

In the work of Zach Blas (American, b. 1981) the visual language, value systems and power dynamics of digital technology are dissected, probed and re-contextualized to map the edges and foundations of our technocratic society. Working in a range of media that includes film, sculpture, writing and performance, Blas employs a mix of dark humor, theoretical research and influences spanning mysticism, science fiction, pop culture and queer aesthetics to weave layered commentaries on digital culture.

In SANCTUM, a new installation commissioned by the Matadero on the occasion of the inaugural Tentacular Festival, Blas creates a mystical environment that is part sex dungeon, part sacramental altar and part airport security detention center. In the center of the gallery, a masked figure keeps watch over a group of digital avatars who find themselves captured and ensnared in various torture devices. The silent figures, which resemble the anonymized body scan imagery generated by airport security scanners, are contorted in what appear to be violent and humiliating positions—they are bound, gagged, pierced, and whipped, and their digital matter is harvested in order to produce new torture instruments. Yet the ambiguous nature of their environment makes it difficult to know for sure whether these avatars are victims or willing captives. Do they experience these acts with pleasure or pain? Are they prisoners, martyrs, or sex slaves?

SANCTUM problematizes our symbiotic relationship with technology, examining the nature of personal agency, surveillance, and control in a world shaped by data mining and social engineering. In today’s digital landscape, our lives are increasingly monitored, tracked, and profiled—by our phones, social media platforms, retailers, governments, and even the products in our own homes. Most users acquiesce to this condition, either enthusiastically or begrudgingly, in exchange for the promise of security, convenience, self-expression, and affirmation. Designed to be sticky and seductive, these products are so appealing that although there is mounting evidence of the many ways they could potentially be misused—think of recent data breaches like the Cambridge Analytica scandal, where it was revealed that the data of more than 50 million Facebook profiles was harvested in an attempt to influence voters—most people continue to use them anyway. In SANCTUM, this “opt-in” relationship to surveillance is recast within the consensual power play dynamics of the BDSM subculture, highlighting how systems of control have evolved beyond the oppressive bureaucracies of “Big Brother” to occupy a space of pleasure, play, intimacy and trust.

Commissioned by
Matadero Madrid

Curated by
Julia Kaganskiy

Architecture, Design,
and 3D Modeling
Scott Kepford

3D Modeling
ScannerWorksNY

Fabrication
Feltremo

3D Printing
Xometry

Computer Graphics
Harry Sanderson
and Daniel Swan

Music
xin

Audio Mastering
Swan Meat

Research and Production
Assistant
Dennis Dizon

Graphic Design
Rebeka Arce

Abierto x Obras

Tuesday - Friday
16.30 - 20.30 p.m.

Saturday - Sunday - Holidays
12.00 - 20.30 p.m.

Free entrance

Matadero Madrid

Paseo de la Chopera 14
28045 Madrid

T 91 318 46 70
info@mataderomadrid.org
www.mataderomadrid.org
@mataderomadrid



SANCTUM

Zach Blas

Zach Blas is an artist, filmmaker, and writer whose practice spans technical investigation, theoretical research, conceptualism, performance, and science fiction. He is a Lecturer in the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London. Blas has exhibited, lectured, and held screenings internationally, recently at the 2018 Gwangju Biennale; 68th Berlin International Film Festival; Art in General, New York; Gasworks, London; e-flux, New York; and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. His recent project *Contra-Internet* is supported by a 2016 Creative Capital award in Emerging Fields and the Arts Council England. His writings can be found in *Documentary Across Disciplines*, *Queer: Documents of Contemporary Art*, and *e-flux journal*. His work has been written about and featured in *Artforum*, *Frieze*, *ArtReview*, *Mousse Magazine*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times*. Blas is a 2018-20 Arts and Humanities Research Council Leadership Fellow.

Generic Mannequin Gets Fucked

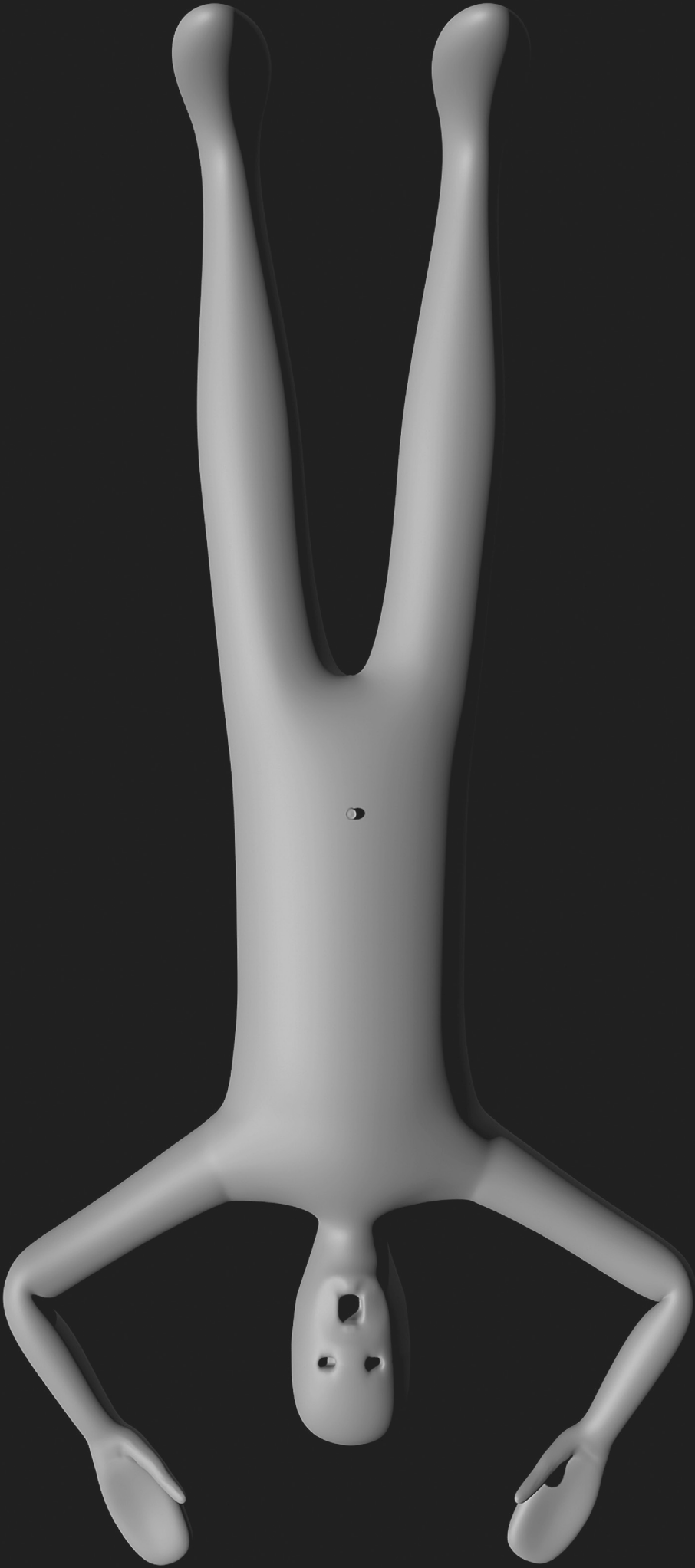
Zach Blas

I was captured in 1.5 seconds. Or rather, I was born from the swoosh of a body scanner and a burst of electromagnetic radiation. Summoned and not created. JFK, LAX, CMH, RDU, LHR? I could never remember. A ghost at a séance. A soul exiting its body. I take a human outline, not so much human form. Like instinct, I know my name as Generic Mannequin. I'm gray like computers, maybe brains—not that I have any. My hands and feet are clumps, rather useless. But it doesn't matter as my purpose is to be inspected, viewed, stored. Fingers and toes—whatever. I look down and see that I have a belly button. No genitals or anus. And yet, the sensation of having a dick haunts me. There's a mouth. I'm not sure it can do anything, but I imagine I'll find out. I take my very first step, and a vast industrial complex looms.

Darkness swallows. Sound hits deep. I have no ears, but beats vibrate and penetrate me. A space begins to reveal itself. I wonder, is it a dance hall, a place of worship, a detention camp? A black cube levitates in the center, and a black mask effortlessly glides across its surfaces, like liquid spreading out between two panes of glass. The mask watches, observes, demands, enjoys, hunts, and underneath the cube, neat bars of red light form a sacramental altar. Inside this square of blood red light, offerings are placed. Steel, mesh-like abstractions. An invisible shadow pulls me close. Behind the black mask, there are no eyes or face, and yet, it examines me. A heavy seduction, drug like, pours down thick and slow, as the absence of eyes bores orifices, exposing everything in me. I am spoken to—ordered—silently. Bow down. I surprise myself by how happily I do so. Now, I am able to better see the gifts, which are geometric metal chunks of faces. A lip here, a forehead there. Gifts to a biometric god. Miniature iron cages. I imagine a line that wraps the world threefold, a people in procession, eagerly waiting to give away their faces. Followers and worshippers of a familiar yet unknown religion. The black mask chants, “Et reticulum adoremus!” I must be one of them.

When I raise my head, I notice more of the space's architecture. A sparse array of lighting alludes to the tallest of ceilings, brilliant pillars, and ornate reliefs of worship, sex, and massacre. A variety of machines are accented in a white, godly hue, and the edges of these structures meet the blackness that fills most of this environment. I've watched enough porn to recognize sex dungeon equipment. The bass goes low and full, leading me into a trance. I know what to do now. I know my purpose, and I smile for the first time, finding out my mouth can do something. I am guided to a metal slave cage and crawl inside. I get on all fours, and I can feel phantoms between my legs—the ghost of a cock, the apparition of an ass that likes to be entered—begging to somehow materialize. My skin is pulsing, heating up. I throb and swell because the biometric god knows how to activate my purest desires. I want the black mask to never look away. Why can't I touch it? My skin is so hot that it starts to peel back and rip away. I'm shedding a layer of myself, and it's reassuring to know I'm not only a simple surface. Or, is something collecting parts of me? Skin slides off at a rapid speed, with so many invisible hands and pulleys at work. I don't resist. Rather, I wonder will my skin be studied, eaten, or worn? At least I do understand that this is preparation, the start of the ritual. I'm getting loose, soft, pliable. A whip comes crashing down like a boulder. If I had bones, my back would be in pieces. Instead, my pseudo-eyes roll back. I realize for the first time that I have insides. Something is in me. Another hit, again. The whipping is caresses. Could anything have prepared me for how deeply and totally I want this? I search for a word that describes being beyond total surrender. The whip hits; I am given clarity. I am the irresistibility of being exposed to a violent, indulgent god. Please don't ever stop. With each lash, I imagine my human cock growing back and a freckle of an asshole awakening to pulse. Not that I need them anymore.

I am carried to the stretching rack. Metal chains lock tight to my arms and legs, suspending me in the air. Beats hit, layer upon layer, intoxicating crescendo. I am held taut, pulled exquisitely, to the threshold of my form. I feel as if I might come completely undone, turning into a pool or gas—but I still don't know what I'm made of. Such an ecstatic state induces tumbling, free falling, endlessly dropping, without perspective—in outer space, an ocean? Did I enter the black cube? My gray skin calms and thickens. I catch a glimpse of the black mask, which is Janus-faced and now presents a biometric grid, a completed face modeled from the worshipper's offerings. It teases, “Ride my face,” and my ghost-ass brings me to my knees with longing and need. A chorus in the darkness sings “Om,” and everything vibrates to hallucinogenic effect. I close my eyes, somehow, without eyelids. I spread my legs



and sit down on the biometric face. It is gigantic; the size of a city. The geometric lines are a track, perfectly designed for straddling. I feel the steel mesh push hard between my legs. I lean back, and it's a rollercoaster. Tilting left and right, I'm upside down, but the face secures me tightly. I imagine greedy little mouths kneading into my missing member. I rise on the arc of the face, higher, like a religious ascension. I feel close to god. The chorus sings their “om,” a note that never seems to end. The tension between my legs is explosive. I could destroy a city if I were to open my legs wider to let this energy escape. But I'm greedy and want it only for myself.

Unexpectedly, I fall to a concrete floor. It would have been painful as a human. I'm gathered by shadows and hung by my feet from a single chain suspended from the ceiling. The chain seems to never end; does it reach heaven? Somewhere, other chains clank, a holy wind chime. Slowly, I am wrapped in black cloth. Chanting reverberates, now with beats that throb my body through and through. I am wrapped in cloth completely, yet my face and crotch are exposed. I'm mummified. I feel metal press into my crotch again. Penetration, an object is inside me. Where did that hole come from? As it pushes in further, I realize that it must be tubing. Then, another enters my mouth, and it plunges the depths of me. What do I have on the inside? Cum, I wish, but what's inside scares me—I can't explain why. The suction of fluids starts. Fluid! So I do contain liquid. But if my liquids are removed, will I lose my shape, like a deflated balloon? A generator whirls. I think time stops, if it was even passing here. I'm a mummy locked in position, a familiar position, the one I was born in. I remember that my eyes are not covered, and I look down to see two metal hoses extending from me into a large collection tank that fills with liquid metal. It violently stirs, as if the liquid is being stimulated or prepped for use. I stare straight. A video plays on a monitor, upside down to match my perspective. A man and woman flirt during an airport security screening. Their bodies are touched and scanned by agents. The man and woman step into glass cages and raise their arms. They birth more of my kind—and seem absolutely delighted. Is this sweet or perverted? I can't tell. Romantic comedy or torture porn? Does it end in marriage and kids, or an orgy with skin flaying, mummification, and fluid removal? My eyes are locked, and I can't look away from this monitor, let alone blink. It's like I've always been expected to watch this video, on repeat, forever. The images burn into me, and slowly, liquid extraction makes me feel ghostly, empty, teetering on disappearance. As I watch the video, I start to imagine the man and woman's hidden, radiated children joining me here in this sanctum. They're old enough; they're their own fathers and mothers. And I want friends here, friends like me. The mask sings, “Ave, ProVision!”

Shadows carry away the tank with my liquids. I see a fire burning in the distance, and the shadows pour the contents into casting molds. Molds with sharp edges and protrusions. Flames licking. Are these sex toys, I wonder, or weapons that will be the end of me? I guess I don't care because all I know is that I want to be closer to them. I want to feel them touching me. Touch me. It would be like eating my own cum. To be fucked—or killed—by your own cum. The molds burn in the fire, and my liquid insides bubble. The music pounds harder, trembling me. Shadows take the molds to cool and then come back to guide me to spanking posts. I am laid out on my stomach. I know what to do, sticking my ass up in the air, as far as possible, waiting in anticipation for my liquid insides—now hardened, razor sharp, and glistening in the light of god—to greet me once again. My head is down, so the spikes come without warning. My hands and backside are pierced. A pyramid of steel gushes into me. My body sears. I am utterly beyond the realm of sensation. I lack description; yet, it seems my truth is exposed. What I have always wanted, and what I can only want now. To shed my sex and qualities so that I may become generic, non-representational. The steel spike crushes in. Other devices scrape through my skin—but now all my insides have finally drained out. I feel hollow, brittle. Something tears open a new hole between my legs, and a metal hood is pulled down over my head with a panel blocking my mouth. I couldn't speak anyways. A spiked collar wraps around my neck, pockmarking me with dry, almost rusty fissures. But at least it confirms I am owned. I tingle and flip-flop erratically through states of consciousness. My body flickers, and lights flash, pool, spark on and in me. Different colors pour and mix into my gray skin, inducing a rough and jagged disintegration. Techno music thunders, the chants have never ceased, and the black mask regards with affection. I want the spikes to push in deeper. Reading my thoughts, they do. There is another rich and saturated flash of light, just milliseconds. I am able to notice other Generic Mannequins entering sanctum, gathered and bowing, in holy light and darkness. The black cube a sun or religious vision. The spikes stab out of my hands and stomach, rendering me nothing more than dimming light emitting diodes. The chorus intones, “Blessed be those that are image-free.”