

PHASE GALLERY

Parallel Worlds

Scott Benzel, Norman Klein

with Margo Bistis, John Hawk, and Patrick Vogel

Phase Gallery

November 2-December 7 2024

Opening Reception: November 2, 6-9 pm



Phase Gallery is pleased to announce the exhibition *Parallel Worlds* featuring new and recent collaborative works by Norman Klein and new works by Scott Benzel.

The history of parallel worlds begins in the Gilded Age with early science fiction and planned cities. As the philosopher Williams James observed in 1895, humans were living in a “moral multiverse” where “visible nature is all plasticity and indifference.” Today theoretical physicists are on the verge of proving James’ insight. At the same time, memes and multiverses are roaming freely inside our minds and politics. Indeed, parallel worlds are always imaginary and relentlessly tangible. They are meant to blur the fictional into the real. Of course, to what end?

Parallel worlds can be abstracted into data, or invoke simultaneity, as in a cubist painting or a computer desktop. They can resemble collage or bricolage. They tend to be unfinished, yet always invasive and expanding. Parallel worlds can represent a descent into the rings of hell. In Europe circa 1920, this descent was identified with Expressionism and featured heavily in German cinema, as in *Metropolis* (1926); and the *Dr. Mabuse* series.

After the Great Recession of 2008, parallel worlds—previously discrete from one another—collide once again. The wires get crossed. With derivative bonds, faux money becomes dangerous. Similarly, we learn that parallel worlds online are easily hacked. The internet of things becomes a physical—not simply virtual—phenomenon. When parallel worlds collide, they generate a third place where fiction and fact seem indistinguishable (as in fake news, Big Lies, and our presidential election cycle, from top to bottom). These collisions generate parallel “entities” (AI, robotics, NPCs) that care nothing about invading our bodies. They blindly distort time and space. Finally, in 2016, the sum of these collisions helped Trump win the presidency; they have infected our weakened body politic. Techno responses to this problem have been exploding since the 1980s: gaming; cyberpunk; nanotechnology; big data capitalism. The overall effect has been to intensify the role of archives and archaeologies within the arts. The works in this show excavate imaginary, yet historically accurate, archives. Norman Klein’s and Margo Bistis’ *The Imaginary 20th Century*, 2016, featured in the exhibition, operates as an interactive media novel with a database of 2,200 images and films. The story of Carrie and her suitors takes viewers across centuries, continents, historical events, imperialist and utopian fantasies. All the characters are misremembering the future differently, leaving spaces between, allowing the viewer to puzzle out the phantom that was collectively imagined a century ago.

Scott Benzel sculpts an archive from found trash, the digital commons, and the work of several masters of distorted memory over the past seventy years. Selections from his collection of detritus *Symbols of the divine show up in our world initially at the trash stratum*, 2024, (from a line in Philip K. Dick’s VALIS) are transformed into hallucinatory signage; the videogame *Forget the Labyrinth...*, 2024, is birthed from Sylvia Plath’s and James Merrill’s “channeled” Ouija board poetry, digitally-scanned artifacts from the archives of museums world-wide, and data-derived imagery of impossible-to-see cosmic phenomena.

Benzel’s *SETI Negative SETI*, 2024, saturates the night sky outside the gallery with pulsing worklights conveying a variety of signals, including the longest communication from chimpanzee to human and the unusual light fluctuations of KIC 8462852 (the WTF Star) that some believe suggests the construction of a Dyson Sphere, a giant energy-harvesting mechanism, 1,470 light-years from Earth.

More installations and video have been assembled around *The Imaginary 20th Century*: Patrick Vogel’s and Norman Klein’s installation *The Secret Rise of Skunk Works*, 2022, based on a new chapter by Klein, stages threads of espionage connected to the Lockheed Corporation just before World War II. In John Hawk’s film *A Third of a Dollar*, 2024, Klein reimagines the mysterious disappearance of Leon Theremin in 1938, the Soviet techno-genius who pioneered electronic music and industrial espionage.

Another parallel journey into southern California is a film version of the award-winning interactive media novel *Bleeding Through* by Norman Klein et al., 2003. The film and the updated print edition (2023) combine the work of Jens Martin Gurr and Norman Klein.

A series of screenings, performances, and talks will accompany the exhibition. Closing the exhibition will be a lecture on *Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles, 1920 to 1986* by Jens Martin Gurr, a professor of British and Anglophone Literature at the University of Duisburg-Essen, and a book launch of the newly extended edition of Norman Klein’s *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects*.

Scott Benzel is an interdisciplinary artist living and working in Los Angeles. His work has been shown or performed at The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum Of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, LA><ART, Los Angeles, The MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles, The Palm Springs Art Museum, the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, and REDCAT, Los Angeles, and was featured in Made in L.A. 2012 and 2023 (as part of Los Angeles Contemporary Archive) at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Benzel has organized shows at Los Angeles Contemporary Archive, The MAK Center for Art and Architecture (Schindler House and Mackey House), Los Angeles, and Welcome Inn, Eagle Rock, CA, as part of Pacific Standard Time organized by The Getty Museum, among others. He is a member of the faculty of the School of Art at California Institute of the Arts.

Norman Klein is a professor in the School of Critical Studies at the California Institute of the Arts, and the author, for instance, of *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (1997/2008) and *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects* (2004/2024), the multimedia novels *Bleeding Through: Layers of Los Angeles* (2003/2023) and *The Imaginary 20th Century* (2016), *Freud in Coney Island and Other Tales* (2006), and *Tales of the Floating Class* (2018). A critic, urban and media historian, and novelist, he has written extensively on the culture and politics of Los Angeles, on cinema, and on architecture.

Margo Bistis is a European intellectual and cultural historian and adjunct professor at ArtCenter College of Design. She has published scholarly articles on modernism, caricature, and urban history, and is co-author of *The Imaginary 20th Century* (2016), a multi-media novel and print book. This collaborative work has appeared internationally. Solo and group exhibitions include Orange County Museum of Art (2006); ZKM/ Center for Art & Media Technology Karlsruhe (2007); the Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Design (2009); DOX/ Centre for Contemporary Art, Prague (2010); the College of Creative Studies Gallery, UCSB (2018); and the University of Maryland Art Gallery (2018).

John Hawk, a native of Seattle, Washington, received his MFA from CalArts in Art and Film/Video in 1991. His award-winning work has been screened and exhibited at numerous museums, galleries and film festivals, including the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC, the Seattle Art Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, REDCAT Theater, Los Angeles, the Black Maria Film Festival in New Jersey, the Anthology Film Archives, New York as well as PBS and CNN television. He is also a critically acclaimed guitarist, recording engineer and record producer and prior to his return to art and film was an internationally recognized guitar builder with a Seymour Duncan bass and guitar pickup named in his honor "The Hawk-bucker". He is currently a member of the faculty at CalArts where he has been teaching in the School of Film/Video for 30 years.

Patrick Winfield Vogel is an artist, vintner, and curator from Los Angeles. Their collaboration with Norman Klein began at Office Space Burbank, an experimental space where *The Secret Rise of Skunk Works* was first exhibited. Patrick received their MFA from the program in Art and Technology at California Institute of the Arts.

PHASE GALLERY

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