

ARTFORUM

EPIC FURY

SIMON DENNY ON THE DARK ART OF DEFENSE TECH



Left: Palantir CEO Alex Karp speaking with a16z partner Katherine Boyle at a16z's American Dynamism Summit, Waldorf Astoria, Washington, DC, March 3, 2026. Photo: Christian Keil/X.

Opposite page: Simon Denny, *Output 0764*, 2025, plotted acrylic and inkjet on canvas, 47 1/2 x 47 1/2".

I view myself as an artist.

—Alex Karp, a16z American Dynamism Summit, Washington, DC, March 2026

IN RECENT YEARS “defense tech” has moved from the quiet edge of venture capital portfolios to something closer to the industry’s principal focus. Investors who spent decades funding consumer- and enterprise-tech companies have now made an obsessive turn toward weapons firms that operate like start-ups, founded by the type of entrepreneur who used to make Web browsers, social network platforms, or VR headsets. This reorientation is cultural as well as financial: Defense tech’s venture dominance coincides with the maturation of an industry-oriented media sector, produced for and by this community, which prefers direct-to-consumer podcasts, Substacks, and social media influencers over allegedly liberal-biased legacy newspapers and magazines.

This new flood of venture-capitalist-as-influencer platforms has promoted and naturalized a distinctive military-industrial idiom that closely—and strangely—apex certain twentieth-century artistic tropes. Today’s most prominent founders and investors communicate in a visual grammar that shares a great deal with the aesthetic languages of Italian Futurism, primarily, but also of “return to order”

neoclassicism, World War II-era propaganda, and modernist museum branding. They are adopting the countercultural posture of the avant-garde to shape the reception of military innovation.

This move proudly dovetails with a broader effort in the US to repackaging the right as transgressive and rule-bending rather than conservative and tradition-bound. In that sense, the cultural output of the defense-tech sector is the latest incarnation of a tendency that emerged in the alt-slipstream of the 2010s on image boards like 4chan and morphed into the hipper end of MAGA. (See, for instance, the downtown New York, Dimes Square—adjacent publisher Passage Press, which offers sleekly retro-modern reissues of conservative writers like Ernst Jünger.) But it also increasingly rhymes with the bellicose tone of the Trump administration itself. “War Secretary” Pete Hegseth recently summed up the attitude of the administration with a phrase straight out of the playbook of F. T. Marinetti, the poet-polemicist founder of the Futurist movement, characterizing US military action in Iran as motivated by “maximum lethality, not tepid legality; violent effect, not politically correct.”



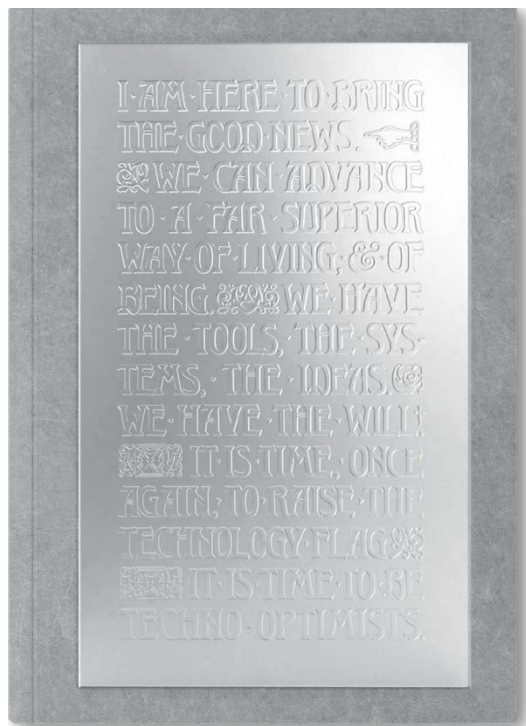
Defense tech adopts the countercultural posture of the avant-garde to shape the reception of military innovation.

TECHNOSTALGIA for the historical avant-garde in venture circles emerged in the run-up to Trump's reelection, most grandiosely in the form of venture capitalist Marc Andreessen's 2023 *Techno-Optimist Manifesto*, published on the website of his firm a16z and later distributed as a luxe bound volume. In his text, Andreessen—who founded Netscape, the first commercial browser company, in the 1990s—frames technological progress as a moral good, a struggle in which, the manifesto claims with modernist gusto, beauty and progress are fused. Marinetti gets an explicit name-check in a list of influences accompanying the manifesto and a pointed citation in the body of the text: “To paraphrase a manifesto of a different time and place: ‘Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive character. Technology must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow before man.’”

In a hyperbolic but influential March 2026 *Harper's* article on the cultural norms of today's newest Silicon Valley AI start-ups, journalist Sam Kriss proclaimed “the end of thinking,” charting a new era in tech that prioritizes agency and action. “The *highly agentic* are people who *just do things*,” he writes. “They don't timidly wait for permission or consensus; they drive like bulldozers through whatever's in their way.” Just Doing Things, Kriss says, is now what VCs look for in founders above all else. Futurism's political and aesthetic program, which celebrated speed, rupture, and war as “the world's only hygiene,” has become a useful blueprint for *highly agentic* attitudes in today's climate of neo-accelerationism. At a moment when “edginess” has become a tool for algorithmic attention-leveraging communication styles, even Futurism's proximity to the birth of Fascism looks more like a transgressive feature than an incidental bug. Like the authoritarian heads of state whom the Trump-verse admires, early Fascists were “highly agentic”—they also *just did things*. Today's strongmen are bent on remaking society, fortified by the “moral clarity” conferred by machines.

Dynamism was the core principle of Italian Futurism. “American Dynamism” is an investment division at a16z that lumps together security/defense and aerospace with housing, education, and other areas related to “solving national problems” and the “flourishing of all Americans.” The “OG American Dynamism company,” according to a16z partner Katherine Boyle, is Palantir, the data-processing hegemon named after an all-seeing orb in *The Lord of the Rings* that supplies enterprise companies as well as military and civil bureaucracies with interfaces that fashion information into actionable graphic summaries. Its recent visual and textual output offers a window into how art and cultural authority are being mobilized to proselytize the values accompanying defense tech to investors, state actors, and wider “Western” audiences.

The backstory of Palantir's CEO, Alex Karp, is filled with seemingly contradictory politics, providing unusual scope for plausible political deniability: His mother, Leah Jaynes Karp, is an artist known for photocollages about racialized violence, and he received a Ph.D. in social theory from Goethe University Frankfurt, supervised by academics close to Jürgen Habermas and following in the tradition of the post-Marxist Frankfurt School. Yet the language used in his published work and in presentations to investors and journalists is, in the words of a16z cofounder Ben Horowitz, “99 percent Republican.” (“I still don't really know what he thinks,” Horowitz said approvingly in a 2025 a16z podcast episode. “He's very clever in that way.”) Part of the possibly-liberal register of his rhetoric is Karp's frequent invocation of art (and his references to his liberal upbringing, including his artist mother). Karp even claims to be an artist, describing his role in making Palantir's



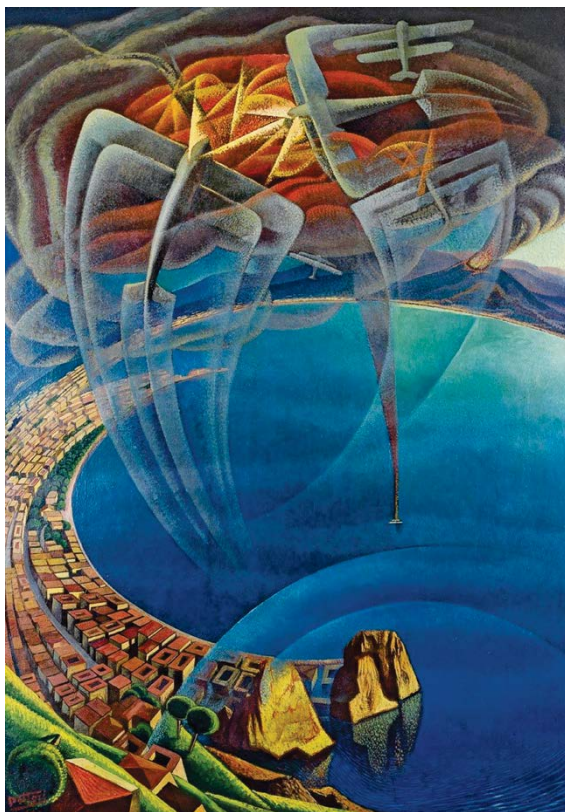
Above: Cover of the founder's edition of Marc Andreessen's *Techno-Optimist Manifesto* (Network Press, 2025).



Left: Leah Jaynes Karp, *Reward for Information—Victim Eulogized Yesterday, 1982*, dye coupler print and ink on paper, 39 3/4 x 31 1/4".

Opposite page, top: Two stills from Palantir's AIPCon 7 highlight video, June 5, 2025. Right: Alex Karp.

Opposite page, bottom: Gerardo Dottori, *Battaglia aerea sul Golfo di Napoli or Inferno di battaglia sul paradiso del golfo* (Aerial Battle over the Gulf of Naples or Infernal Battle over the Paradise of the Gulf), 1942, oil on plywood panel, 73 1/2 x 51 1/4".



products as working as a kind of artistic mentor, shaping (and extracting value from) the talent of his employees as an artist would from raw materials.

In Karp's 2025 book *The Technological Republic: Hard Power, Soft Belief, and the Future of the West*—published by Penguin and cowritten with the Palantir executive Nicholas W. Zaminska—he argues that Western tech talent must realign itself with state priorities and national power rather than the consumer markets that have preoccupied Silicon Valley in recent decades. Silicon Valley was founded with military contracts, he notes; the dominance of soft consumer-internet-focused companies in the 1990s–2010s was an aberration, and should die with the mirage of the “peace dividend” that Francis Fukuyama said would accompany the “End of History.” *The Technological Republic* reads as an attempt to confer intellectual legitimacy on the new vogue for defense tech, weaving philosophical, artistic, and literary references into stories ridiculing the apparently inconsequential mission of companies like '90s toy retailer etoys.com (and by implication Amazon, which essentially aggregated a lot of dot-com-era start-ups into a single everything store). Today's valiant companies, by contrast, make existential, geopolitically impactful products like AI missiles.

The final chapter of Karp's book, “An Aesthetic Point of View,” presents aesthetic judgment as a means of distinguishing seriousness from decadence and national purpose from drift. One section analyzes the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat, contrasting the development of his signature idiom—through boldness and brave independent thinking—with later, supposedly derivative street-art-flavored work made by unnamed imitators. In Karp's telling, Basquiat is someone who Just Did Things, like today's defense tech founders, who possess a similar kind of creative conviction, as opposed to the consumer tech imitators of yesteryear. This attempt to marshal aesthetics into a political apparatus that determines the future is a bold choice for a thinker with a background in Walter Benjamin's warnings around the “aestheticization of politics”—a delicious-seeming contradiction that Karp leverages for its attention-economy value.

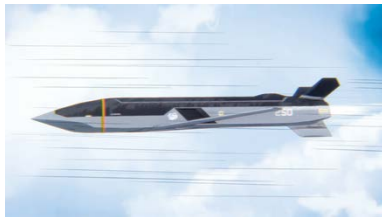
IN JUNE 2025, Palantir held the seventh edition of AIPcon—an invite-only but publicly livestreamed conference that takes place biannually in an undisclosed location, showcasing its artificial intelligence platform (AIP) for existing and prospective institutional customers. For this edition, the company shamelessly used mock-MOMA branding for the logo and as a leitmotif for the entire event. Subtitled “PMoA: Palantir Museum of Art,” the conference employed, as a projected stage backdrop for Karp, Abstract Expressionist painting simulations



The logic of the Palantir Museum of Art only works because reverence for militarism and machines is encoded into MoMA-sanctioned modernism from the outset.



Above, left: Tullio Crali, *Granvotta rovesciata (Giro della morte)* (Upside-Down Loop [Death Loop]), 1938, oil on panel, 31 1/2 x 23 3/4".



Above, right: Rendering of Anduril Industries' Fury unmanned fighter drone, 2024.

Left: Two stills from Anduril Industries' Barracuda-M Family of Cruise Missiles promotional video, 2024.

Right: Rendering of Anduril Industries' Roadrunner autonomous air vehicle, 2023.





Above, from left: United States War Production Board's *The Grind That'll Win* poster, ca. 1942–43. Anduril Industries' *The Grind That'll Win* poster, 2024. Below: Rendering of Helsing and Grob Aircraft's CA-1 Europa autonomous fighter jet, 2025.

hung in empty white cubes. Guest speakers from key client firms likewise stood in front of this virtual museum to celebrate recent victories using Palantir's AI. Flashing above their heads was the tagline THERE IS ONLY THE ARTIST AND THE WORK.

The visual identity of AIPcon mapped the “aesthetic” claims of Karp's book, both ridiculing and co-opting the liberal approach to canon-building. Karp and Palantir's appropriation suggests that the values undergirding institutions like New York's Museum of Modern Art (which, since at least its 1949 “Twentieth Century Italian Art” exhibition, has told politically progressive stories about early Futurism as part of the “development” of the modernist project informed by its founding director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr.) are, perhaps, more compatible with the cultural and political agenda of defense tech than one might at first imagine. Clearly, if Futurism's innovations are key to the development of modernism, then the political and social contexts that Futurism emerged from, and the values of the regimes that enabled it, also manifest in modernism. The logic of the Palantir Museum of Art only works because reverence for militarism and machines is encoded into MOMA-sanctioned modernism from the outset.

Palantir's spiritual successor, Anduril—an AI-first hardware/software weapons company founded in 2017 and again named after a *Lord of the Rings* object, in this case a protagonist's sword—is the most visible and valuable company included in the a16z “American Dynamism” portfolio, other than Elon Musk's SpaceX. Since 2019, when a16z first invested in Anduril, the latter has won major contracts with the US government, growing at an exponential rate. Anduril's success reads as a foundational example





Above: Rendering of American Colossus Foundation's proposed statue and Prometheus Museum, Alcatraz Island, San Francisco, 2026. Right: Screen capture of Monumental Labs' website, 2026. Opposite page: Simon Denny, *Output 1042*, 2025, plotted acrylic and inkjet on canvas, 47 1/4 × 47 1/4".

that validates the American Dynamism fund's very existence: a more explicitly militarized version of SpaceX that can successfully challenge military hardware "primes" like Lockheed Martin.

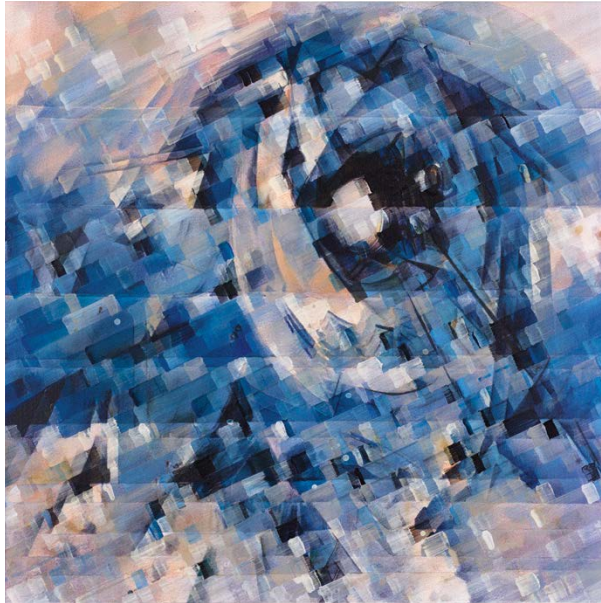
Anduril's promotional imagery heavily resembles Futurist *Aeropittura* ("Aeropainting") of the 1920s–40s, which reflected a post–World War I fascination with air power. These paintings celebrated flight as a new sensory and political regime, transforming aerial perspectives into expressions of heightened command. Viewed from above, the world became abstracted and patterned—a new sphere of vertical operations. In *Aeropittura*, technology does not simply enable perception; it engenders a new kind of master. Gerardo Dottori's 1942 *Aerial Battle over the Gulf of Naples* mobilizes the contrails of its entwining fighter jets to express the effect of new military technology on a crystalline landscape. In works such as Tullio Crali's *Death Loop*, 1938, the viewer is given a spiraling cockpit view: We are situated within the machine itself, made to feel the exhilaration of aerodynamic control as an aesthetic event. The painting foregrounds the visceral experience of being inside a bomber as it whooshes over a city, reifying war as exhilarating, sensational. Gone are the abstracted force lines describing velocity that defined the Giacomo Balla of the 1910s—now, in the work of Balla's sometime student, those lines support a mission, becoming more decisively representational as they describe the path of the aerial machine. In *Aeropittura*, militarized perspective feels thrilling, inevitable, even beautiful.

The visual culture produced by Anduril to glamorize its unmanned rockets, submarines, and accompanying control software leverages a lot of *Aeropittura*'s potential. The X account of the company's lead designer, Jen Bucci, sheds light on the genealogy of Anduril's aesthetic, returning repeatedly to vertiginous aerial

perspectives, luminous gradients, and simplified silhouettes that turn military hardware into a kind of contemporary sublime. A promotional image for the company's Roadrunner drone is a direct descendant of Crali's compositions: The rush of powerful systems beams forth from faux-painterly pixels.

Anduril's founder is Palmer Luckey, a super-active reply-guy on X and omnipresent in the new tech podcast universe, not to mention the recipient of flattering major features in outlets like the *New York Times*. He invokes a chan-friendly gamer lineage for the company, as befits his start in VR (he was the founder of Oculus Rift, sold to Facebook in 2014, from which he was effectively fired in 2017 for funding a pro-Trump super-PAC) and his 2022 venture ModRetro, a retro gaming company. This gamer-native feel is evident in Anduril's polished, cinematic language of mission, agency, and heroic problem-solving. In the company's promo video for its Barracuda series of AI-powered unmanned drones, defense products are advertised with the tempo and spectacle of game trailers: Here, hardware is presented as protagonist, and military conflict is framed as game scenario. Threat-space becomes meaningfully navigable and decision-making pleasurable. Questions of life and mass death are transformed into gameable action.

If *Aeropittura* supplies one historical frame for this form of visual reworlding, US World War II propaganda supplies another. With graphic clarity, 1940s US War Production Board rearmament posters linked industry to virtue and production to patriotism. A poster such as *The Grind That'll Win* placed factories within a patriotic national panorama of righteous and inevitable mobilization: A heroic masked



worker figure resembling Captain America sharpens a sword on a wheel grinder, sparks converging into the stripes of an American flag, from which emerge warplanes and boats. Much like the illustrative legibility of Crali's images—Crail was also, like Balla before him and many other Futurists, a prolific graphic designer—poster grammar advances a painterly vision of bold forms and force lines, coupling industry with destiny while compressing ethical debate into aesthetic certainty.

TODAY IN EUROPE—and especially in Germany, where I live—the neo-Futurist aesthetic pushed by defense tech is becoming more visible as the weapons industry claims more space in policy debates and in the public arena. In May 2025, a new center-right government entered power, led by Friedrich Merz. Soon after, a key vote made it possible for the country to borrow above a national debt ceiling put in place by Angela Merkel after the 2008 financial crisis. Much of this new borrowed money has gone toward funding defense start-ups in Germany, with pressure mounting both from the length and breadth of the war in Ukraine and from Trump's continued wavering on the fate of the United States' membership in NATO. Like many other countries in Europe, Germany fears that the US under Trump is as likely to be an adversary as an ally; defense autonomy thus becomes an existential question. Sometimes this shift is framed in quasi-Keynesian terms, with military spending positioned as an economic engine that fills jobs lost to a shrinking automotive sector. In any case, this is clearly a generational opportunity for would-be defense entrepreneurs.

As Germany expands its defense capacity and defense-linked industrial strategy, a cultural normalization project unfolds in the city streets. This has been starkly evident in public-facing advertising in Berlin. Walking around Mitte in March 2025, I encountered several billboards from the Peter Thiel-backed German AI

drone start-up Quantum Systems. One image from that campaign is almost a direct copy of an Anduril image published in its 2024 "Rebuild the Arsenal" campaign, a factory fantasy featuring people-free production facilities; in the Quantum Systems version, rendered in a familiar quasi-*Aeropittura* painterly digital patina, German flags wave dramatically above flocks of drone workers. "Germany needs an upgrade," the copy reads.

The German context—with its intertwined histories of modernist design innovation, propaganda, and militarized technological ambition—is a particularly sensitive one when it comes to any attempt to aestheticize defense. The fact that companies like Quantum Systems (and others like Helsing and Stark Defense) now pursue large public advertising campaigns is already a major departure from existing norms. The Futurist-derivative aesthetic, imported from the American sphere, could be seen to exploit an interesting loophole in the most sensitive of histories that informs the cultural aversion to military imagery: The aestheticians of National Socialism explicitly rejected Futurism, counting it as an example of degenerate modernism incompatible with the Nazi regime—even as these works were, at times, used as official state emblems by the Nazis' allies in Fascist Italy. One wonders whether Germany might also see a mimetic migration of another current US trend on the tech-right, toward neoclassical ornamentation and sculpture—an aesthetic development typified by sometime crypto founder turned conservative influencer Ross Calvin's proposal, spotlighted in an issue of the *a16z* Substack, to build a huge sculpture of Prometheus on top of San Francisco's decommissioned Alcatraz prison, or the tech-driven, 49,000-square-foot New York City sculpture workshop known as Monumental Labs: "Robots and craftsmen, powering a stone renaissance." An unfortunate bridge can be found on the Instagram page of Calvin's project, dubbed American Colossus, which has on several occasions spotlighted the sculpture of Nazi favorite Arno Breker.

In my own recent work, I draw on the historical images that companies like Anduril and Quantum are mining. Defense tech made me see Futurism anew. The AI core of these companies suggested to me that to probe this cultural turn—to decode the cultural signals of leading technologists—one might need to use image models that share their logic. Using the open-source image-generating AI protocol ComfyUI, I fine-tune existing models with paintings by artists like Crail and Balla alongside imagery put out by leading defense tech firms. Selecting from many outputs generated by these protocols, I then employ plotter drawing machines and hacked UV printers to paint their compositions, the results echoing earlier computationally driven art, the kind for which printers were built inside midcentury companies and research institutions like Bell Labs, often themselves connected to military funding.

Fine-tuning datasets is a form of history-tweaking—a practice that resonates with the canon-hacking attempted by defense tech actors like Karp, Andressen, and Luckey. My paintings go beyond appropriation or collage, but also contain parts of both. In the words of AI-literate artists Mat Dryhurst and Holly Herndon, the paintings are *spawned*. The canvases create confusingly affective echoes of defense tech's cultural force-memeing. It's the Pop art of dread. They somehow describe the feeling of witnessing the naturalization of the transgressive politics behind these companies and their gradual embedding in the apparatus of state and in wider culture. The images suggest a kind of negative sublime: They overwhelm without awe, synthesizing intensity with mechanical gestures that approximate the nihilism-rich latent space of defense AI. A disorienting familiarity oozes through their layers. A sloppy AI residue hauntologically lingers. These fake Futurist paintings refract the defense tech worldview, charged as it is by forces that leverage the value of our most transgressive avant-gardes, but also the most destructive regimes of the modern era. □

SIMON DENNY IS AN ARTIST BASED IN BERLIN. HIS EXHIBITION "RULES BASED ORDER" AT KRAU/PA-TUSKANY ZEIDLER, MUNICH, IS ON VIEW MAY 16 THROUGH JULY 31.