

# DIGITALISATION

**Culturala**

# CONTENTS

Title Page

tiny reminders of new futures from the past

out 2 4get

a new era? the impact of emerging tech on creativity

should we be scared of AI poets?

between the digital & the analogue

the planet in digital time

where the analogue & digital collide

in a way even the rainbow is digital

a pixel story

creative alliances: a short history of the artist and the machine

credits

## Editorial Note

Dear friend – hello!

Welcome to culturala's digitalisation issue, we're glad to have you here with us.

Digitalisation is a phenomenon that we're all too familiar with, but it is rare that we actually speak about it. So, what is really digitalisation all about? Is it when we perceive things to be from the digital realm? Is it our current obsessions with phones, or the fear connected to anxieties and excitement over algorithms?

In this second issue of culturala, we deep-dive into the topic through the lens of thirteen writers, artists, art historians and poets. The issue is combined with a [public program](#) where you can find all our on- and offline events and publications. This issue is continuously expanding, and there's an upcoming audio version, too! You can access this as well as a continuously updated library and keyword-based access through the web version of the issue.

The web version of the *digitalisation* issue is available through [culturala-digitalisation.webflow.io](http://culturala-digitalisation.webflow.io) with the password digitalisation-of-the-21st-century.

Hope you enjoy!

With love,  
culturala

# BETWEEN THE DIGITAL & THE ANALOGUE

*by Sarah Lou Sasha Maarek*

*and Maria Kruglyak*

# 1. The Liminal Space



*Sarah Lou Sasha Maarek, MadLab 2: Swamp (2021). View here with the passcode: digitalisation-of-the-21st-century.*

*‘MadLab3 is inspired by the sideshow phenomenon of the fortune teller automation, once seen in fairgrounds and seaside attractions. A mysterious tail hangs in a metal box. When a coin is inserted, the tail comes alive, splashing a corrosive liquid inside its steel enclosure. Over time, the liquid will rust the steel, and the whole object will transform and decay. The tail reminds me of the creepy Croatian folktale of the štriga, a dangerous witch that can be identified by her tail. Maarek’s metaphoric tail/tale entices the viewer’s human fascination for novelty and the uncanny while*

*simultaneously pointing out the hubris of activating the creature within the box by feeding it with coins, the audience becomes a creator, giving life to the beast.'*

– [Dr. Gillian McIver](#), curator of ALchemy! (2022), writer, artist, filmmaker and art historian.

**O**n a rainy morning in East London, I met up with Sarah Lou Sasha Maarek, or Sasha as I've come to know her, to speak about her work. I liked the imagery and the feeling that her pieces evoked, but I just couldn't seem to get down to what they were actually about. I know artists often don't like to be asked these questions, but as a writer on contemporary art, it's kind of the one thing that concerns me. Dressed all in black, Sasha was waiting for me at a cafe co-working space in Bethnal Green. She had a light, easygoing way about her, and a whole lot of energy and excitement. Armed with an iPad (hers) and a laptop (mine) we dug into the contents of digitalisation and of her work. I started with a question at the heart of this issue: what is digital to you? In what ways are your works digital, or how do they go from the non-digital to the digital? For Sasha, I added one more question: in what way do your works inhabit both the digital and the analogue space?

*'Everything I do belongs to the space in between. Both the physical work, you know, the sculpture and installation, and the CGI images. I like to merge the idea of the digital with that of narrative. For me, [the digital is a place of fiction, of dream, of myth, of stories](#). I use this medium to talk about my work but really it's a realm in itself. The liminal space that I'm interested in is the one that lies between the digital and the analogue.'*

It reminded me of Ben Hall's essay ['Tiny Reminders of New Futures from the Past'](#), also featured in this issue, where they speak of (digital) *worldbuilding* as a place of oral folklore and myth-making. A place of magic. Sasha was exhilarated, 'It's exactly that!' It's all about people's perception of it, she explained, saying that in the end her works exist in the physical, sculptural space. The digital is basically the magic ingredient.

## 2. The Process Of Digitalisation



*Sarah Lou Sasha Maarek, MadLab 3: Insert Coin (2022). View here with the passcode: digitalisation-of-the-21st-century.*

'I play with the non-knowledge of people. At first, I wanted to work with demystification,' she tells me, showing her first exhibited piece. She made a sculpture of her own face, a doll of herself, and put it up in her room. Then, [she attached a motor to the doll's mouth](#), and invited people to come and kiss the doll.

'So, at first, I would show people that it was only a motor and two lines of code. I tried to showcase how desperate we are to project ourselves, to think that it's real. Interestingly, although it was just a doll, my brother refused to kiss it. He said it was too much like me. And people found it so spooky!' When they were kissing, they stopped believing that it was a doll. 'But then I was like, it's too funny, let them believe. They want to believe, they want to see magic. They don't want to see the two lines of code.'



*Sarah Lou Sasha Maarek, Kiss My Doll (2019). View here with the passcode: digitalisation-of-the-21st-century.*

Sasha's practice continued to use the digital knowledge she has to place people in this liminal, uncanny place. ***So, what does digitalisation then mean for you?***



'To me, digitalisation sounds like a process, something going further. I don't know whether this idea of a progression of something other than the actual state of where we are right now is really relevant to what I'm doing at the moment. Instead, I'm trying to make us search for it within ourselves. The more and more we project onto the non-human non-living, the more we're getting digitalised. That's my process of digitalisation.'

As we continued speaking about her work as an architect, her use of CGI and the stories she wanted to tell with her works, I increasingly felt like I was pulled into a place of fantasy where the digital is just another layer of experience. Those who understand it read it as that – sometimes. But sometimes, we choose to believe. It's the same with AI. We're constantly discussing the question of what happens if the AI suddenly starts thinking, but if we look at the AI machines that have been developed in recent years, it's all just code. ['Exactly, it's just an algorithm,' Sasha says.](#) It processes the information we give it. And as long as we don't understand what's happening, as long as there's a black box of an interface in the way, it becomes magic. And it is in this realm of magic-making science fiction that Sasha's works start performing their liminality. You know, the creepy, strange, real-but-not, human-non-human. ['I use the digital to fake reality,' Sasha explains. That same feeling of the uncanny,](#) that Daniel Hengst describes so well in his conversation with Dandara Hahn featured in this issue.

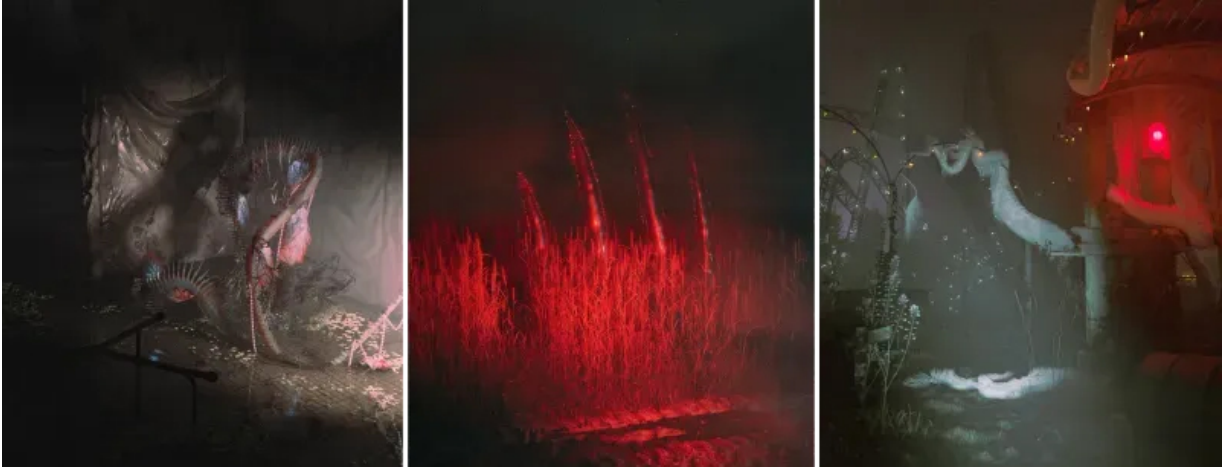
### 3. The Mad Scientist

**I**nitially, Sasha replied to our open call with the third part of a series she calls MadLab. It's based on the laboratory of the mad scientist, the one that creates Frankenstein.

'It's the idea of a human trying to make a human via technology. If you start looking at why we're interested in making something that looks like us and thinks like us, you can trace it back to the Golum myth. In fiction and narration today there is always the fatality of the creator or the creation. I always wanted to work with what happens between the creator and the creation after the process, the non-human human vs. the human. The idea of the monster as a creation. Frankenstein.'

After training as an architect, Sasha enrolled in a master's at Central Saint Martin's (CSM), and that's when her idea of technological entities shifted to this idea of the monster and her works literally took the shape of the monster. It started with MadLab1 which investigated alchemic experiments with making humans.

'I wanted to make the audience participate in it. I became interested in discovering in this forbidden secret, I wanted to make these installations where you can come in and you feel like you're not meant to be there or to see it, like entering the mad lab of the mad scientist. I wanted to create all these places that are rich in this feeling of the uncanny. A place where reality is displaced, where something's off. I've always wanted to meet the monster under the bed, you know?' Sasha says, laughing.



*Sarah Lou Sasha Maarek, Monster Pic Found in my Drawer (2021-22): monster sightings for MadLab3 / CGI-generated images.*

The MadLab pieces work in a series, but they're all a mixture of CGI-made supposedly found photographs of where the monster has been sighted, among other various machines. One of these, MadLab3, is a tail that starts to move when you drop a coin into it. Another, MadLab1, is a strange creature lit up in a green light in a glass box. 'There was a 16th-century recipe by Paracelsus on how to make a human. You take a glass jar, put semen in it, leave it for 40 days and then it becomes an artificial human. Why have we been making these recipes for so long? It's like we want to create *us*, we want to transcend *us*.' The desire to become The Creator.

'The monster exists because it's different from us. What I love about the monster is that it has to do with seeing, showing – think the French word *montrer* (to show). It all comes back to the metaphor of reaching and finally finding the monster in bed. That moment when there's a shift in reality.'

In this fictional world of the various creatures that the mad scientist creates, the monster has been sighted. Just like photos of alien sightings, where you can see the outlines of the monster, its footprints – if you're ready to believe in it. 'I'm trying to consolidate a narrative with CGI to create hyperrealistic almost photographs. Almost there. But not quite,' Sasha says, laughing and I start to wonder if this is all not just a trick. Not a bad one, but one we're

playing with ourselves. *We want to believe*, she said earlier, and it really is like that.

'It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. Really, all it is is story-making and humans **love** stories. If we're scared of taking technology to a point where it can think, we will be creating technology that at least seems to think for itself. And then we put it in this glass box,' she continues, pointing at the glass that the MadLab monsters always find themselves in. The sculpture of the creature itself, caught in a box, trapped in glass. As if the glass box itself is that border between the fictional and the non-fictional, the speculative and the real, [the digital and the analogue](#). In the end, it's the border between believing and not believing.

'The main mechanism of what I make is empathy and projection; it's what happens inside the audience. They're part of the work. I love to play with the audience.'

Sarah Lou Sasha Maarek is an artist and architect working with CGI images, digital arts, performance and installation. Her works inhabit a magical sphere where myths are reality, forming installations of fiction. Seemingly from another world, the pieces are known for giving you a feeling of the uncanny – and for engaging their audience in a way where the audience becomes part of the piece. Sasha recently graduated from Central St Martin's in London, and went on to exhibit in the Alchemy group exhibition at The Steamship PS (curated by Gillian McIver) and show a short movie for LUX. Cluster Contemporary at OXO Tower Barge, and organised [Beast and Monster](#) together with Mircha Ivens, forming the collective [ABINTRA 8](#) (Sarah Lou Sasha Maarek, Laura Macij and Mircha Ivens).

You can stay up to date with what she's working on her instagram [@slimrk](#).

Maria Kruglyak is the founder and editor of culturala. She also works as an art researcher and writer, focusing on themes of contemporary art, art theoretical language, ecology and marginalisation. Maria wrote this piece on Sasha's work based on a conversation the two had about the latter's work in Bethnal Green, autumn 2022. You can keep in touch with what she's doing through her instagram, [@m.kruglyak](#), or get in touch with her directly at [maria@culturala.org](mailto:maria@culturala.org).

# CREDITS

We've had incredible support in creating this issue, from contributors, a sponsor, people who have given advice and, of course, the whole culturalala team that's pitched in at different occasions.

First off, credit to the beautiful contributors to this issue who worked on the texts, contributed to the conversation, proofread, checked, provided details and were overall more than supportive in making this issue happen. In alphabetical order:

Akane Kawahara  
Benjamin Hall  
Catherine Mason  
Dandara Hahn  
Daniel Hengst  
Elspeth Walker  
Ffirst Time  
Hassan Bhandari  
Isabel Bonafé  
Kelly Huen  
Maria Kruglyak  
Mia Ribeira Alonso  
Sammi Gale  
Sarah Lou Sasha Maarek  
Valentina Ferrari

We'd also like to give our heartfelt thanks to our first sponsor, Roger Preece, for his financial and educational support in the beginning of 2023 that has enabled this issue to come to life.

Here we would also like to give credit to the team, for partaking in selection, production and creation of this issue.

Kelly Huen, community and social media manager, who contributed with production, support and marketing of this issue.

Alejandra Espinosa and Sarah Scott for their thorough editing of the pieces, and opinions on the design.

Alejandra Espinosa and Maria Kruglyak for the production aspect of the issue.

Fiona Verran for her support, opinions and selection.

Maria Kruglyak, who created the framework, worked with the artists and designed the issue.

Thank you also to Hassan Bhandari, Lera Burmistrova, Ilya Kruglyak and Mikey Sibson for all of the design advice you have given to culturalala.