

SECOND SEX WAR EXPLORES THE LIMITS AND FREEDOM OF OUR BODIES IN VIRTUAL REALITY

Danish artist Sidsel Meineche Hansen's new exhibit uses Oculus Rift and a 3D avatar to investigate presentations of gender and sexuality

Sidsel Meineche Hansen interviewed by Ryan Ormonde
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The allure of virtual reality lies in its possibilities for escape and exploration, to exist—if only fleetingly—in a world free from the physical parameters imposed on you by biology and genetics. However, when you lock into virtual reality via hardware such as Oculus Rift, you substitute your flesh and blood for a virtual body designed by a digital media company. As such, the sum of characteristics and behaviors that make up a given avatar is limited by the assumptions and prejudices of its content creators. What does that mean for the ways in which the gender of a virtual body is presented? Is there any room for expression of sexuality and sexual orientation? While these questions often arise from a gaming context, what happens when we consider them in terms of another industry making serious inroads into virtual reality: pornography?

Originally from Denmark, Sidsel Meineche Hansen is a London-based artist who is interested in feminist and queer responses to gaming and pornography. Her new exhibition at the Gasworks art gallery in London is titled *SECOND SEX WAR*, a reference to the “sex wars,” an outcome of the 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality in New York, which caused a split in feminist debate between anti-pornography and anti-censorship arguments. The exhibition brings together works featuring EVA 3.0, an avatar Meineche Hansen purchased from a company that supplies 3D human models for a range of commercial uses, both in standard and immersive animation. Meineche Hansen worked with digital arts studio Workflow Ltd to create video works that use EVA 3.0 to explore the artist's ambivalent position within the “sex wars.” *No Right Way 2 Cum*,

made in response to the British Board of Film Classification's recent ban on female ejaculation in U.K. pornography, is a looped animated sequence of the character masturbating. The centerpiece of the exhibition is *DICKGIRL 3D(X)*, a pornographic CGI animation presented via Oculus Rift. In this rendering, EVA 3.0—or, rather, you for the duration you have the headgear on—has a dazzling cyber phallus and is engaged in an ongoing sexual act featuring an amorphous and somewhat grotesque biological mass.

To get to the Gasworks requires a circumvention of the high walls of The Oval, an internationally famous cricket stadium in south London. On the day I visit the gallery for a preview of the exhibition, my anti-clockwise route takes me past what seems to be an actual gasworks, before a side street reveals the pleasant, minimal exterior of the gallery itself. When I enter the first room of the exhibition space, a headset and headphones await me unassumingly on a vegan leather bean bag. Immersing myself in the virtual world of *DICKGIRL 3D (X)*, with its aptly pulsating soundtrack, I find myself in another space with white walls, although these ones appear to be immaterial and infinite. In this world, my movements are synced to the actions of a fantastical and relentless sexual experience. There is a moment where my point of view somersaults, but for the most part I am being made to identify with an avatar with breasts, translucent skin, and a large penile appendage that seems to be harnessing some kind of electromagnetic current. I am EVA 3.0.

When I remove the headgear a few minutes later, I am disoriented yet again, this time by my return to the materiality and relative fixity of the gallery and my own body. Not long after, Meineche Hansen joins me on the bean bag to discuss *SECOND SEX WAR*.

Ryan Ormonde: *What first sparked your interest in exploring this relationship between the body and technology?*

Sidsel Meineche Hansen: I'm not a person who has played a ton of games. The reason I got interested in all of this was through the first character I did for an animation called *Seroquel*®; I was interested in trying to figure out how gender sat in relation to this specific 3D object and how it was commodified. That's kind of like my entry into thinking about Oculus Rift and thinking about 3D objects and thinking about gaming. So it's not because I've been like...

RO: *In that world?*

SMH: Yeah.

RO: *Most of the works in the exhibition either feature or make reference to a character called EVA 3.0. Can you say a bit more about how that character was created?*

SMH: So, the guy who made the EVA character is called Nikola Dechev and I bought it off Turbosquid, which is a digital media company that sells 3D style models to different industries: games architecture, interactive training, virtual assistance, and also adult entertainment. So in that way the characters are ready-made and arrive through those channels.

RO: *Did you name the character or was that its name?*

SMH: That's the product name and then it comes with a user manual where you can kind of like flip through it. The print that's sold in relation to the show is called *HIS CORPORATE CUNT ART* and it's accredited to Nikola Dechev because it's his... production. But it's somehow re-commodified through the context of the show.

RO: *Would you describe these works as a strange kind of collaboration with Dechev?*

SMH: Maybe it's more a way of appropriating his work. I'm not totally sure about this but maybe one way of looking at it could be that it's a way of reclaiming the means of production [laughs]. That it's a design that somehow profits on the gendering of the product, but in this context it moves into a different context of being commodified. Appropriation also comes with a new economy around... well, art, ultimately, I guess.

RO: *So to be clear, what kind of uses would EVA 3.0 normally be directed towards?*

SMH: *HIS CORPORATE CUNT ART* illustrates the morph control of EVA's vagina; so basically, she's plugged into «adult entertainment» as a character that you can kind of interact with through an avatar. But I've also seen that character, or a very similar character, being used for advertising painkillers. The first animation that I made was dealing with the pharmaceutical industry and how they use CGI as a medium for creating a transparency around the human body and pedagogy around treatment. That was specifically to do with psychoactive drugs, which is also why the title of the piece is *Seroquel*®—it's the name of an antipsychotic drug. In that video, found footage, which was produced by the pharmaceutical industry, was interjected

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with sequences that I made together with Werkflow Ltd. In this new video, we're appropriating animated pose-sets [a series of key character poses making up an animated sequence] and ready-mades from the virtual porn industry. In many ways this for me has a lot to do with performance in one way or another and how there's almost a choreography around porn.

RO: *How has working on this pornographic-related phase of the project been different from working on the earlier pharmaceutical-related phase?*

SMH: I feel like *DICK GIRL* is moving into territory that I feel ambivalent about—it moves into this weird disjunction between an embodied relationship to gender and a disembodied one. Without sounding too abstract, I think that there is a lot of that going on already in relation to the discourse around feminism and also queer theory. I feel like [*SECOND SEX WAR*] is trying to open up to a conversation, but without necessarily taking a safe position or assuming that there would be a consensus around what post-human porn is, for instance. These [avatars] are characters that do not live by the material conditions of a female or a queer body, or a body of color, so it somehow moves out of that—and in that, there's this utopian promise of moving beyond what defines us. But there is also maybe a trait of New Liberalism in the sense that the *DICK GIRL* character could possibly reflect a queer position somehow, but in actuality it seems more like an expansion of a heterosexual market, which could in all actuality be homophobic [laughs]. I think it puts you in a position where you might feel uneasy about your own identity but also about the way that gender and sexuality and all these things are somehow reflected back at you.

RO: *I'm interested in the use of text in No Right Way 2 Cum. How did that come about?*

SMH: Following the ban of female ejaculation in U.K.-produced porn, the video was an attempt to try and figure out if CGI is part of that register or if is totally outside of it, but also to try and deconstruct a cum shot. The typical cum shot is where you watch from the outside and you see this visual expression of pleasure or whatever. But in this version, and especially also the Oculus Rift version, you're made to inhabit the body of the avatar. The ejaculate hits the camera in an attempt to kind of disrupt that classic cum shot. The «No Right Way 2 Cum» written with cum is a way to disrupt the consumption to some extent. That would maybe also be a typical moment of censorship, but rather than censoring or blurring, it's made into a statement or something that might hold a more constructive position. I guess that I have been more interested in pro-sex feminism or the «sex wars» specifically for that reason, because it was a moment in time when

female sexuality was heavily contested on the level of the exposure of the female body and the representation of the female body in relation to the porn industry.

RO: *In what ways are the sex wars still relevant to today's discourse about sex and gender. Have we made any progress?*

SMH: I don't know. I think, at least for my part, it's important that [the work] is not a re-staging of the 1980s sex wars, but it's thinking about virtual bodies or 3D bodies and the specific relationship between subjects and objects. I think the sex wars of the '80s were defined by the moment in time. I wouldn't necessarily subscribe to the concept of female sexuality because I think it represents yet another level of universality around what that is and what it could be, to some extent. But I'm interested in a discussion that isn't in agreement or already in consensus because I feel like that's not necessarily the most productive one. And so this reference to the sex wars is revisiting this critique of the porn industry and trying to find multiple positions rather than two polar ones. But moreover, trying to think about how Oculus Rift and all sorts of digital distribution of images have somehow changed our relationship to our bodies or our sexuality, and how it is exposed online and otherwise.

I don't really know if that answers your question because I don't really know if you can talk about progress being made. It's so difficult because you could say progress in terms of censoring stuff or progress in terms of actually providing a space for people to think about their sexuality or to experience it or whatever.

RO: *When you say you don't want to fall back on a binary argument and you're not interested in a discussion that is already in consensus—is that where art comes in? Is that its role within these discussions? For example I understand that you are hosting seminars around this exhibition.*

SMH: Prior to making objects that can sit in an exhibition, my practice was mainly invested in putting together seminar series as a way to create a discourse around a given thing. I think the art context is in some ways open to that conversation. But at the onset I actually didn't want it to inhabit the gallery space or any kind of art context because I think it also puts a specific demand on discourse. I'm starting to feel more comfortable with putting objects in a gallery [at the same time as] having reservations about putting discourse in a gallery. But here it kind of sits next to each other—there will be a number of talks by either friends or peers and academics who will contribute to the discourse by contesting it from their point of view.

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In terms of what art can do, I think I feel extremely ambivalent about art, as with a lot of things.

<https://www.thefader.com/2016/03/24/sidsele-meineche-hansen-second-sex-war-interview>

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