

MY BODY WAS A TEMPLE IN THE END-USED CITY: SIDSEL MEINECHE HANSEN

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For five years now, London-based artist Sidsel Meineche Hansen has explored the ways in which virtual, robotic, and human bodies are manufactured, represented, manipulated, and traded in today's technology-driven society through its many capitalist appendages—namely the pharmaceutical, pornographic, gaming, and tech industries. Her new body of work, presented in Welcome to End-Used City at Chisenhale gallery in London, extends this line of research, looking at how surveillance capitalism, typically represented by the clunky, outdated symbol of the CCTV camera, has morphed into an insidious, invisible world of personal data trading in which we and the public institutions that should (theoretically) safeguard us have become complicit. Through her dynamic artistic practice, which manifests itself via cross-disciplinary seminars, exhibitions, and publications, Meineche Hansen is broadening the notion of "institution," proposing the body and its "sacred" inner workings as a site of institutional critique.

"A multitude of men, are made one person, when they are by one man, or one person, represented; so that it be done with the consent of every one of that multitude in particular."
—Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651

I first saw Abraham Bosse's bizarre frontispiece for English philosopher Thomas Hobbes's classic seventeenth-century political treatise on statecraft, *Leviathan*, when I was in my second year at art school.¹ The gargantuan figure of a king towers over a vast mountainous landscape, dwarfing the city beneath him. His arms and torso, at first appearing to be covered with intricately engraved armor, are in fact shielded with the tiny figures of his subjects. They turn, backs to the

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viewer, toward the benign face of the sovereign, gazing up at the monstrous paternal authority they have collectively created. Bosse's etching embodies Hobbes's concept of governance as an "artificial" body built up out of the consenting, natural bodies of its citizens. As the invisible will of this artificial "body politic" asserts itself, it ripples through the physical bodies of its subjects; they become his complicit appendages.

This image loomed ominously in the back of my mind while contemplating Meineche Hansen's latest video work, *End-Used City* (2019), part of her new commission at Chisenhale Gallery. Consisting of a flat-screen TV, game console, and controller, the accompanying text invites us to "activate" three short videos located in the humanoid corpus of an avatar who, as if prompting our own "gaming" position, faces us, controller in hand. With each video selection we are transported into his body, which offers itself as a space we must penetrate in order to access the work. His torso, like Bosse's sovereign, is also covered in tiny human figures, but we see that Meineche Hansen's avatar has instead been branded with the faces of Silicon Valley legends, his sovereignty stripped. Similarly, despite inviting our participation by way of the game controller, we find that just one button is active: we can only press "play."

In this new body of work, Meineche Hansen suggests data trading as a modern variant of the social contract. "End-used" is itself a pun on the term "end-user agreement," a reference to the innumerable legal contracts we habitually enter into. By engaging with the technological products of everyday life—launching apps, logging into Wi-Fi, or simply browsing the web—we surrender our personal data, which is then harvested and sold for profit. This holds alarming implications, as for example in the case of the 2018 Facebook–Cambridge Analytica scandal, when the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica was revealed to have harvested data from Facebook personality tests and used it to target and influence voters. There seems to be a resurfacing of the Hobbesian narrative in today's technological era whereby software has become a mode of governance—the hardware being our own, increasingly automated bodies.

Protection of one's sovereignty therefore becomes an issue of data protection, but also of protecting the body's opacity, data harvesting being a means of breaching our internal world. It is telling that Meineche Hansen's bodies are mutable, translucent, and all-penetrable. In her video work *Seroquel®* (2014), named after the antipsychotic drug and presented as part of her 2014 solo exhibition *INSIDER* at Cubitt gallery in London, she explores the ways in which drugs and imagery enable the colonization of our bodies. Here, pornographically proportioned figures are dissected, both by themselves with the aid of chemical agents (one figure douses herself in

a fluorescent substance, splitting open to reveal her hollow interior) and by the camera.² These bodies are sourced, readymade, from TurboSquid, a digital media agency that manufactures virtual bodies for a wide range of mainstream uses, as well as pornography. In *No Right Way 2 Cum* (2015), part of her solo exhibition *SECOND SEX WAR* at Gasworks in London (2016), the artist hacks one of these pornographic models, employing it to “pleasure” herself to the point of ejaculation, referencing the media’s regulation of female desire through shame and censorship.³

Meineche Hansen’s great strength is her ability to visualize the invisible, internalized structures of surveillance capitalism, highlighting the slippery trade-off between desiring something and becoming subject to it. In a world where our bodily and mental spaces are increasingly colonized, a form of resistance is wryly suggested in the fate of our branded avatar who, at the end of the video, is decapitated by a drone and thereby becomes embodied—his bronze-cast head lying next to the TV monitor. In a strange inversion of the naive cyber-utopian claims of the 1990s, whereby the move into the virtual was hoped to mean liberation from the state and its institutions by freeing ourselves from the bodily attributes that made us subject to discrimination (and therefore discrimination itself),⁴ in actuality we have merely expanded their reach from our material reality into our minds, giving them access to our hopes, fears, and desires. It therefore seems that in order to escape these structures it is not sufficient to transcend our physical bodies; we must now also escape our virtual selves. Meineche Hansen’s avatar seems trapped in the folds of this Cartesian split as his transfiguration from URL to IRL is left incomplete; his body remains, hanging impotently in the virtual space of the simulation. I am left with the sobering thought that perhaps there is no longer any completely sovereign, offline space, even within our own selves.

Notes

1. The edition I encountered was Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin, 1982).
2. In her 2018 solo presentation *Real Doll Theatre* at KW Institute in Berlin, we see these female automatons made physical in the form of robotic sex dolls, proposing the phenomenon as the beginning of the normalization of automated sex. *Maintenancer* (2018) follows a sex worker who delegates some of her trade to the dolls, describing them as a form of pension plan—replacements for her aging body. The accompanying app allows the full customization of the dolls’ personalities; in return, the user automatically consents to the monitoring of their own sexual behavior.
3. In 2014, the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) banned all future porn produced in the UK from depicting female ejaculation.
4. In 1996, John Perry Barlow, former Grateful Dead lyricist and cofounder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, published “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” claiming the internet as a neutral realm outside of any nation’s borders and therefore not subject to external laws. He predicted that the internet would develop its own social contracts favoring the oppressed: “We must declare our virtual selves immune to

your sovereignty, even as we continue to consent to your rule over our bodies. We will spread ourselves across the Planet so that no one can arrest our thoughts.” John Perry Barlow, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” 1996, <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>.

<http://moussemagazine.it/sidsel-meineche-hansen-india-nielsen-chisenhale-london-2019/>

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