

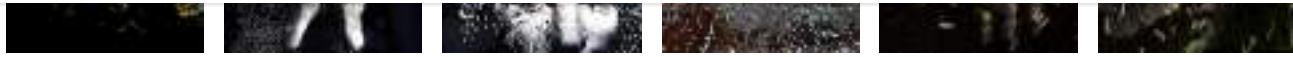
**DAZED****ART & PHOTOGRAPHY****LONGREAD**

This artist asks: Did ancient Greeks invent the first AI?

Charles Sandison's new Delphi-based installation, The Garden of Pythia, unites ancient myths and cutting-edge technologies to explore our distant past and possible futures

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APRIL 16, 2025

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Thousands of years ago, pilgrims from across Greek civilisation flocked to the mountainside settlement of Delphi, to consult the Oracle at the Temple of Apollo. The priestess would deliver prophecies in a state of religious ecstasy, channelling the temple's god... or maybe it was just the toxic fumes she inhaled from a fissure in the rock. Either way, there *is* something magical about the ancient site to this day, from its ever-present myths to the shifting light on its peaks and valleys. If you travelled there more recently, you might even have caught glimpses of a strange figure in the hills after nightfall, beaming fragments of language and flashes of light into the darkness.

That figure wasn't quite a demigod or a supernatural prophet, though. It was the Scottish-born, Finland-based artist [Charles Sandison](#), tweaking his new installation *The Garden of Pythia*. Commissioned by [PCA](#) for its Delphi-based 'pi' pavilion, the artwork maps the artist's signature software-based light projections onto the timeless Greek landscape. In the shifting leaves of a tree, clusters of words solidify into the face of a statue or a row of columns – images lifted from the nearby archaeological site, where you can still see the crumbling remains of the Temple of Apollo – and dissolve again like a cloud of fireflies.

The images, symbols, and processes that underlie *The Garden of Pythia* came together over the course of two years, with intensive periods of on-site experimentation. At times it was a bit like painting *en plein air*, Sandison says, watching wind blow through an illuminated tree at the show's opening, in that it involved "collaborating" with nature in real-time, before going back to his hotel room to adjust a few parameters or lines of code. In order to see the projections, most of the work was done after sundown, but this suited him fine.

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Courtesy of the artist/PCAI

"I'm a really nervous person," he tells Dazed. "People terrify me, and I'm shy as shit, and I'm painfully self-conscious. I can't stop thinking all the time, analysing and processing." But the picture he paints of working alone in the mountains is the opposite, an oasis of calm. "I can hear foxes barking in the distance, and cowbells rattling, and I can still see the outline of the mountain. I work all night, and dawn comes up, and it's utterly transcendent. All of the internal noise vanishes, and I've got an absolute resonance, total inner peace... I can just become a rock in the landscape."

Sandison began experimenting with code as a young child. "I was an academic failure," he says. "I didn't learn to read until I was eight years old. I was failing in maths. And then I was diagnosed as having dysphasia or dyslexia. But I taught myself to code." It wasn't until art school in Glasgow (and after falling out of love with photography) that he considered code as an artistic medium. This was in the late 80s and early 90s, under the influence of language-based artists like Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger. "I was visiting my parents' house and I went to the attic and found my old Sinclair ZX81," he says. "I plugged it in to see if it still worked... and I remembered how to code, and got that happy feeling, that nostalgia. Then I thought, 'Oh, fuck, this is conceptual art! The computer program is a conceptual artwork.' Then the real struggle began: how do you turn that into something that people will experience?"

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He’s been exploring this question for the last few decades, exhibiting art alongside the YBAs in the 90s, showing at the Venice Biennale in 2001, and relocating to Tampere, Finland where he’s been awarded the prestigious Ars Fennica prize. “I was heading for Berlin,” he says of the move. “But I ended up stopping in Finland in a sort of forest commune for two weeks, and suddenly got this inner peace, like, ‘Fuck I can’t live in cities.’”

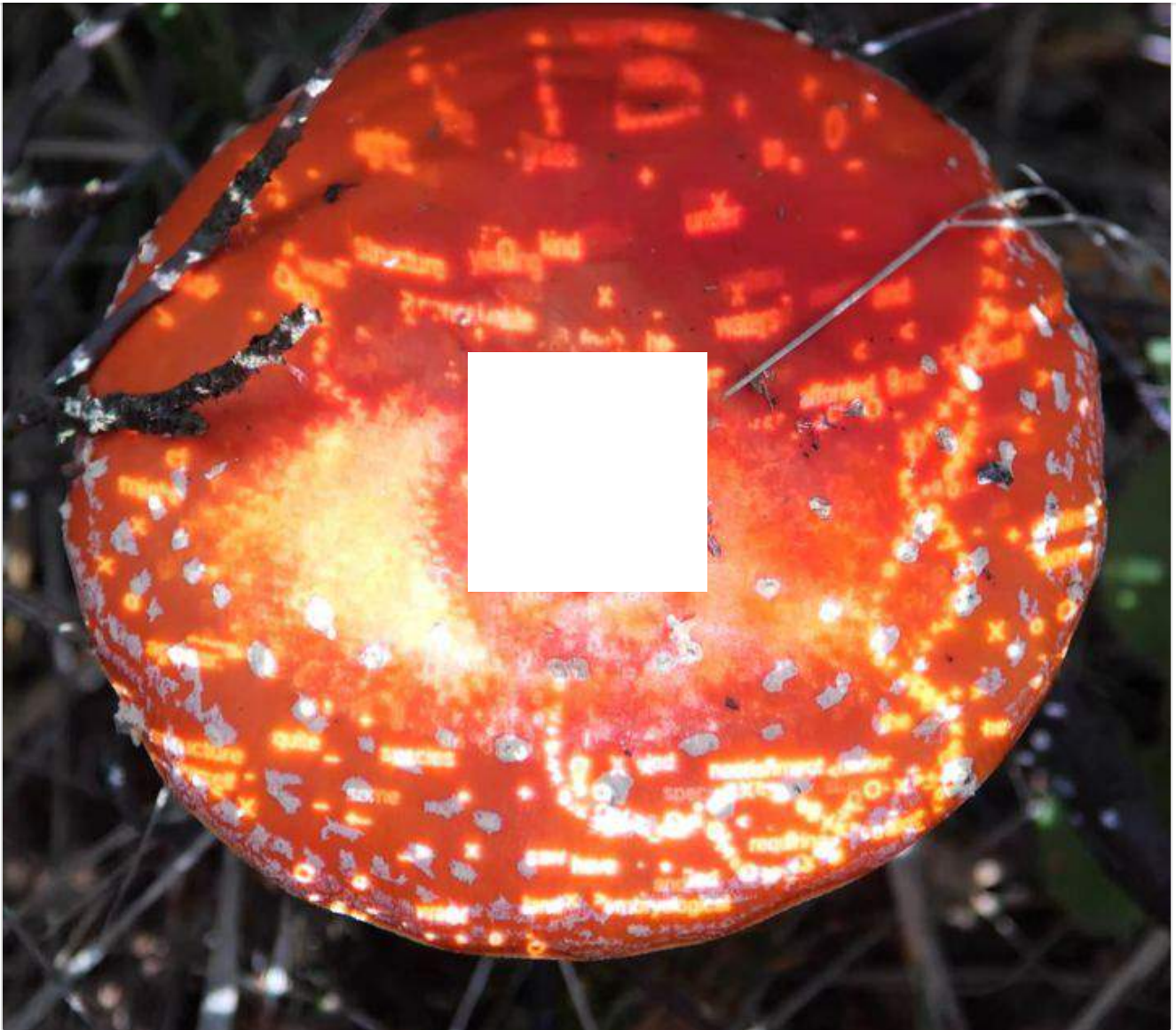
Staying in Finland, he eventually ran out of money and found himself shoplifting to survive after being denied a newspaper delivery job, but by a stroke of luck he landed an appointment at the local art school. This was “the real magic moment,” he adds. Because Nokia made up a significant portion of the Finnish economy at the time, the art school had access to the best computers and projectors on the market, and he began exploring their potential outside of teaching hours. “That was a real breakthrough for me, that I could get the computer code off the screen and translate it into space.”

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Courtesy of the artist/PCAI

20-something years later, Sandison's projection works arrived in Delphi by another quirk of fate. During Covid, he'd spent some time alone in the woods of Finland at twilight, mapping ant hills and trees as a canvas for new projections. When lockdown ended, he presented these works as an aside to a bigger exhibition in Athens, which is where PCAI founder and CEO Athanasios Polychronopoulos and artistic director Kika Kyriakakou stumbled on them. Immediately, PCAI commissioned a permanent installation for the 'pi' pavilion – a former rest stop for weary travellers, transformed into an architectural monument dedicated to raising environmental awareness and forging new cultural ties.

The collaboration made sense; both PCAI and Sandison take a future-facing approach to ecology. The former, for example, uses pioneering techniques – often in collaboration with artists and curators like Hans Ulrich Obrist – to create zero-waste circular economies from Greece to the UAE, while the latter folds emergent AI technologies into his contemplations on nature. In fact, Sandison doesn't love the term AI. "Before we talk about artificial intelligence, we have to know what *our* intelligence is," he explains. "And to be honest, we haven't a fucking clue."

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Take, for example, the generative algorithms the artist uses in his work: left to their own devices for millions of years, could they develop through all the stages of evolution, from a single-celled organism to something like an embryonic plant or animal, and eventually give rise to a sentient being? It's not out of the question, Sandison suggests. "Nature created intelligence... a certain interaction between subatomic particles, some kind of pre-ordained pattern made *us*. A lot of what we do as artists or writers or whatever, it's connected back to that, trying to uncover some sort of primary code." In another sense, he draws parallels between the Oracle at Delphi and the AI interfaces we use today: both are designed to answer timeless human questions with their own, alien insights (and hallucinations).

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Scientists and technologists already have lots of stories and models to describe these kinds of behaviours Sandison’s so fascinated by, where complex and surprising phenomena emerge from seemingly-random and chaotic conditions, like Conway’s Game of Life (an influential cellular automaton that he first encountered as a hospital-bound 15-year-old). But, as *The Garden of Pythia* proves, art can help turn these models into a “tangible and quantifiable experience” for a broader public too – a bit like the Oracle turning the prophecies of the gods into a song. “Artists have always been a kind of shamanistic translator... In an overwhelming information environment, you have these people who are able to bite off some of that white noise.”



Courtesy of the artist/PCAI



Ancestor (or LUCA) theory. “And then we became multicellular organisms, and then we became fish. And then we stuck our head out the oceans water and grew legs and crawled out onto the land, and then became lizards and birds and reptiles and mammals and primates. And now here we are next to the Oracle of Delphi, having a conversation.”

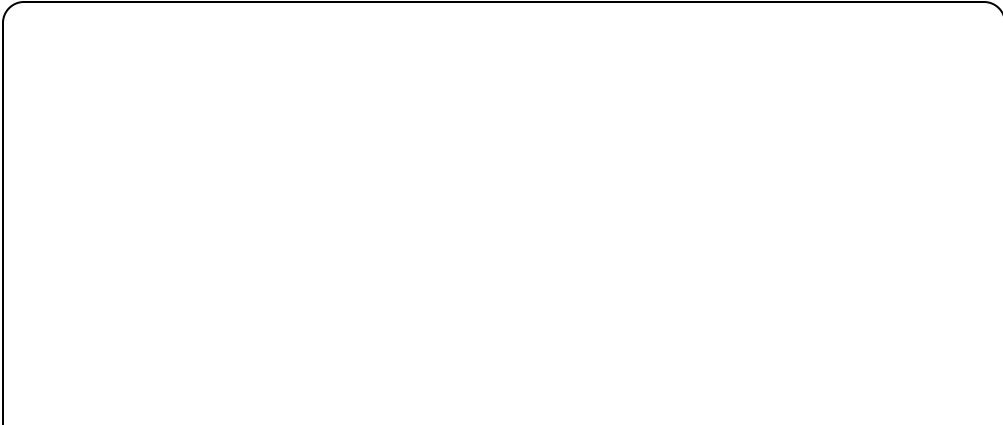
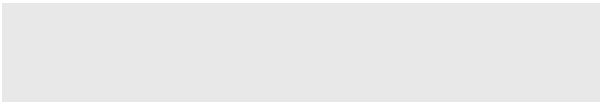
A worthy project for the future, he suggests, is to attempt to recreate this long history of evolution, instead of trying to jump ahead to a human-like version of intelligence. “Let’s just start with trying to create single-cell digital organisms, put them in a digital petri dish, give them 30 million years” – or the equivalent, in hyper-accelerated computer time – “and then see if they become sentient.” We might just stumble on the LUCA of an as-yet-unrealised digital future, and who knows where that might lead?

Charles Sandison’s The Garden of Pythia opened April 9, ahead of the 2025 Delphi Economic Forum, and is now on view at PCAI’s ‘pi’ pavilion.



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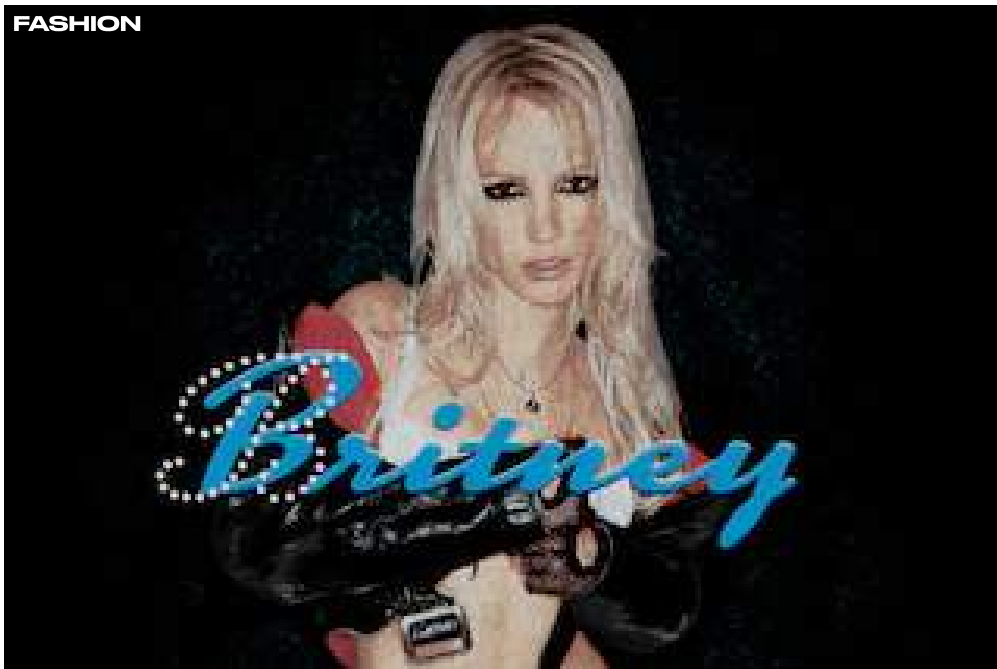


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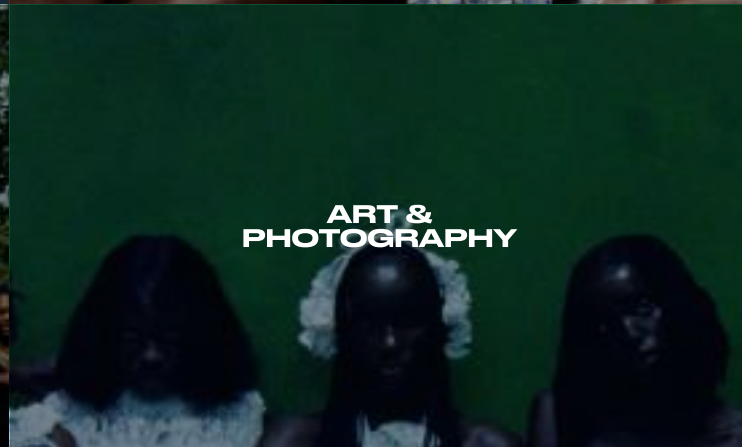
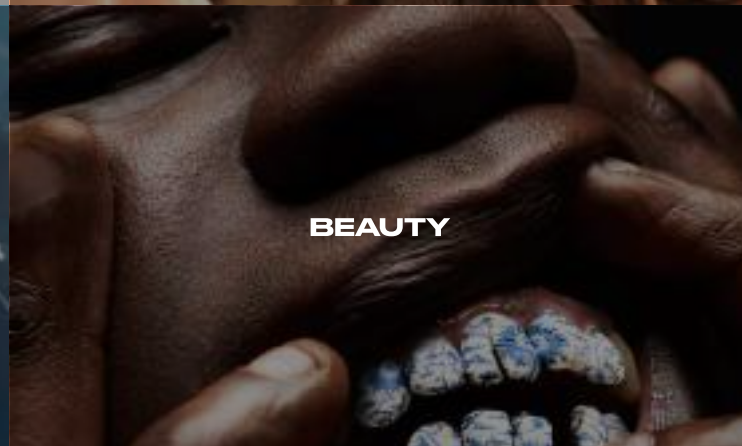
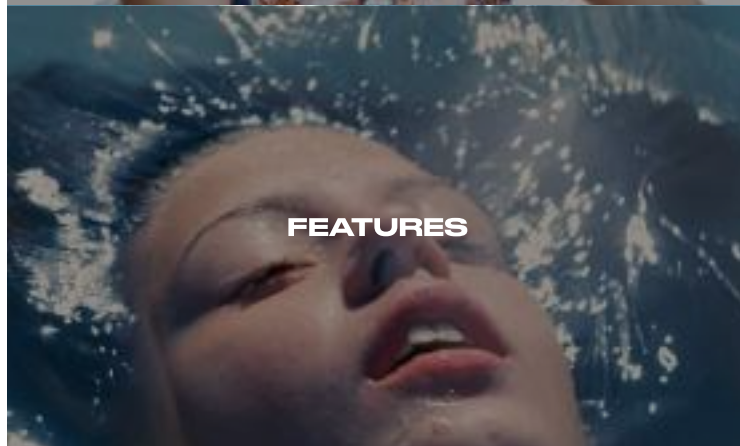
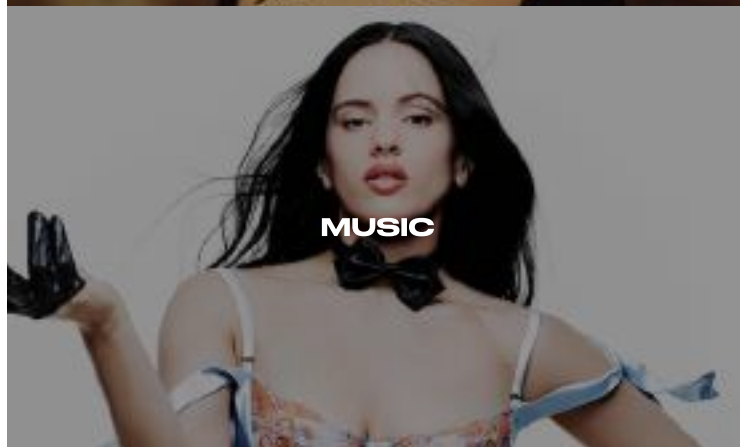


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