport security agent and a

passenger just kind of queerness being attuned to these like really disturbing, complex, compromised, contradictory forms, like where kind of desire can be playing out in relationship to power. And the further I was thinking about this relationship of exposure I even found an entire book on this there's a book called *Exposed* by the political philosopher David Harcourt, who are sorry, Bernard hardcourt, who basically kind of outlines this whole theory of the expository society, which is really this idea of kind of getting out about this kind of this desire and kind of wilful exposure to these systems. So, I was really interested in looking at that with *Sanctum* and then I - It also kind of attempted to pull in other elements of previous work I had made around biometrics. So, you'll see in here that there's this kind of control figure that has a black mask with no face behind it kind of thinking about looking but like not kind of looking with our eyes, as we know at some kind of other algorithmic computational looking. And this mask also ends up kind of exploding into this biometric diagram kind of just thinking about that kind of architecture; a face kind of exploding into like an environment for something bigger. And the installation is immersive and the...

Julia Kaganskiy 25:38
Do you want to play the video?

Zach Blas 25:40
Yes. Okay, so the last thing I'll say, just so you understand what's happening, the generic mannequin is kind of the protagonist of the space, and it's being subjected to different types of algorithmic systems that look like they're somewhere between sex and torture. And the point is that it's indistinguishable. Okay, I'll just play a bit of this.

Video 26:00
[atmospheric music and sounds]

Julia Kaganskiy 26:59
So this is a kind of sex dungeon that we're in where these generic mannequins are being tortured, or it's a question right? Are they being tortured or are they getting some sort of pleasure out of this?

Zach Blas 27:14
Yeah.

Video 27:16
[atmospheric music and sounds]

Julia Kaganskiy 27:56
Shall we move on?

Zach Blas 27:58
Yeah, I was going to say I think that's enough of *Sanctum*. I just personally like that video better. So, this is the last work we'll talk about. And this is a work called *Icosahedron*, which was an interactive artificial intelligence work I need for the Walker Art Centre in the US in 2019. And it's basically meant to look like this kind of corporate CEO desk that has a crystal ball sitting on top of it with an elf inside. And you can sit down and talk to this elf, and you can ask questions about the future. I'll just show you a tiny little clip of what the interaction with that looks like.

Video (speaker) 28:48
What is the future of Silicon Valley? Do you have any thoughts on Silicon Valley or California?

Video (machine) 29:01
GSS may become the most domestic coffee machine.

Video (speaker) 29:06
What is the future of healthcare?

Video (machine) 29:15
If Take-Two Interactive will persevere then no example might colloquially boil to retrofit Reuters, like health care companies.

Video (speaker) 29:24
What is the future of feminism?

Video (machine) 29:34
Satellite owners might become the most honest, distant future to behaviourally oscillate, and yet we may see the most reusable universe within the next millennium.

Zach Blas 29:44
So, I think the answer is nonsense, which is, you know, kind of a part of the point. But the work was inspired. I wanted to make a work that dealt with this company Palantir Technologies, maybe some of you have heard of this California tech company that is co-founded by Peter Thiel and kind of more notorious figure in Silicon Valley, kind of known right-wing figure. And Palantir has done a lot of things, as you can see here. They've been accused of we've kind of got, you know, supporting racist policing, because they have, they were responsible for rolling predictive policing out across the state of California. They've also worked with ICE, which is immigration enforcement in the US. So maybe we could talk about Palantir for ages, but um, you know, their nefarious to say the least. And what really interested me was more. Well, I mean, definitely interested in everything that

company is doing, but equally, how they have conceptualised themselves. So, the Palantir happens to refer to the crystal ball that wizards use in Lord of the Rings, because I'm very interested in you know, what does it mean for a tech company with a particular socio-political outlook is Palantir, to be doing certain types of predictive analytics work into the kind of imagine and conceptualise themselves as wizards looking into crystal balls in order to see the future. And at the time, when I was doing this research, I came up with this concept called metric mysticism, which was trying to think about a broad trend in the Silicon Valley companies, not just Palantir, where companies appropriate different types of magic mysticism, religion and fantasy, and use this to conceptualise how they're working with big data, kind of as in a way to obscure the kind of more kind of practical kind of, I don't know, kind of straightforward, direct ways in which these technologies are working, and also importantly, their limitations. And rather, kind of give these like incredibly sweeping, powerful, kind of fantastical frameworks where they're, you know, wizard, sort of Lords or Gods and able to see into the future and control and manipulate it.

Julia Kaganskiy 32:02
Yeah, I think that this aspect of magic, you know, has always been kind of associated with technology. What's the quote, you know, the, "the sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic". But especially as it concerns artificial intelligence, because it has this almost kind of oracle-like quality to it. It, it really leans into these mythologies and these imaginaries. And I'm curious about what you're hoping to get at when you use, when you lean into this? Is it, do you feel like you're drawing attention to this in order to critique it? Or do you think that there's a risk of sort of furthering that this mythology that's already kind of widespread?

Zach Blas 33:03
Yeah, good question. I mean, I could be I mean, that's certainly not the intention

Julia Kaganskiy 33:09
I mean, it's always a challenge.

Zach Blas 33:12
Yeah. I mean, I think he would say, you know, there's different ways of doing criticism. And I think, you know, one way to do criticism is maybe a more straightforward way could be to, you know, maybe more, you know, kind of technically analyse, like, the tools that Palantir is using and talk about their limitations, it could be to, really focus in on the social and political consequences of these technologies, which a lot of mainstream journalism has been, you know, really doing for quite some time now. And I think, you know, my interest, I think it's more within these kind of, yeah, focusing in on these stories, and fantasies and

beliefs. And, yeah, kind of pulling them out, extending them; connecting that connecting them to kind of longer histories. And then, of course, you know, would like to think that there is, you know, something critical in this work, you know, maybe it's just, you know, not criticism, as you're usually familiar with it. But yeah, I think just right now, the work, yeah, the work that I want to make is just about reflecting on these power structures, and just attending to the beliefs and fantasies, and I think, you know, usually the way maybe this is helpful, usually the way that I think those are often framed in some critical capacity is often by their titling or the discursive kind of framing that I give them, you know, the sense that artworks don't exist in a void you know, I always say if we read about a movie that we go see, then like, you know, why shouldn't we read a paragraph about an artwork to get a little bit more context into what we're looking at?

Julia Kaganskiy 35:06
And, you know, I was going to say there's something about both in *Sanctum* and perhaps in this work, which, for me, at least seems to focus on the way that we as the users, or as the viewers in this case, are kind of maybe not complicit, but we're participants, right? We are actively part of either the expository society, or in this case of projecting on to these kind of often broken random responses from AI systems, maybe a lot more meaning or a lot more sophistication and depth than is potentially there, right? Like we are willing participants in the magic trick in the sleight of hand.

Zach Blas 36:04
Yeah, I also think, you know, it's, I think, getting, you know, focusing in on these belief systems fantasies, it's another way to, to gain insight into how power is working, you know, I think you need to have a sophisticated, you know, comprehensive understanding of power in order to figure out like, how to how to what to do with it, you know, whether you want to critique it, or resist it, etc. So, you know, that's just kind of the mode that I feel like the work is very much in right now. And maybe on that note, I should just jump in to *576 Tears*. And I'll just kind of practically explain the work first. So, it's a website and when you enter the website, you're confronted with this video, that is a machine learning generated video that was created by training 576 computer graphic images of crying eyes within a neural network. And so, what you end up getting is, you know, I kind of think of this as like an eternal flame of tears. It's kind of like ever just mutating eye, that's forever crying. And then of course, you're kind of confronted with this background of these liquidity or kind of liquidity grid of these abstract images. And then you have these two spinning teardrops, and if you click on the one on the left on your given access to a story, which is kind of a creation myth of a God - an artificial intelligence God, which is kind of the character of this website, and I think the entire website like it is the is this God, and you portal inside this teardrop, and then you get access to the story. And this story was crafted by training a variety of

writings on neural networks. So different types of religious texts and a wide range of material at that crying and emotions, whether that was philosophical, technical, fiction, religion, just kind of really wide range of things. And that introduces you to the character of the God and kind of sets up this religion that the God is proffering that has to do with emotions and gaining access to emotional intelligence through the collection of teardrops. And then if you click on the other tear, since there's only two navigation icons on the website, if you click on the teardrop on the right hand side, you enter into an emotion recognition interface where you're prompted by this AI God and it asks you to confess an emotion and cry to it and if you click and agree to do this, an emotion will be detected and we're using kind of standard emotion recognition because I'm interested in the basically six emotions that corporate emotion recognition can pretty much recognise right now. And anger is one of them. So apparently, I was anger earlier today when I took a screen grab and then basically after your emotions detected, it will map different sets of tears onto your face, and it will give you the option to offer the God these tears and if you again agree to do that by clicking what will happen is you'll get kind of still image of your tears so kind of, kind of zoomed in image of the type of tears that you were crying and you get an AI generated six word text over top of this. And again, this text is generated from a neural network that is trained on like kind of same amounts of, amount of writing, but the story was generated from. And then on, if you click out of this, your teardrop is and that's on the site as one of these squares. So essentially, the more you know, as the site is engaged with, and people offer their tears, they build up on this site. And you can kind of click on any of these and look on any of the kind of tears that were offered and the expressions that regenerated to go along with it. So that's just the kind of practical walkthrough of the project. And yeah, I'll let Julia kind of guide how we want to unpack it.

Julia Kaganskiy 40:47
I mean, want to I want to hear more about how you started thinking about this work. And you know, what ideas and experiences informed this project? I mean, for me, when I first sort of saw this, I was struck by a couple of things, one, you know, it felt very relevant, very topical. I mean, I think, over the last two years, there has been so much personal and collective grief that we've all experienced, in different ways. And at the same time, we haven't really had the usual spaces for collective grieving that we might have been used to, right? So, people were holding funerals on Zoom, for instance, right? And even the way that this website is kind of laid out with this kind of square grid, to me feels like evocative of this kind of [*laughter*] square grid that is like our new reality space, where we are able to process these kinds of traumas and emotions. So that was my kind of initial, sort of visceral reaction to the piece. But I was really curious about, like, what you were thinking about when you started making this?

Zach Blas 42:13
Yeah, I mean, I knew a lot of things and I really, this work kind of happened by accident. But it's also because yeah, I mean, myself, like many others, you know, tears and crying were very much a part of my reality. And so, it started to leak into ongoing research I was already doing, and I was developing a work that was looking at religion, and artificial intelligence. And I was really taken by this church that had been created in California, maybe in 2017, by an ex-Google employee, and the church was called The Way of the Future and it was based upon a coming AI God. And one of the principles of this religion was that the AI God would find a way to become intelligent beyond biology. So, kind of one of the key tenants of the church was intelligence that transcends biology. And I think you could look at this AI church in Silicon Valley and think this is like a wacky, kind of one off. But you know, think when I look at that church, I see it as part of a kind of long history in California of fringe religions, cult activity, new age spirituality that has always been deeply embedded with Silicon Valley and the tech industry and how technologies are often kind of imagined, conceptualised, you know, it's certainly kind of part of the ecology and environment there. So, it just really jumped out at me and then stayed with me just because it became like, you know, one of these things that kind of pops up the catches your attention, but actually, underneath it is like a much deeper vaster history to think about. And so, some things I was thinking about with kind of religious fantasies of artificial intelligence had to do around judgement on immortality. But, you know, as I was kind of moving around my research between religion and artificial intelligence, I kept bumping into material on crying and tears. Whether that would be when I was reading about AI emotion recognition and kind of newer studies and technology, versions of emotion recognition coming out that can detect like babies crying, for instance, but then in religion, reading about different religions, I would always come up against this idea of crying as a pious and devout activity that was a form of a kind of a language, crying as a language that communicate with God as a kind of perfect language of communicating with God. And, you know, because I was already thinking about this relationship of religion and AI, these are just the crying just started coming closer and closer together. And I think my approach to this was that I wanted to try and tell or create a kind of speculative story, I guess this work this project is almost kind of like an interactive speculative story that kind of imagines a kind of fantastical teleological endpoint to, you know, emotion recognition, which is kind of a God and figuring out actually how to extract emotion through teardrops. And of course, you know, what really interested me with tears, especially with all of the previous work around biometrics was that tears, emotional crying, which is a particular type of crying, there are different types, there are three different types of crying and emotional tear, emotional crying is one of them, is this idea that, you know, what you're feeling in the depths, like inside yourself, becomes externalised. And again, thinking how I talked about earlier, with biometrics needing that kind of externalisation something on the surface in order to make a reading, it just seemed this really

interesting militia of thinking about tears as a way of kind of perfect way of communicating with God. And then thinking about tears already kind of entering technically into the terrain of emotion recognition. So, I think this work is just like a lot of the works, it's about bringing together some things that might not seem like they actually relate. But there's a lot of historical entanglement. And I think the kind of the fantasy drive behind a lot of artificial intelligence, which really is ultimately toward things like radical bodily transcendence, figuring out how to extend life, achieving a way to automate judgement against masses of people, you know, these are incredibly religious principles. So, the work is just um, I think, exploring that through kind of speculative lens. And the other thing I can say about crying was I thought about, I wanted to create a work where there was a God - a God character that was practically experimenting with understanding, crying, and what that could mean, and for the gods to be able to do that it would require, you know, visual input, sonic input, and textual input. So, it kind of technically, this, God figure is kind of studying those different types of informatic patterns to try and figure out what crying could be. So, it's like, the work doesn't resolve that. But then there is this other maybe broader interest in crying and grief, or not even just grief, just thinking about what is the broader socio-political relationship of tears and emotions with the industry of AI? So, on the one hand, I started to think about, you know, all these different forms of judgement, you know, this phrase of kind of automating different forms of inequality and the kind of pain or grief torment, that can cause whether that's, you know, losing your job, from, you know, kind of a system, you know, getting automated, whether that's connected to predictive policing. And then, on the other hand, thinking about, you know, kind of, like tears of joy, I guess, also, you know, having these six emotions to work with, I haven't really started kind of activating my thinking along them. So, in emotion recognition, you have anger, disgust, sadness, surprise, joy. I always forget one!

Julia Kaganskiy 49:04
Did you say fear? I don't think you said fear.

Zach Blas 49:06
Yeah, fear. Thank you, yes. There's kind of started thinking about crawling along all those axes. And with the research that I've done around kind of different Silicon Valley elites, you know, kind of thinking, you know, I start to imagine these tears of joy as they, as the singularity, this event where artificial intelligence surpasses humanity and the fantasy of downloading consciousness into different types of machines. I feel like anyway, I can see that as like a kind of tears of joy moment. But yeah, I think there's a lot of different axis/axes, that kind of crying and tears are working on through this work, and it's just trying to hold them together, I guess, in a technical and kind of poetic way.

Julia Kaganskiy 49:52
I mean, I think what's interesting too, is like, you know, emotions are classically things that machines are incapable of like you think of, you know, Spock on Star Trek, he's like, always just fascinated by human emotions and something that we can't understand it's incompatible, right. And with something like emotional intelligence with affective computing, which this work is dealing with, it attempts to create a standardised way of understanding human emotion, across, across culture to which is also, I think, a very tall order. And, you know, even with something like a single form of emotional expression, like crying, right? Where this kind of internal state becomes outwardly manifest, it's still an unreliable link to any one particular emotion, right? So, you can cry, as you were saying, out of, let's say, fear, laughter, I don't know, anger, surprise, like it can be linked to so many different emotional states. I guess what I'm getting at is like, you know, with the extraction of tears by this fictional AI God, it kind of speaks to me at least to this form of training that we all kind of participate in as we interact with these technological systems, and emotion and our kind of psyches, as being in many cases described as like, if not the next frontier, like the frontier or the technological frontier that we're kind of currently in right now. So, you know, the Facebook algorithm is no longer trying to predict your shopping choices, it's actually trying to predict your emotional state. And that's what is being the technical problem that's being solved right now. And that we're helping to solve by participating in these systems. So, I think this project, go ahead, sorry...

Zach Blas 52:08
No, no, no, that's a great point. I really liked that. Because, yeah, that's an element of this, for sure is about training particular kind of participating in that training and reframing the training, you know, through a certain kind of religious experience.

Julia Kaganskiy 52:26
And, you know, one thing that I think is really fantastic about your work is the way that you kind of weave together these really elaborate worlds. With these kinds of origin myths, like you have here, you also had one for *Sanctum*. They are very kind of robust counter narratives, or stories, story worlds, that are often using, you know, real events, real developments, and commenting on them, but in a way that, you know, takes you into this fantastical space. And so, I'm curious about, like, what appeals to about this as an artistic strategy, because it's one that I think unites a lot of your practice.

Zach Blas 53:24
Yeah, I mean, I think it's, it's changed over the years a lot. And I think, you know, as an artist I was trained more with, when I when I was studying art, I was trained more under kind of 90s tactical media artists. And I think, if any of you are familiar with 90s tactical media, that was art that was very much about developing art that

kind of exists somewhere between, let's say, a conceptual object in a political tool, definitely something that can be used very clearly and overtly in some kind of some kind of activist gesture, I would say, and no, you could certainly see that with earlier work that I've made. I didn't share the *Facial Weaponization Suite*, but this is a project that accompanies *Face Cages* about developing mouths to evade biometric facial recognition detection. And I think after that work, I It's a part of kind of lost interest in thinking that I could actually come up with solutions to these problems. And wanting to make work that is a little bit more ambiguous and I don't necessarily mean politically ambiguous, but I mean, ambiguous about what is happening and what can be done. And I think that's because after I have made work this earlier work in this vein of a tactical media artist, but I felt very stuck for a period of time, that kind of making in that vein wasn't productive, because I, you know, I think it just felt impossible for me to only make work that proposed a kind of some kind of technical fix. And I don't even know if the technical fix is always actually what right is needed. Like it might be some other kind of fix, or maybe fix isn't even the right word, you know, kind of something else that I'm in, which kind of led me back to making it led me towards making work like this, which I think speaks to my, my, I was originally trained in filmmaking and film directing, and, you know, I do have this interest and stories and fantasies. And so that's how I ended up where I am. And of course, you know, who's to say, I mean, I'm sure it will change. I'm sure like, usually, with each work, things are kind of shifting and moving. But this is, this is where I'm at right now. And I, when I think about the work is it's adding up, you know, often, even though this work again, I think about it as more of like a speculative story, I don't really have a kind of clear concept to go along with this work. But often, when I make work, I usually do come up with some concept that becomes a kind of discursive frame, and a different way of interpreting what I've been doing. Because when I'm researching something, the artwork is one way in which that research kind of emerges, and I share that, but there's other modes, whether that's writing or lectures. And so, I think of it as kind of additive within, you know, kind of a larger body of the broader kind of ongoing investigation. And you know that that will shift as things continue.

Julia Kaganskiy 56:46
Awesome, I'm going to start pulling questions from the Q&A. So, if you haven't already posted or uploaded some of the great questions that are in there, head over to Slido to do that. And let's start with this one, which a couple of people have uploaded, I feel like we've touched on this a little bit, but maybe you can speak about it a bit more explicitly. So, someone asks, "can you talk about the relationship connection between artificial tears and real tears?" And I'm also going to add on another one, which is just a very quick one to answer, which is "what is the significance of the title?"

Zach Blas 57:27
Oh, yeah. Okay. Actually, the question about artificial tears in real tears is a great one. And it's actually one of the first questions. Well, I'm, I'm going to interpret it the way that Julia wants to ask it. After two me I remember Julia was like that, there is plan, there was a plot here. Which was this idea, you know, kind of, of like mapping this augmented reality, you know, kind of tears, and it not being it not being, you know, like you actually really crying and the, the kind of character of this? Yeah, the character of this somehow, like bringing this up with you. And that, um, you know, of course, I think it's, you know, it's important to acknowledge, like, yes, there's a difference. And I think that's open to, you know, kind of interpretation in the work. And, but I guess partially what, what I was interested in with that setting was thinking about this God character, kind of somehow being able to bring things out in you. And I think that connects to these fantasies of what these technologies and machines can do. So let me maybe explain that maybe better with like, the how your emotion might get detected. So, you know, we experimented with this, the algorithm we're using a lot, and of course, I didn't think I was particularly expressing an angry face, you know, when my emotion was detected, but I think within the parameter of this kind of, speculative story, it reads as this God is somehow able to see some type of emotion in me that I am not able to necessarily maybe, like, properly express on my face at the time. So, I think this this kind of interest in like misrecognition, interpreting and kind of forcing different types of readings and reactions on the face. I'm interested in that kind of like this, this dynamic within the work and also, I think, I'm interested though at the same time of how these kinds of augmented reality face filters which I'm sure some of you are more familiar with these on other you know, on plenty of social media platforms, right? There's a lot of actually crying filters on Instagram, for instance. And but yeah, it's kind of interested in like the kind of digital logic of that. And, you know, thinking about actually, you know, like, is that kind of culturally creating some type of blend between, you know, artificial and real tears. And I think also, you know, within the story, it's kind of like, the only thing this God can do, right? It can't actually force you to really cry. But it can force you to cry, augmented reality tears. And yeah, again, I think that's just kind of an opening. And I'm also interested in you know, like, whether you're crying or not like how that makes you feel. Because it when I was developing this work, I did spend a lot of time looking and thinking about watching people see themselves crying, augmented reality tears, and you know that, yeah, I'm really taken by that dynamic. And that's the kind of rambling answer but you know, also maybe another thing I'll say is they I'm also interested in I'm getting there are, there are actually artificial tears, you can also go and buy, right, that are that are kind of liquid. And I'm working with that in another project that I'm developing right now. So, you'll see another version of artificial tears soon in the in actual liquid form. And then the question about *576 Tears*. Often what happens with work that I make, because I just ended up throwing so much in, something happens, that becomes, you know, maybe not fully

developed in this work. And then I end up pulling it out and thinking about it more in the next work I make. So, one thing that I wanted to kind of plant a seed for with myself in this project is thinking about religious numerology. And, kind of, I guess, the kind of an imaginative numerology here was actually began pop music, because all the different pathways that I spent studying and reading tears led me to, you know, lots of different material, whether that was like Anne Rice's book, Cried to Heaven, or, you know, literally listening to hundreds of songs about crying, because there's just so much music out there about crying. And there was one song in particular, that really hit me for a variety of reasons that are kind of, you know, an ethical and also just personal and emotional was the song by mysterious by Question Mark and the Mysterians which you have probably the name of the band, with Question Mark and the Mysterians is going to catch my attention. And they have a kind of a garage rock song from 1960 called 96 Tears. And this song haunted me for a long time. And one day, I just multiplied 96 by 6. And that's because I was thinking about these six emotions. And I was also thinking about creating a training set for a neural network. And 6 times 96 is a pretty good robust training set on you know, whether that's a set of images or something else for a neural network. And that's, that's how I came up with the number 576. And I think this project, there's kind of a numerology running through it of the number six, where you have these like, six-word phrases, for instance, as well. And in the next project that I'm making, it's also about religion that will premiere next year, think these kinds of questions and thinking around numerology and computation and calculation will continue to develop and probably bubble more clearly to the surface.

Julia Kaganskiy 1:04:08
there's a number of good questions in here - there's a follow up question which maybe you can answer really briefly, which is, where did it go? About how when we oh, sorry maybe it disappeared? Oh, no, it's here "When we are asked to offer our tears though we make the choice to click. Are we offering our tears towards the point of accelerating the AI Gods learning?"

Zach Blas 1:04:53
Yes, I mean, I think I think with the story, you know, the kind of the speculative story of a website? Well, I mean, I guess that's what you're told. But I think, you know, what really interests me about religion and these tech and kind of proprietary technologies, which, you know, most of the AI systems that we're able to interact with on a daily basis are those that are is that they're black boxed in a kind of religion, right is similar. With like, right, if you're a believer, then there's kind of certain things that you don't have access to, there's certain things that you don't know. And I think that the work is definitely putting those things into some kind of relation. And I think, you know, the work is like, yeah, like a religious sci-fi experiment where this, God is collecting these tears. But, you know, we don't know

what the outcome of that will be, even though of course, the religion, right, there's this tension between those religions are teleological in the sense that there's some kind of like, like a point that we're kind of working toward. And, you know, whether that's, you know, some, right, transcendence, the passing into heaven, the return of a God. And so, this God is working towards something, but again, there's a tension between the story and what it claims that it is, it's kind of a teleological thing that it's working toward, and then actually what's happening practically and technically. Which is like unclear.

Julia Kaganskiy 1:06:35
And, you know, we get to make that choice, in contrast to what typically happens when we interact with these systems, which is, you know, it's in the terms of service or something. And it's not, it's happening in the background without that kind of consent.

Zach Blas 1:06:52
I mean, maybe it's also about, you know, interested in thinking about what is it mean, to submit to a belief system, as opposed to just submitting to a technology, when you're not thinking that there's a belief system, you know, kind of put behind it?

Julia Kaganskiy 1:07:07
That leads me into the next question, which is about "how you situate your role as an artist in relation to AI". And I think that's actually especially interesting, because the last couple of works that you've made, you're not just making work about AI, you're using AI in the creation of the work and you're using things like GANS, natural language processing, in emotional intelligence, in this case, like biometric in the creation of the work. So yeah, I'm curious about where you situate yourself?

Zach Blas 1:07:50
That's a great question. I mean, I think honestly, there's a lot of factors that come into how I choose to approach making a work. And I just maybe it's fair and important to say that I don't necessarily discriminate against making a work that's like, purely representational meaning. Like if I were just to make a kind of film in a classical sense, or a multi-channel video installation, that is, you know, with material that's not necessarily AI generated. But you're right, I have also experimented with AI generated material. And sometimes like this work, there's a mixture of different types of ways of producing material, whether that's, you know, kind of computer graphics or more generated material. And I think it's just important to flag that because I don't have a particular kind of technical or formal fetish for one or the other. And the early work that I started making with artificial intelligence that the first works that I made were, I was way more interested in characters, kind of personas of AI. So, I made this work in 2017, with an artist who's

based in LA, her name's Jemima Wyman, and we made this work together called *I'm Here to Learn* so that was looking at this Microsoft chatbot Tay, who was released as like a teenage American female millennial, and maybe some of you're familiar with us and her machine learning abilities were quickly exploited online. But she was released on Twitter, and she was quickly turned into like a neo-Nazi, misogynist, homophobe, and of all the bad things and was taken offline in a day, and we made a work that looked at different questions around gender and AI with Tay. And then I also made another work that dealt with this character on AI life companion named Azuma Hikari that's produced by a Japanese company named GateBox. So, I don't know I'm just kind of flagging that. I guess I have a really kind of wide ranging interest, and it definitely connects to as an artist and interested in how AI is, is represented and, you know, kind of interpreted and thought and imagined, you know, which is, I think, definitely why I would lean towards something like religion, you know, to kind of try and think about religious beliefs, influence or tendencies that are kind of seeping into something like this might be getting developed by tech corporations. But yeah, it could be, I don't know, the strategies, the strategies, I feel like I've really shifted, you know, it could be about suggesting a political alternative and a queer in a clearer way, and a clearer way. It could be about suggesting a political alternative and a hazy way, where I don't really know how to get there. But the work is like reaching toward that, like trying to kind of reach out and grab that. And then there could be, you know, more work like this that is, you know, is maybe a bit a bit darker. That's kind of staying in a place of, of horror even. I have a really strong interest in horror, actually. And I think I think horror is a genre that's often disembowelled in the arts. But there's something about horror to me that just touches on something really profound about the times that we're living in. And, yeah, and I guess, the strategy here with these works is about trying to, you know, make that quarter felt when it's so easy to overlook when we're engaging with these systems. And then, of course, I guess, with this work, you know, there's also questions around kind of extraction. And, you know, thinking about the extraction; extraction of data, the extraction of energy, the extraction of kind of lifeforce, that AI as an industry kind of requires to even run and operate. Anyway, that's a rambling answer. I'm sorry. I guess I just don't really know how to pin it down.

Julia Kaganskiy 1:12:12
That's okay. I think it was an insightful look into the way that you approach these issues in your practice. But I think we are out of time. So, I'm not going to ask another question. Instead, I'm going to turn it back over to Lili to close us out.

Lili-Maxx Hager 1:12:34
Well, thank you both so much for this, like super insightful conversation. It was really a pleasure to listen to both of you chatting about this work that has been so long in the making. And thank you so much to our audience for participating, for

your comments and questions that inform the discussion today. Please do share any further feedback you may have in the Slido sidebar, you'll see a kind of survey pop up, and we'd be really grateful if you could fill that out. We will be uploading a recording of today's event to UP Projects' YouTube channel, which will include captions and also BSL interpretation. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Arts Council England for generously supporting the event, the work and this is public space. And also, to Jack Newbury, UP Projects' Project Coordinator for providing technical support for this evening. I'd also like to thank everyone who worked super tirelessly on this work to make this happen. Studio Pandan, Alex Piacentini who is also in the audience today shout out to him for programming this...

Zach Blas 1:13:31
Yay!

Lili-Max Hager 1:13:33
...Harry Sanderson, Ashwin D'Cruz, Christopher Tegho, xin, Aya Sinclair and Marine Renaudineau. And of course, Zach, thank you for producing this work and for everything that went into this project. As you said it was a journey and I'm absolutely thrilled of how it turned out. So if you haven't already, I encourage you all to go and visit the work and actually experience it for yourself. Jack will post a link in the chat for all of you now. And thank you so much for attending the event this evening.

Julia Kaganskiy 1:14:01
Thank you so much everyone, night.

Zach Blas 1:14:04
Good night. Take care goodbye.