

NEVER LET GO

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Immersed in a perpetual hypnagogic state, Sidsel Meineche Hansen's *Grumpy* (2025) is an eviscerated yet undead killjoy — an agential feeling before being a subject. I see its forehead frowning and its mouth singing the words to “Sunny” (1966), the song Bobby Hebb wrote as an ode to hope after his brother was stabbed to death. But something is off. Slowly, I begin to discern a fetus — their head gently swaying to the tune — curled-up inside a wan womb. It's a horrific and tender moment, set to a rehearsal of the romantic chords of Ludwig van Beethoven's 1801 “Piano Sonata No. 14,” marked *Quasi una fantasia* (Almost a Fantasy). The screen cuts to black, and I hear the baby hiccup. Then, the mouth reappears, asking, melodically yet imperatively, “When will I fuck you in real life?” An aggressive chorus suddenly breaks out from the inside of these grotesque creatures, now inhabited by a multitude, its mouth a dark, threatening hole.

In the span of this chilling yet intimate three-minute encounter, *Grumpy's* body is never offered to the gaze in its entirety — only portions: head, torso, womb, vulva, legs. The framing is scrutinizing, the lighting harsh; both are administered via Unreal Engine, the same tool licensed to USA governmental agencies for military, medical, and industrial training purposes. The schizophonic soundtrack — to borrow Mark Fisher's term — is composed of melodious voice memos that the artist privately recorded on their phone before *Grumpy's* inception, and that were later lip-synced in motion capture by a collaborator. The friction embedded in their weird montage — with the passage from one segment to the next being signaled by creepy glitches in the mother character's head — reminds me of the appoggiatura Angelo Badalamenti used in composing Twin Peaks's Laura Palmer theme. It's only in my imagination that I may suture the various pieces back around that unknown openness lying on a cold autopsy table.

The figure is the digital transmogrification of *Untitled (Anatomical Venus)* (2024), a sculpture inspired by a life-size anatomical model known as *Venerina (Little Venus, 1782)*. When wax sculptor Clemente Susini was

asked to create, for didactic purposes, this idealized body with removable organs out of mainly (but not only) a dead pregnant teenager, he decided to replace what must have been her agony with a lascivious expression. The miserable result — like many anatomical Venuses that Hansen observed at La Specola, the Natural History Museum in Florence — not only mirrors patriarchal staples about anxiety toward female sexuality and biological essentialism but also establishes a stock model of womanhood. Produced with the premise of being scientifically rigorous while aesthetically pleasing, something deemed essential to stimulate interest and study, it is not surprising, then, that the Venerina soon became an object of desire both for medical universities and rich aristocrats who wanted such fetishes in their collections.¹ This typical tenet of the Enlightenment, i.e., the conflation of knowledge and pleasure, is critical in Hansen’s sculptural and moving-image-based research on porn and horror. As scholar Linda Williams wrote about these film genres, their viewers-users are programmed to experience seduction and shock through the “maximum visibility” of the violation of (particularly female) gendered bodies.² Untitled (Anatomical Venus) reboots its misogynist lineage with a composite process: a cast of a digital 3D model and a live-cast of the sex and reproductive organs of an elderly female body donated to science (the fetus is a science-fictional addition), performed by a medical artist upon Hansen’s instructions. Many elements exist in a strange state of material dissonance — from the perfectly smooth, ready-made surface of the digital body and the fleshy imprint of the hand-crafted human organ, to the organic verisimilitude of the wax body and its distance from the inorganic aluminum spine.

This porous, relational attitude toward bodies and matter recurs in Hansen’s practice, such as in *End-Used City 2077* (2019), a video and CGI interactive game, and in *Public Sculpture (Everything is Personal Data)* (2019), a 3D printed head cast in bronze. In the former, the viewer-player embodies a man-like avatar whose head is an appropriated 3D scan of Keanu Reeves’s as it appears in the video game *Cyberpunk 2077*, and whose naked torso is tattooed with faces of tech billionaires. After navigating a series of what turn out to be obligatory vignettes, each showing a different way in which personal data are harvested in London, a surveillance drone beheads the character I am playing. In *Public Sculpture*, the lost head has somehow tilted outside of the game and, on a closer inspection, appears to commemorate a weapon more than a human, for its irises are engraved with gun sights. This bitter reflection on surveillance as a zero-sum game in which we can only hit “play” despite holding the joystick (as happens in *End-Used City 2077*) continues Hansen’s analysis on the eerie forces that manipulate and control the unconscious, from exploitative socio-economic systems to the tech-industrial complex, pornography and pharmaceuticals.

In today’s paradoxical context in which hyper-visibility is currency, Hansen often turns to the documentary genre to examine the invisibilized forms of reproductive labor, like in *Maintenancer* (2018), made in collaboration with Therese Henningsen, which looks at the care work necessary in a doll brothel. In

parallel, Hansen has reimagined the use of different technologies of visual experience in order to question the positions of power they would fabricate. *End-Used City 2077* is one example of this concern, but so is *Grumpy*, a moving image-based work made to be seen on a phone, not unlike the various contents we daily hold, react to, and ignore in our hands, which command our attention, when not addiction. Another example is the CGI animation *No Right Way 2 Cum* (2015), which entails entering via a VR set the naked body of EVA v3.0, a 3D stock woman-like avatar who masturbates and then climaxes onto the camera lens. In this induced POV, which moves in and out of her face and body until it's been sliced up, nothing is "physical" save for whatever feelings that the viewer projects. Made in response to the ban on showing female ejaculation in UK porn — because, apparently, squirting is not as much a real orgasm as male ejaculation is — it invites a reversal of roles that mobilizes the realities of institutionalized forms of discrimination.

The characters populating Hansen's exquisitely queer feminist practice are often haunting technological assemblages whose insides and outsides are simultaneously present and who have persistently come back as revenant sex dolls, as doubled and remediated uncanny casts, or as customized stock bodies and movements — think of EVA v3.0 as a contemporary version of Venerina: it is employed also in *DICKGIRL 3D(X)* (2016), where it penetrates a formless creature via a prosthetic attachment made of zeros and ones; and *Seroquel*® (2014), in which she is both scientist and psychotic patient in restaged pharmaceutical ads. Together, they amalgamate the affectively charged, intersecting fibers of sexuality, body, gender, and class while estranging the "voyeuristic quest to show what lies below the skin."³

Before *Grumpy's* loop begins again, it says: "Embrace. Let go." Sometimes the line falters, turning into "Embrace; and never let go," and I cannot but think of the fraught traps that we, the curdled ghosts in the profit-oriented machine of today's violent psychopolitics, are hooked on. After all, freedom is hard to shoulder.

Sidsel Meinche Hansen lives and works in London and Copenhagen. Their practice addresses virtual and robotic bodies, and their relationship to human labour within gaming, pornographic, and tech-industries. Hansen's work varies in medium and form spanning wood, clay and metals through which crafted objects are made, to CGI animation, VR and video and other reproducible mediums. Solo exhibitions include: Somerset House Studios, London (online); Kiosk, Ghent; Ordet, Milan; gta exhibitions, Zurich; Chisenhale Gallery, London; SMK – The National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen; KW Institute, Berlin and Cubitt Gallery, London. Group shows include Kunstmuseum Basel; 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia; MUDAM Luxembourg; Taipei Fine Arts Museum; Art Sonje Center, Seoul; MOAD MDC Miami, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Hansen's work will be on view in "Once Within a Time," the I2th SITE SANTA FE International from June 27,

2025 until January 13, 2026.

Bianca Stoppani is an art researcher who does writing and curatorial work around deviant beings and emancipatory politics. Their writings have appeared in artist monographs and publications, art magazines, and newspapers. They have organized reading groups as well as given talks at art institutions, artist-run spaces, and universities. In their role as curator for editorial and discursive projects at Fondazione In Between Art Film, they co-edited the exhibition catalogues *Nebula* (Marsilio Arte, 2024), *Ali Cherri: Dreams of a Dreamless Night* (Lenz, 2024), and *Penumbra* (Mousse, 2022); and curated the exhibition public programmes *Thick Atmospheres* (Teatrino di Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 2024) and *Vanishing Points* (Complesso dell'Ospedaletto, Venice, 2022).

01, 03, 04 *Grumpy*, 2025. Video stills. 2' 5". CGI animation and recorded audio. Commissioned by and developed in residence at Somerset House Studios. Figure design, 3D sculpting, and acting: Arc Justice. Technical production lead by James B Stringer. Courtesy of the artist; Sylvia Kouvali, London / Piraeus; Christian Andersen, Copenhagen; and Edouard Montassut, Paris. © Sidsel Meineche Hansen.

02 *Untitled (Anatomical Venus)*, 2024. Cast of 3D model and dissected sexual and reproductive organs, beeswax, and aluminum. Figure design & 3D sculpting by Arc Justice. Technical production lead by James B Stringer. Casting in wax (sexual and reproductive organs) by Pascale Pollier. Dissection by Prof. Dr. Luc van Nassauw; Senior Researcher / Anatomist and BIOMAB (Biological and Medical Art in Belgium). Metal casting (skeleton) by Fusioni d'Arte 3V. Casting in wax (3D model) by 10 Tons. Photography by Isabelle Arthuis. Courtesy of the artist; Sylvia Kouvali, London / Piraeus; Christian Andersen, Copenhagen; Edouard Montassut, Paris, and Kiosk, Ghent. © Sidsel Meineche Hansen.

05 *Hook 2*, 2023. Steel, forged. Photography by Sebastian Bach. Courtesy of the artist; Sylvia Kouvali,

SYLVIA KOUVALI

London / Piraeus; Christian Andersen, Copenhagen; and Edouard Montassut, Paris.

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06 *Tendinitis Freelance*, 2013. Laser woodcut on paper. Photography by Lewis Ronald. Courtesy of the artist; Sylvia Kouvali, London / Piraeus; Christian Andersen, Copenhagen; and Edouard Montassut, Paris. © Sidsel Meineche Hansen.

07 Sidsel Meineche Hansen & Therese Henningsen, *Maintenancer*, 2018. Video still. 15' 25". Digital video with sound. Colorgrading by Jason R Moffat. Courtesy the artists; Sylvia Kouvali, London / Piraeus; Christian Andersen, Copenhagen; and Edouard Montassut, Paris. © Sidsel Meineche Hansen and Therese Henningsen.

08 *DICKGIRL 3D(X)*, 2016. Video still. 3' looped. Virtual Reality and CGI animation with sound. CGI modeling and animation by James B Stringer and Werkflow Ltd. Soundtrack by Nikisi. Courtesy of the artist; Sylvia Kouvali, London / Piraeus; Christian Andersen, Copenhagen; and Edouard Montassut, Paris. © Sidsel Meineche Hansen.

¹ "Corpo Femminile Giacente Con Parti Anatomiche Scomponibili," online archival record, Sistema Museale di Ateneo, Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna, <https://catalogo.sma.unibo.it/it/29/ricerca/detailiccd/4418/>.

² See Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (University of California Press, 1989).

³ Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Duke University Press, 1995), 139

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