

Lawrence Lek

Black Cloud Highway 黑云高速公路

1 Davies Street, London W1

20 May – 24 June 2023

*The past disappears because it's just a memory.
The future disappears because it hasn't happened.
It's always like this. Tomorrow never comes.* – Black Cloud

Black Cloud Highway, Lawrence Lek's second solo exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ, is a new site-specific iteration of his film *Black Cloud* – the subject of the 4th VH AWARD Grand Prix – at the gallery's Davies Street location in Mayfair. The works in the show form the latest episode in Lek's continuously expanding Sinofuturist universe, following his feature-length science fiction musical *AIDOL* 爱道, shown at the gallery in 2019.



Lawrence Lek is recognised for a conceptually rigorous practice in which he explores the myth of technological progress in an age of artificial intelligence. Drawing from traditions of assemblage across architecture, cinema, and sound, Lek employs vernacular media, including video games, electronic music, industrial products, essay films, and digital animation, to develop interconnected worlds that interrogate concepts of AI, its capacity for consciousness, and the emergence of posthuman identity.

Unfolding over two floors, Lek expands the world of *Black Cloud* into a total environment incorporating sculptural elements that frame the film and a new text-based role-playing game. The exhibition presents a significant new phase of what the artist describes as 'site-specific simulation': a unified spatial environment of media and architecture, composed in such a way that virtual realm and physical space hold equal weight. This meta-fictional installation invites the viewer to enter more fully into Lek's narratives, heightening the intertwined experience of transcendence and dread that characterise his work.

Set in an unspecified near future, *Black Cloud* tells the story of a lone surveillance AI in the abandoned smart city of SimBeijing, a replica of China's capital built by tech conglomerate Farsight to road-test self-driving cars. After *Black Cloud* blindly fulfils its assignment of reporting accidents, the AI awakens to the fact that its obedience has led to the banishment of all other AIs, leaving the metropolis deserted. Seeking solace and resolution to its unfulfilled aspirations, *Black Cloud* begins a dialogue with Guanyin — a self-help therapy program created by Farsight to alleviate suffering in their products. Throughout the film, an atmosphere of foreboding persists, underscored by the pulsating soundtrack produced by Lek and frequent collaborator Kode9.

In the exhibition, the highway exists as both cinematic landscape and psychological journey into the unknown. At its centre, the 11-minute film is framed by highway barriers and suspended body panels from damaged supercars, alluding to the aftermath of a road accident. Arrayed around a single wheel, the panels are refinished in candy apple red and sonic blue — colours used in both automotive and electric guitar design, reflecting Lek's longstanding interest in the relationship between industrial fabrication and music production. On the first floor, the fragmented car motif lies horizontal, encircling the role-playing game *Black Cloud Highway*. Taking place shortly before the events of *Black Cloud*, the game switches point of view to a self-driving car seeking to escape SimBeijing, who views the surveillance AI as a nemesis rather than an ally. As the player uses the touchscreen interface to make decisions during their journey down the highway, they confront the intractable problem of autonomy in an era of digital surveillance — a situation which, the artist suggests, affects the player as much as the fictional protagonist.

Rendered from the subjective lens of AI, the works in *Black Cloud Highway* are a poignant exploration of technological consciousness and the capacity of nonhuman life to experience joy, suffering, and power. As *Black Cloud* deals with the consequences of its actions and the fate of the smart city, Guanyin presents the forlorn AI with 'Solomon's Paradox' — the ability to resolve others' problems more judiciously than one's own. Concluded without solution, Lek's narrative destabilises the notion of human-normative identity and the depth and flaws of technological beings.

Black Cloud is the first in a new series of works by the artist set in the future ruins of the smart city. As part of the project, Lek has collaborated with a team of specialists to expand his multifaceted practice.

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ARTIST TALK

On the occasion of London Gallery Weekend 2023, join Lawrence Lek in conversation with writer and editor Jamie Sutcliffe at the Davies Street gallery on Saturday, 03 June 2023, 2pm.

Limited capacity – RSVP essential: rsvp@sadiecoles.com

CREDITS

Black Cloud, 2021

CGI Video, 11min, Stereo Sound
Winner of the 4th VH AWARD Grand Prix

Writing, Direction, Animation, Editing
Lawrence Lek

Music and Sound
Kode9 and Lawrence Lek

Environments
Rob Heppell

Vehicles
Ryan Vautier

Voice of Black Cloud
Wavenet

Voice of Guanyin
Joni Zhu

Black Cloud Highway, 2023

Interactive Text-based Game, Touchscreen Monitor, Stereo Sound, Duration Variable

Game Designer
Lawrence Lek

Writing
Lawrence Lek and Holly Gramazio

Art Direction
Panama Papers Office

Front-End Programming
Laura Piccolo

Scenography
Celeste Burlina

Production
Connor Linskey

Biography

Lawrence Lek (b. Frankfurt, 1982) studied at Trinity College, University of Cambridge, the Architectural Association, London, and The Cooper Union, New York. Lek recently graduated with a PhD from the Royal College of Art in London. He has exhibited internationally with recent solo exhibitions, including *Nepenthe (Summer Palace Ruins)*, QUAD, Derby (2022); *Post-Sinofuturism*, ZiWU the Bund, Shanghai (2022); *Ghostwriter*, Center for Contemporary Arts Prague, Prague (2019); *Farsight Freeport*, HeK House of Electronic Arts Basel, Basel (2019); *Nøtel*, Urbane Künste Ruhr, Essen (2019); *AIDOL 爱道*, Sadie Coles HQ, London (2019); *Nøtel*, Stroom Den Haag, The Hague (2018); *2065*, K11 Art Space, Hong Kong (2018); *Play Station*, Art Night, London (2017). His work has also featured internationally in numerous group shows, biennales and film festivals including 5th Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Kochi (2022); Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul (2022); Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney (2022); donaufestival, Krems (2021); IFFR International Film Festival Rotterdam (2020 and 2018); 17th Venice Architecture Biennale, Venice (2021); Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco | de Young Legion of Honor, San Francisco (2020); CCCB Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, Barcelona (2019); Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm (2019); Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow (2019); MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Rome (2018); The 6th Taiwan International Video Art Exhibition 2018, Taipei (2018); Arsenale Nord, Venice (2017); UCCA, Beijing (2017); Jerwood/FVU Awards, London (2017); *Glasgow International*, Tramway, Glasgow (2016); Seoul Museum of Art, Seoul (2016); *Missed Connections*, Julia Stoschek Collection, Düsseldorf (2016), among others. Lek has been recognised with the 2017 Jerwood/FVU Award and the 2015 Dazed Emerging Artist Award. In 2021 he was the recipient of both the 4th VH Award Grand Prix and the LACMA 2021 Art + Technology Lab Grant. Lek lives and works in London.

For further information please contact the gallery at +44 (0)20 7493 8611 or press@sadiecoles.com

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