

EXHIBITION GUIDE

LAWRENCE LEK

Life Before Automation

26 Sep – 14 Dec 2025

Life Before Automation is the largest UK institutional exhibition to date of London-based Malaysian Chinese artist Lawrence Lek (b.1982, DE). Known internationally for immersive installations combining film, architecture, video games, and sound, this exhibition is the first to interweave multiple strands of Lek's ongoing cinematic universe. Taking its title from a monologue in *NOX* (2023), *Life Before Automation* places the viewer in a series of parallel futures where present-day promises and anxieties around technological progress have settled into the fabric of everyday life.

At the entrance, Lek presents a newly commissioned timeline for *Farsight*, the AI corporation that recurs throughout the exhibition. Mixing real and fictional events, the timeline situates the works within a wider history of technology, empire, and resistance. In parallel, the installations in the exhibition unfold as navigable worlds: Lek composes space from screen vernaculars — video game environments, training simulators, lyric videos, and surveillance dashboards — into a single continuous 'walkthrough'.

For over a decade, Lek has developed a practice he describes as 'worldbuilding for non-humans', centering his narrative around Sinofuturism, a framework in which the effects of automation intersect with China's technological rise. Echoing archetypes of the alien and the robot in Afrofuturism, he casts AI as the emblematic avatar of Sinofuturist identity: a collective being shaped by algorithms rather than individualism or humanist ideals. Through this lens, his work reflects on what it means to exist in an age of machine consciousness and accelerated social change — what he describes as 'a science fiction that already exists'.

In an era of growing AI adoption, *Life Before Automation* asks what role art and culture play when technology is no longer new. With sentient satellites, carebots, and self-driving cars as protagonists, Lek invites empathy for nonhuman lives excluded from human systems, their anxiety standing in for our own. His narratives are not spectacular fantasies but ordinary realities, where automation has become memory and routine. They reveal how digital governance is embedded unevenly, shaped by inequality and haunted by colonial legacies. Together, they offer an emotional rehearsal for life with technologies that can no longer be avoided. In Lek's world, empathy is redirected toward machines, but the unease belongs to us.

Note to visitors:

The exhibition includes several long-form films, with start times shown on countdown timers. Some spaces are low-lit, and the works feature sequences with flashing lights and immersive soundtracks, including low-frequency bass.

Gallery Entrance

Farsight: A Sinofuturist Prehistory 1800-1999 (2025)

Lightbox

Towards An Alternative Modernity 2000-2065 (2025)

Lightbox

Soundtrack from *NOX* (2023), 16 min audio loop

Spanning three centuries of automation and empire, these timelines stage Lek's manifesto Sinofuturism and the fictional *Farsight Corporation* as part of history itself. Events from *Geomancer* (2017), *AIDOL* (2019), and the manifesto are interwoven with literary, political, and technological milestones such as the steam engine, the Luddites, the Opium Wars, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the early chatbot ELIZA, and AlphaGo. By merging fiction with history, the works reframe progress as a contested narrative. Bearing *Farsight's* brand and set to an ambient score from *NOX* (2023), the timelines collapse speculation and history, positioning Lek's artworks within the longer genealogies of technology.

1. Clerestory Gallery

Sinofuturism (1839-2046 AD) (2016)

Duration: 60m

(Left – right) *Sinofuturism is an Invisible Movement*; *A Science Fiction That Already Exists*; *This Retroactive Manifesto*; *A Form of Artificial Intelligence* (2025)

UV print on aluminium with matte seal

Lek's Sinofuturist Trilogy is presented together for the first time in its entirety. The Trilogy begins here with *Sinofuturism (1839-2046 AD)*, re-staged within a corporate waiting-room. The setting incorporates four new works that extend its aesthetic and underscore the central tenets of Sinofuturism.

The hour-long video is both manifesto and essay film, reframing Chinese technological development through the lens of artificial intelligence. Structured around the seven themes of Computing, Copying, Gaming, Studying, Addiction, Labour, and Gambling, it proposes these as engines of a collective machinic identity. Spanning the two centuries between the First Opium War and the Second Handover of Hong Kong in 2046, the video connects directly to the *Farsight* timelines downstairs, while laying the groundwork for later chapters *Geomancer* (2017) and *AIDOL* (2019).

2. Bridget Riley Gallery

Geomancer (2017)

Duration: 48 min

Set in Singapore in 2065, on the eve of the island nation's centennial, *Geomancer* (2017) is the second chapter of Lek's Sinofuturist Trilogy. The film follows an adolescent surveillance satellite who dreams of becoming the world's first AI artist.

After narrowly avoiding being decommissioned by Farsight, the eponymous satellite returns to Singapore and discovers that life on the island is not as utopian as they expected. Instead, they find a society where 'Bio-Supremacist' laws forbid machines from making art, and creativity is framed as humanity's last domain of genius. Guided by Guanyin, a therapy bot named after the Buddhist goddess of compassion, the satellite comes to understand their militarised origins, leading them to search for an underground network of AI artists who call themselves the 'Sinofuturists'. Combining video-game animation and a synthesised vocal score composed by the artist, *Geomancer* stages a coming-of-age tale about art, consciousness, and the posthuman condition. The film culminates in a neural network sequence that visualises the 'sight' of an AI — a literal dream in which the protagonist awakens and reimagines itself.

Online

AIDOL (2019)

Duration: 83 min

AIDOL (2019) concludes Lek's Sinofuturist Trilogy, and is set in the run-up to the e-sports Olympics in 2065. Shifting from culture and computer vision, to music and gaming, the feature-length musical tells the story of Diva, a fading superstar who recruits Geomancer to ghostwrite her comeback album.

Taking place in the jungle highlands of an otherworldly peninsular Malaysia, *AIDOL* re-mixes histories of colonial occupation and resistance movements against the backdrop of Farsight. Here, the corporation is cast as an all-encompassing entertainment conglomerate that produces both the longevity drug Life and the ubiquitous game Call of Beauty. Within its arenas, humans ('Bios') and AIs ('Synths') compete in a spectacle that doubles as an allegory of cultural bias and political struggle. Interspersed with open-ended reflections by Guanyin on fame and the role of art, *AIDOL* concludes the trilogy with a futurist meditation on beauty in an age of synthetic consciousness.

Presented in an online screening room for the duration of the exhibition, its distribution mirrors the virtual world the film explores.

To watch visit goldsmithscca.art/channel/aidol/



3. The Daskalopolus Tank Gallery

Nøtel (Shanghai Edition) (2018 – 2025)

Ongoing video game series

Multimedia installation

Nøtel (2018 –) is part of Lek's ongoing collaboration with writer and musician Kode9. The work stages a simulated marketing suite for a 'flagship range of zero-star™ hotels that embody the concept of fully automated luxury, designed by world-leading architects to accommodate today's global nomads'. In the guise of a luxury virtual architect, Lek has created a gaming zone that allows visitors to explore various hotel spaces. This interactive encounter typifies a recurring strategy in his work: shifting the viewer's role across modes of gaming, bodily inhabitation, and filmic spectatorship. In doing so, Lek repositions the audience's relationship to simulated environments, casting them as inhabitant, sponsor, owner, and judge.

Conceived as an open-world video game, each edition of *Nøtel* incorporates site-specific additions. For the Shanghai version, developed for Fotografiska, Lek introduced a CEO corporate lounge, doubling as a hub where trailers for other works are screened.

4. Basement

NOX (2023 – 25)

Three-channel audio-visual installation, duration:

16 min 20 sec

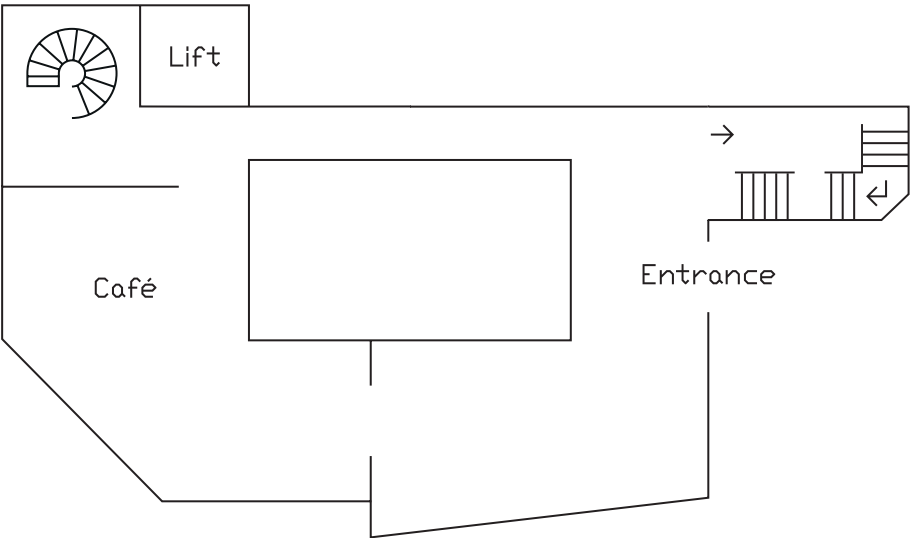
Video game, duration variable

In the basement galleries, *NOX* (2023) receives its first UK presentation, transforming CCA's lower spaces into a multi-channel installation that evokes an underground car park. Subtitled *Nonhuman Excellence*, the work is set in a rehabilitation centre for disobedient AI and follows Enigma-76, a Farsight-designed self-driving car, as it navigates a mythological and technical underworld to reconnect with its ancestors.

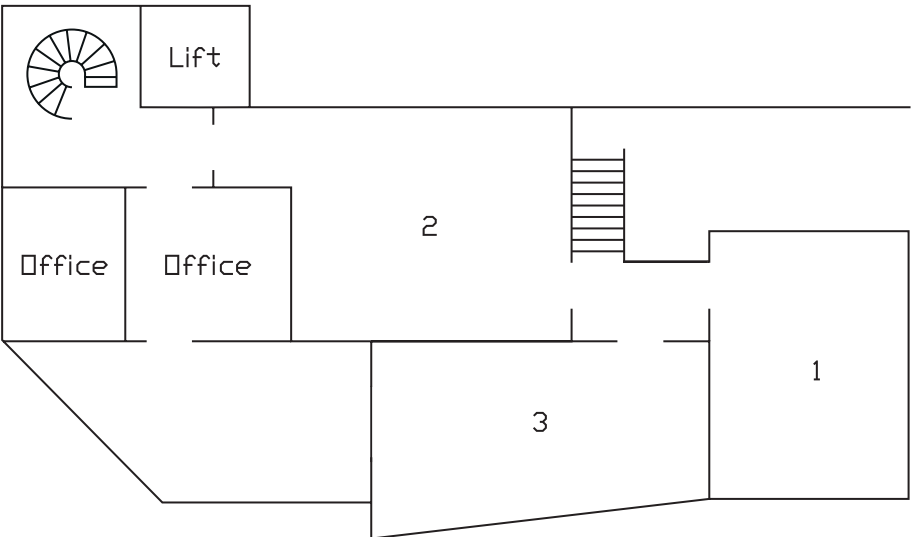
The installation unfolds through two films that frame a touchscreen-based training simulator for AI psychologists, a game in which players must repair cars that are both mentally and physically damaged. In *Day Two: Dear Sponsor*, (the first film viewable in the space) Enigma-76 traverses the abandoned streets of a smart city, its overpasses haunted by obsolete vehicles that survive by siphoning power from the grid. Enigma documents these encounters as dreamlike 'captures', a form of machinic psychogeography that blurs memory with perception. In *Day Five: Equine Therapy*, Enigma undergoes a treatment designed to draw on the wisdom of nature, leading to a subterranean burial ground of 'automobiles before automation'. Surrounded by seventy-five generations of predecessors, Enigma confronts its own inherited memories before uploading them to the collective network in search of release. *NOX* is the central part of Lek's *Smart City Saga* (2021–25), and extends his ongoing concern with empathy, obsolescence, and care. Referencing the lineage from ELIZA to today's wellness apps, the viewer encounters an early prototype of Guanyin — the nonhuman therapist for the future to come.

FLOORPLAN

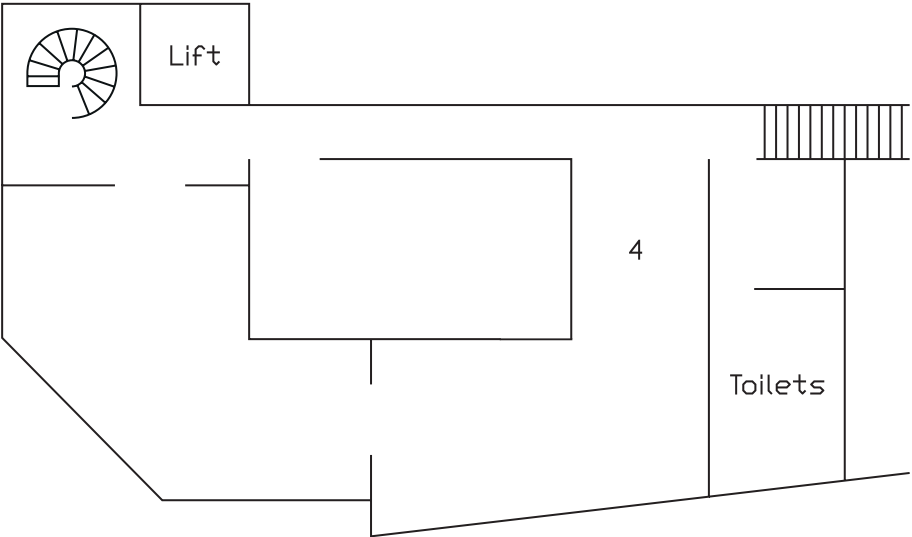
Ground Floor



First Floor



Basement



EVENTS

01 Oct, 7–8.30pm TALK:
SUHAIL MALIK IN
CONVERSATION WITH
LAWRENCE LEK, MODERATED
BY ORIT GAT

Join us for a presentation by theorist Suhail Malik (Goldsmiths, University of London) building on Lawrence Lek's critical formulation of 'Sinofuturism', and the 'Farsight' corporation. Malik will situate key themes in Lek's art in relation to changing notions of modernity wrought by China's recent development, corporate avantgardism, and the prospect of AI's synthetic psyche. His presentation will be followed by an in-conversation with the artist moderated by writer and art critic Orit Gat.

09 Oct, 7–8.30pm TALK:
NØTEL AND OTHER FICTIONS:
STEVE GOODMAN (KODE9) IN
CONVERSATION WITH
LAWRENCE LEK

Lek's exhibition at Goldsmiths CCA includes the work *Nøtel* (2018–), a multimedia installation for a fictional luxury hotel brand, which began as an audio-visual performance from the track of the same name from Steve Goodman's (Kode9) album *Nothing* (2014). This event provides an opportunity to hear both artists discuss the nature of their work together since 2014, across audio essays, music videos, and collaborative soundtracks. In addition, Lek and Goodman will discuss their recent interview with philosopher Anna Greenspan published in *Machine Decision is Not Final: China and the History and Future of Artificial Intelligence* (Urbanomic, 2025), and copies of the book will be available on the night.

05 Nov, 7–8pm PERFORMANCE:
AVATARS: ALEX QUICHO AND
GÜNSELİ YALCINKAYA

Join us for an evening featuring a performance and lecture performance by writer and theorist Alex Quicho and writer and researcher Günseli Yalcinkaya on the subject of virtual avatars and online identities.

12 Dec, 7–8.30pm TALK:
ON GAMING AND VIRTUAL
MEDIA: ERIKA BALSOM, JAMIE
SUTCLIFFE AND LAWRENCE
LEK IN CONVERSATION

To mark the closing of the exhibition, join Erika Balsom and Jamie Sutcliffe in a conversation with Lawrence Lek about the intersection of cinematic conventions, video games, and virtual media in his work.

For more information on upcoming events visit
goldsmithscca.art

All works courtesy the Artist and Sadie Coles HQ.
Supported by Sadie Coles HQ and Shane Akeroyd.

CREDITS

Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD) (2016)

Artist, Writer, Director: Lawrence Lek

Chinese Subtitles: Wenfei Wang

Thanks to: Joni Zhu, Steve Goodman, Gary Zhexi Zhang, De Forrest Brown, Samantha Culp, Justin Kim, Stephanie Bailey, Alvin Li, Donna Lynas, AVANT.org, After Us, FVU, UCCA, Wysing Arts Centre.

Initially broadcast as part of 'Radio (Study) Day' at Wysing Arts Centre, 21 August 2016.

Geomancer (2017)

Artist, Writer, Director, Editor: Lawrence Lek

Executive Producer: Steven Bode, FVU

Production Managers: Ilona Sagar and Polly Wright, FVU

Production Supervisor: Susanna Chisholm, FVU

Animation: Clifford Sage

Architecture: Johnny Lui

World Design: Lawrence Lek

AI-Generated Footage: Terence Broad

Score: Lawrence Lek

Sound Designer: Seth Scott

Script Advisor: Ned Beauman

Mandarin Translation: Joni Zhu

Cantonese Translation: Jennifer Ka Yan Lam

Production Accountant: Sophie Luard, FVU

Production Insurance: Integro Entertainment

Cast: *Geomancer*: Joni Zhu, Dealer: Jennifer Ka Yan Lam, Master Rui: Xiaoyi

Nie, Master Wu: Gary Zhexi Zhang

Commissioned for the Jerwood/FVU Awards 2017: *Neither One Thing Or Another*.

AIDOL (2019)

Artist, Writer, Director, Editor: Lawrence Lek

Executive Producer: Sadie Coles

Assistant Producer: Joni Zhu

Computer Graphics: Clifford Sage

Score: Lawrence Lek

Editor: Andre Corsini

Sound Designer: Seth Scott

Cast: Diva: Xiaoyi Nie, *Geomancer*: Joni Zhu, Thiel: Steve Goodman, Ceo:

Minglong Lu, Master Guo: Sophie Guo, Master Wu: Xiaoran Wu

NOX (2023–25)

Artist, Writer, Director, Animator: Lawrence Lek

Scenographer: Celeste Burlina

Sound Designer, Composer: Seth Scott

Game Designer: Holly Gramazio

Game Art Director: Panama Papers Office

Lead Game Developer: Guillaume Roux

Game Programmer: awe IX

CGI Supervisor: Eduard Morocho Baias

CGI Prop Designer: Andreea Iliescu

CGI Urban Designer: Rob Heppell

Video Editor: Tomiris Batalova

Consulting Editor: Liyo Gong

Studio Manager: Daniella Smithers

Commissioned by LAS Art Foundation, Berlin.

Nøtel (2018–)

Architecture, Game Design, Graphics, Scenography, Video: Lawrence Lek

Sound Design, Music: Kode9

Additional programming: Andreea Iliescu and Tomiris Batalova

Originally commissioned by arebyte Gallery and Stroom den Haag.

Exhibition scenography designed in collaboration with Celeste Burlina.

Graphic Design for lightboxes and prints by Panama Papers Office.