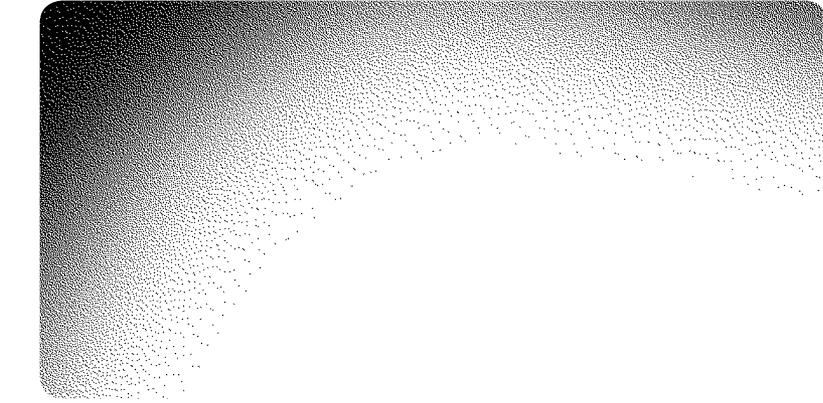
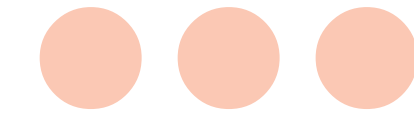


THE SPRAWL



December 18, 2015–April 3, 2016
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts



METAHAVEN

VERTICAL HORIZONS

Ceci Moss

Metahaven describe their new film *The Sprawl* as “propaganda about propaganda”—a mutable work that examines the effect of new networked communication technologies on the state’s public persuasion and diplomacy. The project is a continuation of their ongoing research addressing the negotiations and pitfalls of modern democracy given the rise of mass surveillance, big data, and cloud-based computing. Speculative in nature, their larger body of work occupies a recognizable present and a near future, where traditional understandings of the nation state become complicated by the multiple identities, allegiances, and lines of communication ushered in by new technologies. *Facestate* (2010–12), for instance, imagines a time in which social networks like Facebook have truly become systems of surveillance governing a borderless global society. Metahaven developed a brand and advertising campaign for this fictional society, which is eerily familiar given the widespread tracking already enabled by social media platforms.

The Sprawl exists in a similar temporal space that is both immediate and prognostic. While it focuses on mediated representations of current events such as the Ebola outbreak, the conflict between the Ukraine and Russia, and the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS), the film’s heavily stylized interludes cut through, gesturing toward an anonymous subject on the other side of the screen. Hovering in a ghostly parallel reality, the figures in these clips wield swords or stand transfixed by screens.

Aided by their emotional punch, these mesmerizing snippets are constructed to go viral. Excerpts from Leo Tolstoy’s *What Is Art?* are read aloud by a narrator during a segment, and in an interview with the literary historian Monalisa Gharavi, she reflects on this 1897 book. In it, Tolstoy argues that the activity of art joins humanity in shared emotion; the primary aim of the expressive act is to provoke feelings that create and strengthen those bonds. The reference to this text in the film underscores the ebbs and flows of affect in

our contemporary moment, which drive clicks and web page hits. Propaganda swims among these swells of persuasive emotion: the Prosecutor General of the Republic of Crimea Natalia Poklonskaya’s transformation into a catchy meme following the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the upload of disturbing combat videos by activists in Bahrain, are both cited in the film. Tolstoy understood art as a direct line to universal emotion, a pathway to the truth of shared human experience. By inserting this text into their narrative, Metahaven question the status of this perspective today given the wildly accelerated spectrum of emotion fueled by the internet’s immense output.

The work’s title, *The Sprawl*, makes a deliberate association to land; one thinks of rampant, careless real estate growth, scattered suburbs with strip malls and tract homes. The verb form conjures haphazard proliferation or movement. Perhaps *sprawl* can be read as a type of diagram in the Foucauldian sense, as a structuring mechanism or map of relations between forces that prescribe social relations. Designed as a full-length feature and as something to be spliced into short clips that can be uploaded and distributed via different platforms, traveling on the very networks it describes, the project opens itself up to variations that are indeed sprawling in nature.

Further, the work’s intentionally diffuse format demonstrates the multiplicity described by the theorist Benjamin H. Bratton at the film’s beginning, where he notes, “The development of planetary-scale computation, this accidental mega-structure that I call the Stack, has both deformed and distorted this traditional Westphalian model.” Instead of a national map with distinct borderlines focused narrowly on adjacencies, which Bratton traces back to the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, he argues that the introduction of the Stack over the past twenty-five years due to the emergence of a massive technological infrastructure has ushered in a verticality in which a person, event, site, or network possesses multiple layers of political sovereignty simultaneously. In the present moment, the traditional Westphalian model and the Stack coexist, clash, intersect, and mutate, impacting the conceptualization of both nation and citizen. This tension is an undercurrent throughout *The Sprawl*, and its fractured movement is mirrored in the film’s fluctuating format.

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A text in the film proclaims: “nothing can be hidden forever.” Propaganda operates in this great wide-open space, a major theme of the project. However, the internet’s promise of total transparency is greatly beholden to geopolitical realities and never distributed equally, a fact that Metahaven’s research and work on “black transparency” reminds us of. In their recent book with Sternberg Press, *Black Transparency: The Right to Know in the Age of Mass Surveillance*, as well as past exhibitions at Future Gallery in Berlin and Bureau Europa in Maastricht, the Netherlands, the designers argue that information released by whistleblowers and hackers such as Edward Snowden, WikiLeaks, and Anonymous lays bare the continued secrecy of governments despite pronouncements of openness and transparency. Metahaven term this phenomenon “black transparency” and approach its tactics and consequences through design. “Nothing can be hidden forever” is both a declaration and a warning.

The Sprawl signals not only the mutation of state influence in the age of social media and an unprecedented volume of images, but also alerts us to the status of sovereignty and citizenship under a new paradigm. If, following Bratton, we are witnessing the assertive results of planetary-scale computation, its intricate inner workings remain difficult to represent. Metahaven operate within this haze, following it, tracing circuitry in the shadows.



he invented an encounter with a wolf

Written and directed by: Metahaven
Produced by: Metahaven
Commissioend by: Lighthouse, The Space
Commissioned by: Lighthouse, The Space
Curation: Remko Schuur, Metahaven
Interviews: Benjamin H. Bratton, Maqum Monalisa Ghann, Peter Romeransky
Cast: Gwen Pui, Georgina David, Xianzhong Huang, Asiri Bernali, Kees de Klein, Annabel Reed, Selja Stankovic, Xiaoyao Pippa Xu
Lighthouse
Senior Producer: Emily Kyriakides
Development Producer: Stan Habel-Alli
Artistic Director: Julia van 't Zelfde
Executive Director: Miriam Randall
Communications Manager: Aleida Stronger
Director of Photography: Remko Schuur
Additional Photography: Metahaven
Production Sound Mixer: Ferry de Peter, Tim van Peppen
Edited by: Metahaven
Casting: Metahaven
Editing Consultant: Daniel Goddard
Original Music: Composed by Karello
Sound Design: Jamie Nardo
Camera & Lighting Assistant: Elise Grasso
Production Manager: Val Anna Spierings, Lucy Chen
Production Manager: U.T. Fonia Felcher
Metahaven
Design Assistant: Kees de Klein
After Effects: Benedikte 'Mad' Mox, Woppe
Research: Kees de Klein, Lucy Chen
Web: Jones Lund
Jeroen: Sjaak Suijs, Aie Jui Sui, Ruf Rennie, Chloë Schaffé, Joeri Woudstra, Anastasia Kulnink, Ramon Webster
Curation: Fono (Tobias Corbal), Metahaven
Illustration: Mikaela Decker, Aoi Ushimowitz
Voiceovers: Masha Pruss, Henrietta Mene
Camera Lighting Equipment provided by: Camera Rentals
Schram Studios
Studios: Schram Studios, NL Studios
Insurance provided by: Aon Risk Solutions
Excerpts from:
Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?*, 1897
Anna Akhmatova, *Requiem*, 1935–1940
Nikolai Berdyayev, *Truth and Revelation*, 1953
Ismakhoron Russian: Anastasia Kulnink, Ekaterina Kholopina
Ismakhoron Arabic: Selim Helmi, Remko Kulk
The producers would like to thank: Charlie McGough, Bas Schram, Suzan Bechedel / NL Studios, Sylvie Greenewald, Anthony Lilley, Maria Bota, Ingrid Kopp, Ruth Mäckenzie

Metahaven would like to thank: Julia van 't Zelfde, Stan Habel-Alli, Lighthouse, Ceci Moss, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Lucy Chen, Femke Heinegroen, Jochem Pak, Paul Fuller and Vesper van der Velden
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LIGHTHOUSE

• THE SPACE •

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MEDIA FONDS

NL FILM FONDS

creative industries fund NL

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Designed by Metahaven

ybeca

ART WORKS

