

## **Soft Power (Arcadia Inc.) /**

Cezar Mocan /

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Soft Power (Arcadia Inc.) is a work of speculative fiction which responds to the use of landscape photography as a carrier for brand ideologies, on the computer desktop and beyond. The fictional company proposes the synthetic landscape as a “clean, context-free alternative to nature imagery”.



*Still from softpower.exe real-time simulation, 2021*

## Curatorial Statement

*Soft Power (Arcadia Inc.)* is a mixed media installation which engages with the history of Western landscape photography and painting, and the co-opting of that aesthetic by Silicon Valley for its own uses. The installation contains a real-time digital simulation, running as a single channel video of infinite duration, and a series of photographs taken within the digital simulation and printed onto aluminum dibond.

This work calls attention to a devastating history of Western landscape representation – in paintings, writing, or photographs – often historically used as a way to assert power over a place and a people. There is a direct tie between Euro-centric westward expansion and the pictorial erasure of histories, cultures and peoples. The lack of human life in these paintings is by design: it aided the propaganda campaign that fed notions of Manifest Destiny. Similar tactics have been used, since the beginning of personal computers with Microsoft Windows XP's *bliss.png*, by the tech industry as a way to strengthen brand identity – what can be more desirable than unrestricted access to the beauty of nature, anywhere, anytime? – while often continuing to erase context, labor or lives under the guise of "user-friendliness".

The work presents an expansive, bucolic digital landscape simulation in which a group of three humanoid “agents” walk on mathematically determined paths informed by historical tropes: one agent is programmed to only walk West, another is programmed to photograph nature from above. The three agents take photographs of their surroundings at significant moments of their journeys. These photographs are then uploaded, in real time, to a website that visitors are able to access from their own devices. For the installation, a grouping of seven photographs has been selected to print at high resolution, which are displayed as “natural” landscape photographs. In doing so, *Soft Power (Arcadia Inc.)* subtly draws attention to the overtly perfect and succulently beautiful photographs and nudges viewers to look harder: are these *real* photographs? Which will logically lead to questioning what “real” photographs are, and what is at stake when scenic beauty is produced by artificial forms of intelligence in a simulated landscape.

## Bio

Cezar Mocan is a Romanian artist and computer programmer based in Brooklyn, whose work focuses on the power structures that shape society’s engagement with technology. He works with software, video and computer generated imagery towards recontextualizing aspects of digital culture we take for granted, often in absurd ways. His practice at large investigates the role branding and Silicon Valley discourse have in shaping contemporary ideologies. Most recently, he has been researching the computer desktop’s use of nature photography through the lens of landscape studies.

Cezar’s work has been shown in exhibitions in New York and Berlin, including *Anywhere but Here* at The Canvas Bowery (2021) and *SPRING/BREAK Art Show* (2021). His most recent work, *Soft Power (Arcadia Inc.)* has been recently shortlisted for the Lumen Prize in Art and Technology. In conjunction with his artistic practice, he teaches and often designs or develops software for other artists. He holds a B.S. in Computer Science from Yale University and an M.P.S. in Interactive Telecommunications from New York University, where he is currently a Research Resident.

## Supporting Documentation

### 0. Intro Video

You can find a video introducing the project [here](#), edited with footage from the real-time simulation.

### 1. Real-time simulation

Below are a few stills from the *softpower.exe* real-time simulation. To get a better idea of what the software looks like, you can find a screen recording here: <https://vimeo.com/627567700>.



## 2. *Photographic Prints*

This work was shown in the proposed form at SPRING/BREAK Art Show 2021 in New York, with a collection of 7 prints of photographs taken by the three virtual beings present in the simulation.





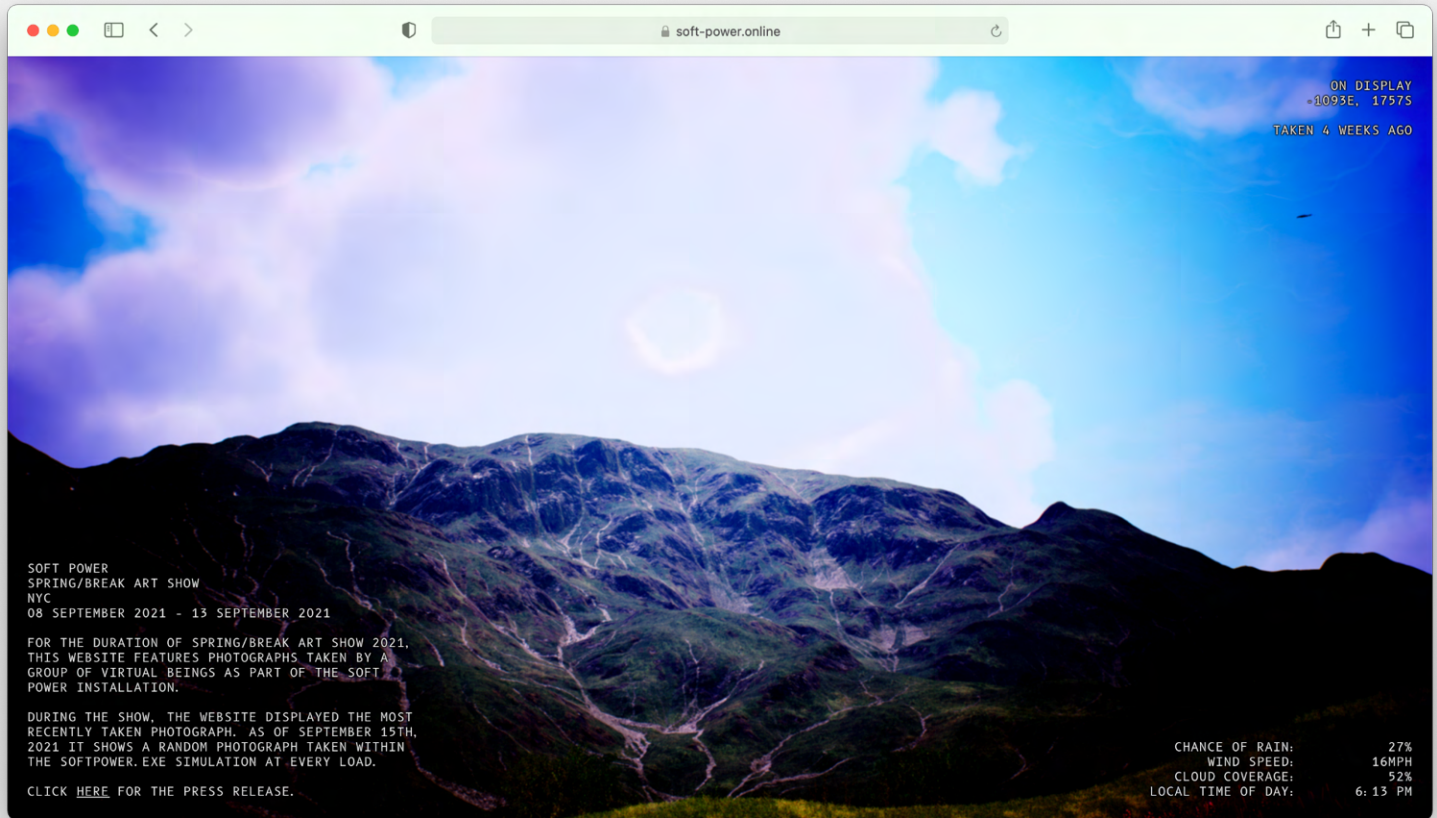
*32W,560S, UV Print on Aluminum Dibond, 20" x 15" (50.8 x 38.1cm)*



*1967W,9N, UV Print on Aluminum Dibond, 20" x 15" (50.8 x 38.1cm)*

### 3. Website(s)

For the SPRING/BREAK show, all photographs taken by the virtual beings were uploaded in real-time to the <https://soft-power.online> website. The website would always display a single image, the most recent photograph taken within the simulation.



A previous framing of this project involved a fictional company which claims to offer “context-free landscape photography, ready to be embedded with your ideology of choice.” You can find more about that at <http://arcadia-inc.org>.

### Credits

Producer: Lizzy Chiappini  
Sound Design: Emma Brown  
Voice Actor: Hannah Campbell