HACKING THE SELF: SIDSEL MEINECHE HANSEN'S «INSIDER»

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A white tablet falls slowly down the screen. A three-dimensional (3D) anatomical model takes it to his mouth, his oesophagus lighting up in anticipation. We are then shown the drug's effortless passage through the digestive tract, where it is progressively broken down and metabolized. Healthy cells blacken and combust one after the other, like full rows in a game of Tetris. A pipette penetrates a stem cell, extracts a sample and transfers it to a Petri dish. Later, another translucent model, strapped to a gurney, is injected repeatedly in the forearm. A green substance first sedates his nervous system, then a yellow one paralyses his lungs and a red one finally arrests his heart. Lastly, staccato edits counterpose typical and pathological behaviours of bodily organs, from optical aberrations and neurological disorders to erectile dysfunction and repetitive strain injuries.

Medically scrutinized, assisted and subdued male anatomical models file through Sidsel Meineche Hansen's eight-minute video *Seroquel*® (2014), the central work in her 2014 exhibition *INSIDER* at Cubitt, London.[1] Appropriated from promotional videos advertising pharmaceutical products, these clips make the depths of the human body and psyche visible to the naked eye, creating an illusion of total transparency that carries Julien Offray de la Mettrie's eighteenth-century man-cum-machine thesis to its logical conclusion: if our bodies and minds are but sophisticated machines, they can also be programmed and monetized ([1748] 1994). The stakes in the commodification of healthcare are brought home by the voice-over: a scripted conversation between a mother and daughter, read by writer, performer and self-empowerment speaker Lydia Lunch. 'Mum, why do I feel dead inside?', the daughter asks, to which the mother replies with a didactic take on the death drive, describing how legal and medical institutions have historically sought to fight off self-destructive thoughts in the fear that they might curtail productivity. The format

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of the dialogue is loosely based on conversations that anthropologist and cybernetics theorist Gregory Bateson staged with his own daughter ([1972] 2008). While these were intended to prove the influence of feedback systems in our perception of the world and others, in *Seroquel®* the invention of cybernetics in the post-war period is linked to more ominous developments: the implementation of soft forms of governance, such as psychiatric drugs and cognitive behavioural therapy, and their manufacture of what the voice-over dubs 'the industrial complex of your emotions'.

The administration of the antipsychotic drug Seroquel, after which the video is titled, is one such technique, and a lucrative one at that. A powerful sedative approved for the treatment of bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, it has become one of the world's bestselling drugs after being aggressively marketed off-label to treat much more common conditions, such as depression. According to the NHS, one in 100 people develop schizophrenia and two in 100 suffer from bipolar disorder, while depression affects one in four women and one in ten men. In addition to marketing the drug for unapproved uses, its manufacturer, UK pharmaceutical giant Astra-Zeneca, has been accused of systematically misleading both patients and doctors about undesirable side effects ranging from significant weight gain to diabetes and, paradoxically, depression and suicidal behaviour – the very same symptoms that the chemical compound is claimed to remedy.[2] *Seroquel®* is however less an exposé of the pharmaceutical industry's rampant commercialism than a reflection on the role that both drugs and images play in the colonization of our bodies as much as our emotions, desires and affects. In other words, Meineche Hansen's video can be described as an experimental trial, testing out some abnormal interactions between digital avatars and psychoactive compounds.

Two newly produced CGI sequences interspersed amongst the appropriated footage suggest as much.[3] The first sequence opens with a tracking shot along a dimly lit kitchen countertop: the camera pans across some food jars and a magnetic knife rack, finally resting on a shiny stovetop kettle, which reflects the image of a female figure walking towards it. As her hand slowly reaches out to grab the kettle, long, manicured fingernails are revealed. The video then cuts to a wide shot taken from the opposite corner of the kitchen, the image now rendered in grey, like the hairless, hourglass-shaped avatar herself, whom we see lurching towards the camera in seamless grey underwear that becomes one with her skin. At this point, fast cutting between basic, wire-frame models and fully fledged photorealistic views paves the way for the final, dramatic act: the protagonist raises the kettle above her head and resolutely pours its contents over herself, the drops appearing like fluorescent violet marks on her naked skin, slowly opening up her torso along the breastbone. A beat gradually builds as the image loses detail, the heroine's agonizing movements now delineated by a mesh of bright green lines, while the crack along her chest offers a glimpse of her hollow interior. Her arms drop, and her body intermittently merges with the background, both figure and ground reduced to a flat, computer-desktop-

like pale blue.

Although Lunch's preceding musings on the death drive seem to imply that this self-inflicted mutilation is an attempt at suicide, on closer inspection the protagonist's defiant attitude and bodily mutations indicate that what we are witnessing here may not be death, at least not exactly. Reflecting on the emotional numbness ensuing from certain life-changing events – from brain damage to social exclusion – Catherine Malabou has argued that 'the body can die without being dead. There is a destructive mutation that is not the transformation of the body into a cadaver, but rather the transformation of the body into another body in the same body' (2012: 34). Following on from Malabou, might we understand the deep cut down our heroine's breast-bone not as her annihilation but rather as a violent transmutation, that is, a manifestation of the death drive that not only curbs the character's desire for survival and well-being but also engenders a new identity?

The second CGI sequence reinforces such a transformative reading. Again, a tracking shot guides us through a generic modern interior: an empty, steel-and-glass, open-plan, office-like laboratory. The same female figure, now clad in a white coat, sits at a desk, looking down a microscope. The music gathers pace as the camera circles her, until it eventually rests on a close-up of turquoise molecules swirling restlessly beneath the lens. The camera then pulls back, dissecting the avatar's skull to reveal the same turquoise substance inside her brain. As in the previous scene, both the subject and her surroundings are transformed by this event: her skin becomes translucent, exposing her nervous system as a network of glowing white lines; her white coat turns dark grey; all of a sudden the laboratory lights appear intensely saturated; and the same turquoise stuff re-emerges in the background as the virtual camera departs the scene.

The motif of the transparent, all-penetrable body reappears here substantially transfigured. For a start, whereas the appropriated pharmaceutical images depict male bodies exclusively, Meineche Hansen's CGI model is not only female but also acutely hypersexualized. Like the sets in which we see her clumsily performing, she is a digital commodity: EVA v 3.0., a stock avatar purchased from TurboSquid, the internet's largest catalogue of 3D models catering to the advertising, bio-pharmaceutical, gaming and pornographic industries. A quick browse through their website shows anatomical and orthodontic models next to exuberant nude or barely dressed women of all ethnicities and body types, which can be bought for as little as ten dollars. In opting to work with an avatar whose 3D curves are surely intended for pornographic uses within the context of a project dealing with the bio-pharmaceutical industry, Meineche Hansen calls attention to the intersection between both regimes of image production.[4] In so doing, she builds upon queer theorist Paul B. Preciado's analysis of what he calls the 'pharmacopornographic regime' (2013), that is, the complicity of bio-molecular and audio-visual mechanisms in the management of

subjectivities under biopolitical capitalism.

In *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (2013), Preciado has argued that, since World War II, the means of control and surveillance of bodies, gender and sexuality have become increasingly miniaturized and internalized. Hormonal treatments like the pill or testosterone gel, he proposes, function today like microprosthetic devices or 'soft technologies of micro-control' which 'adopt the form of the body they control and become [...] indistinguishable from it, ending up as techno-soma-technologies. The body no longer inhabits disciplinary spaces but is inhabited by them' (Preciado 2013: 79). While Preciado's study of the performative construction of subjectivity draws from a range of poststructuralist feminist thinkers – from Luce Irigaray to Teresa de Lauretis and Judith Butler – the imbrication of somatic and semantic technologies is particularly indebted to Donna J. Haraway's cyborg theory and her argument that both media and biotechnology rely on 'the translation of the world into a problem of coding' (1991: 164) – a common matrix that Preciado and others tamper with through gender hacking.[5]

In exposing both the neo-liberal underbelly of the bio-pharmaceutical industry and the digital architecture of her 3D heroine, Meineche Hansen's video can be seen to partake in this deconstructive lineage. As the rest of her exhibition at Cubitt made clear, however, the work also extends Haraway's affront to dualisms of the body and mind to the age of so-called immaterial labour, reconsidering what corporeal materiality might mean at a time when disembodied notions such as information, knowledge and affects have come to obfuscate the role that our bodies play in contemporary life. In the exhibition, *Seroquel*® was shown on a flat screen hung inside a cell-like, L-shaped cubicle fitted with an austere double bed with medical green bedding.[6] The internalization of neo-liberal tenets of productivity hinted at in the title of the video installation, *Proud to be Your Own Boss, Proud to be Busy* (2014), resonated in some of the woodcut prints displayed along the main gallery wall. *iheal* (2014), for example, shows a clenched fist emanating sun rays, a historical marker of subaltern fights against oppression – from feminism to gay rights and black power. However, unlike in activist pamphlets, here it is not the fist itself that radiates power, but an electronic device fitted around the wrist, known by the commercial trade-mark iHeal, which sends electromagnetic waves into the deep tissue and bones in order to stimulate cellular regeneration and accelerate the healing process of soft tissue injuries. A promotional online banner for iHeal shows a young woman wearing the device while holding her iPhone in one hand and typing away on a laptop with the other: a mise en abyme of micro-prosthetic technologies indicative of the feedback circuit of stress-inducing and healing techniques that mines our performance-obsessed subjectivities, for a profit. Meineche Hansen has explored the connection of repetitive strain injuries to contemporary labour practices in the earlier woodcut *Tendinitis Freelance, from the DONER: The Manual Labour series* (2013), in which a sword inscribed with the word 'tendinitis' is about to stab a wrist, alluding to the etymology of the word 'freelancer',

which originally referred to a medieval mercenary, as well as insisting on the physical dimension of labour within cognitive capitalism (Steyerl 2013). Whereas this earlier work uses a diagrammatic representation to elucidate the connection between a medical syndrome and its socio-economic basis, the conflation of the raised fist with the iHeal device is much more baffling insofar as it turns an icon of emancipation into one of oppression, thereby hinting at the extent to which we are hand-cuffed to neo-liberal definitions of the self via those very technologies that purportedly contribute to our freedom and well-being.

This bleak irony was only deepened in neighbouring woodcuts, themselves a hybrid of manual and digital labour since the artist had her handmade drawings scanned and laser-cut onto wood surfaces to produce the prints.[7] *cmd* (2014) expands on the intimate relationship between technology, medicine and commerce by juxtaposing three well-known icons: the command symbol on Apple keyboards, the Staff of Asclepius – a serpent-entwined rod, which, since Greek times, has come to symbolize medicine[8] – and the dollar sign. *OCD.CBT. OD* (2014) adopts a similarly schematic approach to illustrate the paradoxical toxicity of psychiatric care tackled in the video: arranged in a circle and connected by arrows, the acronyms for 'obsessive compulsive disorder', 'cognitive behavioural theory' and 'overdose' offer a hopeless reversal of cybernetic feedback diagrams. Finally, each of the five wood-cuts making up the series *Toxic Institution* (2014) depicts the chemical structure, or code, of a psychoactive compound – from Seroquel to heroin – as if in an attempt to identify the blueprint of the panopticon of our times.

Yet a white cardboard sculpture of a full-breasted, glowing-eyed creature positioned in front of this series of wood-cuts robbed them of all attention. Fitted with long wings that doubled as hind legs as well a second face sprouting from the back of her head, this protean humanoid figure seemed like a lo-fi alter ego of *Seroquel*®'s mutant avatar; in fact, it was credited as a remake of *Sindhu*, a sculpture carved by the artist Ovartaci during her internment at Risskov Psychiatric Hospital in Denmark, where she was a patient from 1929 to 1985. *Sindhu* was one of the many feminine figures that populated Ovartaci's work and life, since the artist liked to surround herself with the sculptures she made and with which 'she developed lasting relationships, or wanted to become' (Meineche Hansen 2014: 3). Indeed art was just one of the forms in which Ovartaci materialized her desire for transformation – born Louis Marcussen, she self-initiated a sex change in 1957 and adopted the name 'Ovartaci', which is Danish for 'specialist in madness'. In titling her remake *Insider*, Meineche Hansen extends Ovartaci's play of words to reverse the concept of 'outsider art', suggesting that Ovartaci's doppelgängers offer a privileged insight into the ways in which medical institutions model subjectivities. This idea is further explored in the woodcut *Torture me so I can learn* (2014), based on a painting by Ovartaci, which shows a white-underwear-clad female body with arms and legs stretched out hovering over a doorway-like frame, emanating sunrays. Rendered in light blue, with flowers blossoming beneath

the woman's feet, Ovartaci's painting can be read as an image of liberation, with a small, winged figure at the top edge of the canvas embodying the protagonist's eventual flight. In contrast, Meineche Hansen's black- and-white rendering strips the image of the flowers and the flying figure, stressing instead the woman's ribs as stigmas and adding the inscription 'An initiated woman is a marked woman'. This phrase is adapted from Pierre Clastres's study of torture in Latin American indigenous societies, which he saw as an initiatory rite of passage by which, as he put it, 'society imprints a mark on the body' (1973: 118).[9] In connecting this primitive rite to today's micro-prostheses, Meineche Hansen suggests that the increasing sophistication and inconspicuousness of political technologies only make our bodies more malleable, more 'marked' than we can easily see, the plasticity of *Seroquel®*' s CGI avatar standing in for the permeability of our own physiological and psychic architecture.

What then is the political valence of this mutable body-cum-artefact? If we are to read the character's self-inflicted mutilation not as a suicide but as a transformative act, how can we characterize the new being emerging from the pharmacopornographic regime? Is it a hacked, emancipated subjectivity or the confirmation of the ultimate penetration of soft, micro-political techniques of control? We might describe the tension staged in the exhibition between the normative effects of bio-technology and the possibility of mutant bodies hijacking their own code in terms of technological ambivalence. This would chime with both Preciado's and Haraway's post-Foucauldian analysis of the changes in social relations brought about by science and technology in terms of a dialectics of power and resistance:

"For excellent reasons, most Marxisms see domination best and have trouble understanding what can only look like false consciousness and people's complicity in their own domination in late capitalism. It is crucial to remember that what is lost, perhaps especially from women's points of view, is virulent forms of oppression, nostalgically naturalised in the face of current violation. Ambivalence towards the disrupted unities mediated by high-tech culture requires not sorting consciousness into categories of 'clear-sighted critique grounding a solid political epistemology' versus 'manipulated false consciousness', but subtle understanding of emerging pleasures, experiences and powers with serious potential for changing the rules of the game." (Haraway 1991: 172–73)

Still, we would be hard pressed to perfectly align the unresolved, mutant scenes in *Seroquel®* with Haraway's 'emerging pleasures' or Preciado's exhortation 'to resist and dismantle the somato-semiotic norm and to invent collectively new technologies of the production of subjectivity' (Preciado 2013: 364). In fact, the self-annihilating scene at the heart of the video speaks of a deeper desperation. In as much as we can read the avatar's gesture as an attempt to meddle with the semiotic and bio-technological codes of subjectivity, along the lines of Preciado's *gender copyleft* manifesto, we must also recognize that its means are inherently

self-destructive. It is as if hacking contemporary technologies of subjectivity necessarily implied a form of self-sabotage, which could well be the logical consequence of their ultimate internalization.

Malabou's notion of 'destructive plasticity' might be helpful here to think through the political implications of such self-inflicted violence. Destructive plasticity reverses classical accounts of metamorphosis in at least two ways. Firstly, it argues against the metaphysical dissociation between form and substance that would see metamorphosis as a mere change in appearances that leaves an individual's being intact – 'as if, in the evening, form could be left hanging like a garment on the chair of being or essence' (Malabou 2012: 17). Second, transformation is here understood not only in positive terms but also as a negative, explosive impulse, 'which sculpts by annihilating precisely at the point where the repertoire of viable forms has reached exhaustion' (Malabou 2012: 54). Whereas the idea of metamorphosis has historically been associated with the possibility of flight (think Daphne's transformation into a laurel to escape Apollo's ardent desire), Malabou identifies destructive plasticity as a substitute for flight when there is no outside or elsewhere to retreat to:

"The only possible way out from the impossibility of flight appears to be the formation of a form of flight. In other words, both the formation of a type of ersatz of flight and the formation of an identity that flees itself, that flees the impossibility of fleeing itself." (2012: 11)

Rather than describing one's ability to adapt and change in order to survive an altered environment, destructive plasticity presents us with a drastic response to an unbearable situation in which there is no room for change, or where power has become so slippery and polymorphous that transformation is politically innocuous. If Ovartaci's doubles are projections of unfulfilled desires to be realized in fantastic worlds more accommodating of fluid definitions than the one she herself inhabited, Meineche Hansen's malleable bot is itself a projection of patriarchal, capitalist relations. In a world in which the boundaries between inside and out-side have become ever more muddled, it is not surprising that flight amounts to escaping oneself.

Naturally EVA v 3.0 is not the only one trapped in a smoke-and-mirrors scenario from which there appears to be no escape. To a certain extent, her predicament is similar to that of the artist, who finds herself enmeshed in an industry that epitomizes those very neo-liberal tenets that her work seeks to criticize. Consider, for example, the paradoxical display of the woodcuts on self-exploitation at an art institution that runs on under-paid, if not volunteer labour. More than a critique of Cubitt itself, or of institutions more generally, however, Meineche Hansen's exhibition was aimed at her own 'becoming institution',[10] in the same way as the heroine's self-inflicted wounds can be read as an attempt to hack her

own code. This, we know, is not only a futile bid but also a deeply contradictory one, since, as the work is shown and written-up in reviews such as this, its circulation stands to inflate the artist's visibility and, with it, her desirability and value. Yet, it is such a refusal to steer clear of contradictions that best defines Meineche Hansen's work. After all, *INSIDER* was not only an exhibition about self-destructive thoughts and behaviour, but also an attempt to think through self-destruction as an artistic strategy.

Notes

1.'Sidsel Meineche Hansen: INSIDER', Cubitt, London, 16 October–16 November 2014, curated by Fatima Hellberg.

2. Unsurprisingly, the corporation has settled most of nearly 30,000 lawsuits regarding such abusive practices, for which it is estimated to have paid just under two billion dollars in the United States only (a negligible cost considering that in 2012 this drug alone generated a six billion profit). Following the uproar, AstraZeneca has been forced to clearly list a litany of side effects and unapproved uses in its US commercials (Freedman 2012).

3. These two sequences are set apart from the video's main narrative both aurally and visually: they are both accompanied by the only sound of minimal electronic music and shown full-screen, whereas the appropriated clips are accompanied by Lydia Lunch's voice-over and shown as inserts within a semi-opaque blue frame. Further, when shown at Cubitt, the video was presented on a flat screen with headphones, with two loudspeakers amplifying the music during these two sequences only.

4. The figure's user manual prominently advertises the wide range of control that the model offers over the movements of her mouth and 'private parts'. Meineche Hansen has continued to work with EVA v.3.0. in the video *ONEself* (2015), which analyses pornographic uses of CGI from a feminist perspective.

5. Preciado has adamantly criticized the ways in which processes of transitioning are currently sanctioned by medical and legal institutions. Amongst other things, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (2013) is the chronicle of his own, self-prescribed testosterone protocol. He announced his decision to change his name from Beatriz to Paul B. in an article for the French newspaper *Libération* published on 16 January 2015 (Preciado 2015).

6. Interestingly, the colour green was introduced in hospitals in the inter-war period as a means of appeasing patients' mood and its use was generalized during the post-war period. This was, in part, a result of the emergence of colour consultants such as Faber Birren, a graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago, who applied the principles of colour therapy to the interior design of institutions (Pantalony 2009).

7. The use of the woodcut technique relates to Meineche Hansen's interest in the Kristiana Bohème, the group of Oslo-based artists and writers that revolted against bourgeois moral and sexual values in the late nineteenth century. In some ways, the artist's exploration of the politics of nervousness in the wake of the Great Recession of the mid-2000s can be seen to take up their study of physical and psychological afflictions in the context of an earlier economic crisis – the Long Depression of the 1870s.

8. Fittingly, the Staff of Asclepius is often confused with Hermes's caduceus, a staff entwined by two serpents, which symbolizes commerce.

9. Clastres's original dictum reads: 'An initiated man is a marked man'.

10. 'Becoming Institution' is the heading under which the artist lists her CV and press materials on her website. See: http://www.labourpower.co.uk. Accessed 11 September 2015.

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http://www.labourpower.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Hacking-the-self-Sidsel- Meineche-Hansen-INSIDER-Reviewed-by-Helena-Vilalta.pdf