

USER 2

Kristina Nagel

7 May – 15 June 2025

A person in a black leather motorcycle suit stands in front of a black leather chair.
Fluorescent light reflects off their contours.
The chair is weathered, softened by bodies.
The motorcycle suit is broken-in; it's been shaped through use, too.
The person, a woman, grasps the chair's arms and lowers her hips into its seat.
As she sits, her body compresses the chair's cushion against its frame.
She reclines, crosses right leg over left.
She cups the armrests' ripped leather edges.
Her bare palms press against the exposed foam and wood core.
Leaning forward to get up, she leaves ripples in the chair leather, indexing her presence.

This is engagement, this is communication. But if so, what is the content?
What is being transmitted?

The body, the garment, the chair, the room—they are content but content is in zombie mode now. Content is empty. Content is 23 million vids uploaded to TikTok each day. Content is infinite raw material ready to be imprinted by the user. As it is the user, now, or algorithmically sorted pools of users, more than any individual artist or creator, who decides what a piece of content means and what it's worth. So then who or what is the user?

"You are a user. We are users. I am a user," Shumon Basar wrote in the press release for Kristina Nagel's 2023 show, "USER." "These could be confessions shared at an addiction clinic," he continued, "except the substance of abuse isn't alcohol or drugs but digital information and images." For that show, Nagel installed six approaching-billboard-scale portraits of "users," suited in leather, their faces gently blurred.

Here at Gratin in Nagel's "USER 2," the bodies are headless, and fragmented, belonging to the same data class as the other elements: room / chair / garment / body. If in "USER" the self was anonymized, it is now out of the picture. And yet we users have selves.

A self that, as a user, will reflexively fill a piece of content with meaning.

A self that, as a user, needs to imagine its own ass in the leather pants.

A self that will see this show and, as a user, post a take about Futurism and speed, the machinic parceling of a body, and leather as a second skin contra the force of accelerating technological power... or something like that.

Nagel's images are open—available to be scripted. But that kind of storytelling, that kind of story-hallucinating is the job of the users now. That's UGC (user generated content).

It wasn't always this way. The rise of digital (and now neural) networks over the past two decades has changed communication and the site of meaning production and, possibly, all of us with it. "Your body is your response to the state of existing," Bernadette Corporation told us in its 2004 novel *Reena Spaulings*. "[I]t's the materiality you are."¹ But 21-years later, maybe its *users* that selves primarily produce; users more than bodies. We wrap ourselves in users now, wearing them in like leather, which is to say (via some McLuhan apocrypha), we shape our users and thereafter our users shape us.²

Caroline Busta

¹ Bernadette Corporation, *Reena Spaulings* (Semiotext[e], 2004)

² "We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us." Father John Culkin, 1967 (apocryphally attributed to his friend Marshall McLuhan)