Sidsel Meineche Hansen
Rebecca Sykes

Exhibition Review
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About the author(s)
teaches Material Art History at City and Guilds School of Art, London, and Critical and Historical Studies at the Royal College of Art, London. She was a Learning Workshop Assistant at the National Portrait Gallery, London, from 2012 until June 2020.

Cover image:

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The day before I went to see Sidsel Meineche Hansen's exhibition at the Chisenhale Gallery, London, an Amazon Echo Plus (2nd Generation) was delivered to my flat. A Big Tech bauble thrown in for 'free' as part of a new broadband deal, 'our Alexa' became the subject of some serious domestic debate. Should we join the estimated twenty per cent of British households who already have a chatbot in their homes, or learn from the fate of the Trojans and keep it shut up in the box it came in? The number of spaces where we are truly alone is shrinking as surveillance technology, like a bacterial culture, rapidly colonises our public and private spaces. What is maybe most remarkable about the spread of the new technologies that feed on our personal data is the extent to which we, as consumers and citizens, have been largely content to let them into our lives. It is this relatively happy acquiescence between the users and providers of our digital products that *Welcome to End-Used City* aims to probe.

End-Used City (2019), an interactive installation made for the exhibition, consists of three short films accessible through the use of a game controller. The start menu that viewers navigate to initiate the session is dominated by an avatar made using body-scanning technology. The menu looks like the title-page to Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, the seventeenth-century treatise on our need for an absolute ruler who can keep men 'all in awe' if we wish to live a life of peace and comfort. Crucially, the people must give their consent to this arrangement before it can take effect.

Fig. 1 *End-Used City*, by Sidsel Meineche Hansen. 2019. Installation. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate; exh. Chisenhale Gallery, London).

In the original engraving, the Leviathan takes the form of a moustachioed muscleman whose arms and torso teem with the bodies of his subjects. *End-Used City*'s virtual leviathan is an enormous smooth-headed tech-bro sat crossed-legged with a dystopian London cityscape at his back FIG.1. Instead of a sword and sceptre, he holds a game controller that covers his genitals. The faces of several dozen, predominantly white, men – the all-powerful tech-industry players who set the terms and conditions of 'surveillance capitalism' – are embedded in his chest. The latter phrase was coined by Shoshana Zuboff and describes the business model that drives the digital economy by finding new ways to entice consumers into gifting the 'raw material' of their 'behavioural data' to the digital giants, who will then make immense fortunes by laying 'bets on our future behaviour'.[1]

Fig. 2 *End-Used City*, by Sidsel Meineche Hansen. 2019. Installation. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate; exh. Chisenhale Gallery, London).

The three films that follow are inspired by *Cyberpunk 2077*, a role-playing video that features a conspicuous Keanu Reeves as a non-playable character and that is organised around an investigation into the way surveillance technology impacts our experience of public, semi-public and private spaces in London. Common to all three videos is a female game character who speaks with a voice that belongs not to the actress on screen, played by Anna Smith **FIG.2**, but to 'Harmony', a real-life sex robot with a Scottish accent that can be programmed via an app. In the first video we see the character travel around the London Underground wearing zombie contact lenses and a blank stare. Inspired by Transport for London's recent roll-out of a Wi-Fi tracking system designed to monitor the movement of passengers while underground,[2] the video imagines a world where the city is full of humanoid robots who mingle with flesh-and-blood humans-cum-data sources in order to monitor their behaviour. The low-budget sci-fi visuals are accompanied by a voice over that describes how 'smartphone penetration' allows for data to be traded for an 'effective life'.

The second video juxtaposes the surveillance technology of different eras as the android is monitored by close-circuit television cameras operated by the concierge of a residential block. As we watch her move around the building on Cameras 1, 2 and 4, the audio tells us how 'I type the name of the subject into the search field', in reference to the detection and tracking methods today's facial recognition technology has opened up for surveillance professionals. In comparison, the clunky decades-old CCTV used by the concierge **FIG.3** can only watch its target leave the carpark attached to the building. Finally, the video set in the

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'private' space of the artist's flat sees our android, who is now a drone operator, taking the *Big Five Personality Test*, a personality survey that maps users' answers against a taxonomy of behavioural traits, like neuroticism, over the phone: 'Do you think that people are reluctant to be as close to you as you want to be with them?'.[3]

Fig. 3 *End-Used City*, by Sidsel Meineche Hansen. 2019. Installation. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate; exh. Chisenhale Gallery, London).

Despite its compelling premise, it is not clear exactly who the audience, or end-user, for a work like this is. The exercise of disentangling the varied source material for the visual and scripted references – the videos are overlaid with 'clues' in the shape of acronyms and symbols – is not easy for anyone not already immersed in the language of artificial intelligence and is one that ultimately neglects the psychology of such technology's all-too human consumers. The framing of the female agent as a 'playable character' who viewers control from a first-person perspective is in the end limited to starting the videos playing in a pre-determined sequence – 'once you have selected a video you cannot exit' – and by the end I was hungry for a more human touch.

The growing number of men for who the opposite appears to be true is, in part, the subject of the other video work on show. *Maintenancer* FIG.4, made in collaboration with the film-maker Therese Henningsen, is a linguistically awkward but visually compelling film about a woman whose job it is to clean out the orifices of a sex doll in-between client bookings in a German brothel. We hear first from the Madam who describes the benefits of diversifying her services by putting sex dolls with silicone bodies and robotic heads on the menu: 'the dolls are ideal employees …

they're never sick, they always look good and they offer all three holes with no complaints or extra charges'.[4]

The work makes clear that it is chiefly desire that makes us tick 'I Agree' without so much as scanning the legal contract we're effectively signing, as well as, more substantively, how female labour is being redirected in a post-human, prostitution world. While it is interesting to take a moment to think about the men who pay to ejaculate into a silicone pouch 'used' by dozens, if not hundreds, of 'guests', it is the woman who talks about her transferable skills, she worked previously as a care assistant, while pumping her arm into a plastic vagina. 'Anna', the brothel's most requested doll, is seen here sprawled on its back. Hardware still has its place, it seems, and its maintenance requires latex gloves and lots of wet wipes.

Next to the screen sits *Untitled* (2018), two cardboard boxes, like a delivery left on your doorstep, that come courtesy of WM Dolls, a sex robot manufacturer based in Guangdong Province, China. Much like creating a Memoji, visitors to the WM Dolls website are invited to pick their preferred eye colour, manicure style and vaginal depth. *Untitled*'s larger box is similar in size to a small coffin, while a smaller square-shaped box sits on top (robotic heads are sold separately). The latter package mirrors *Public Sculpture (Everything is Personal Data)* FIG.5, a 3D-printed head cast in bronze of the virtual leviathan, placed just to the side of where viewers of *End-Used City* stand (the leviathan is decapitated by a drone once all three videos have played). Despite their shared fate, the two disembodied heads littering the exhibition space seem destined to reinforce the binary of man = (dispassionate) data, woman = (programmable and playable) desire, that the architects of AI seem so anxious to maintain.

The implications of inviting technology that likes to listen into our intimate spaces are far from clear; it will take years for the digital dust to settle. What we do know is that the issue of consumer consent is not something surveillance capitalists show any signs of taking seriously. An insistence on the importance of informed consent is an idea that recurs in *Welcome to End-Used City*; the exhibition even demands that we ask to go to the toilet via *Keychain Secure* FIG.6, a key attached to a laughably impractical key chain, similar in shape to a kayak paddle's bulky protrusion, that is necessary to unlock the door to the gallery toilet and can be requested from the front desk. The work parodies the keychains issued only to paying customers in coffee shops and succeeds in showing that there is no realistic route back to the pre-digital past. The data market place is our new state of nature.
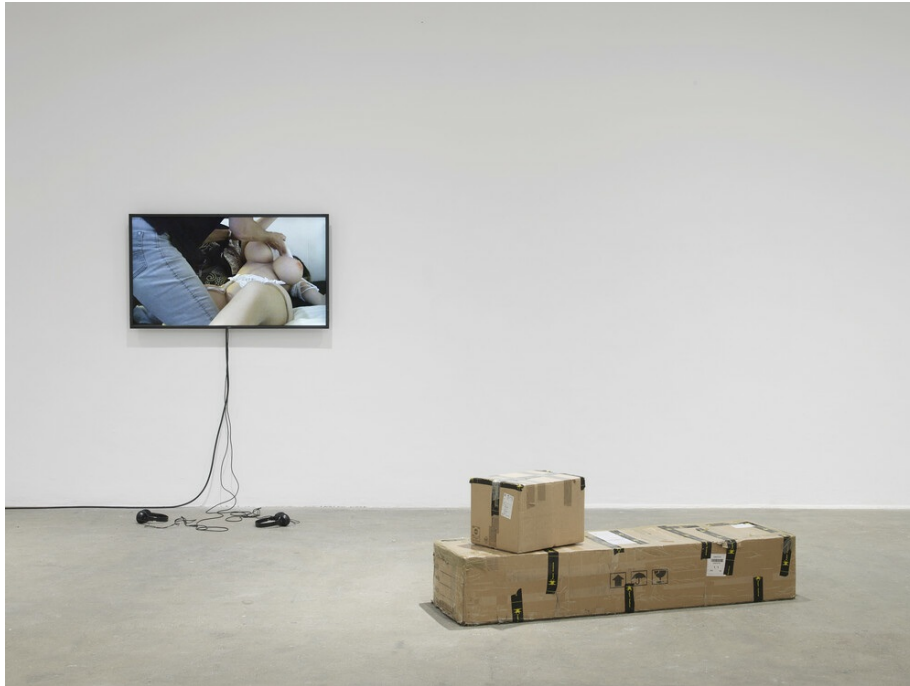
Fig. 4 Installation view of *Sidsel Meineche Hansen: Welcome to End-Used* City, at Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2019. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate).

Fig. 5 *Public Sculpture (Everything is personal Data)*, by Sidsel Meineche Hansen. 2019. Bronze, 20 by 25 by 16 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate; exh. Chisenhale Gallery, London).

Fig. 6 *Keychain Secure*, by Sidsel Meineche Hansen. 2019. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Andy Keate; exh. Chisenhale Gallery, London

Exhibition details Sidsel Meineche Hansen: Welcome to End-
Used City
Chisenhale Gallery, London
20th September–8th December 2019

Footnotes

1   J. Naughton: '"The goal is to automate us": Welcome to the age of surveillance capitalism', *The Guardian*, available at https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/jan/20/shoshana-zuboff-age-of-surveillance-capitalism-google-facebook, accessed 19th October 2019. See S. Zuboff: *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, London 2019.

2   Available at https://tfl.gov.uk/corporate/privacy-and-cookies/wi-fi-data-collection, accessed 23rd October 2019.

3   https://bigfive-test.com/, accessed 21st October 2019.

4   This line is from an interview with the same Madam, for which see M. Schäfer: 'Inside Germany's First Sex Doll Brothel', *Vice*, available at https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/a37g7k/inside-germanys-first-sex-doll-brothel, accessed 19th October 2019.

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