

# CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: SIDSEL MEINECHE HANSEN

Sidsel Meineche Hansen interviewed by Ellen Greig  
Chisenhale Gallery  
13 September 2019

**Ellen Greig:** *Your new exhibition is titled, Welcome to End-Used City (2019). It includes previous works from your PRE-ORDER I-III (2018) series, as well as new works.*

**Sidsel Meineche Hansen:** Yes, *Welcome to End-used City* comes out of a body of work called *PRE-ORDER I-III* that centres around the figure of the sex robot — specifically the prototype of a first-generation sex robot called ‘Harmony’, that consists of a chatbot combined with a lifelike robotic head, attached to a silicon body. If you download and use the software to run the Harmony application, you automatically give consent to the licensors to collect and process your personal data through the product’s end-user licence agreement. So, I have been thinking about the concept of personal data and how your desire to ‘use’ a commodity makes you comply with the surveillance of the provider you are dependent on.

In Shoshana Zuboff’s book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2018), she writes about a person’s need to live an ‘effective life’ which is supported by technology, and how a person might trade their data in order to live that life. She also situates the end-user licence agreement as an instrument for colonisation, where the ‘lay user’ waives their sovereignty. This waiver of sovereignty happens on an economic level, by users being dispossessed from their own data assets, as well as on a psychological level, by the enclosure of mental space and this sense of having your own private thoughts.

*Welcome to End-used City*, is related to these ideas. It always takes me a while to wrap my head around new works but I see *End-Used City* (2019), as a way to think about the city and its residents, in parallel to the sex robot and its users. So, in *End-Used City*, the city is a machine, that collects personal data about the residents, and, it is set in London in the present day, because this is pretty

much what is going on already. So, the show is also about 'terms of use' and also this question of how to self-authorise within a given system.

**EG:** *Hellmouth (To Madame) (2018) is installed at the entrance of the gallery space. For me, it acts as a gate keeper to the space. What does the title 'Hellmouth' refer to?*

**SMH:** The hellmouth is a medieval theatre prop depicting the entrance to hell that was used by the church to promote Christian values. It is also known to be one of the earliest representations of a vagina dentata, based on the belief that the orifices of the female body are entrances to hell. *Hellmouth (To Madame)* is made of latex and is double sided. I like that it is double sided because it alludes to injury but negates this idea that hell is on the other side. *Hellmouth (To Madame)* and the video work *Maintenancer* (2018) relate to each other – through the latex materiality of silicon dolls and how the female form is mass produced with the aim to automate sex.

*Maintenancer* was made together with filmmaker Therese Henningsen. The video is set in a German brothel, where we interview Evelyn Schwarz, dominatrix and brothel owner of Bor- Doll, about her investment in, and relationship to, sex dolls. We also interview her assistant about her job maintaining the dolls, through regular disinfection and repair. So, it is a documentary about this initial transition into post-human prostitution, and how the automation of the sex industry still relies on reproductive labour.

**EG:** *Let's talk about your new work, End-Used City (2019). It is an interactive video work, that, through the use of a game controller, moves audiences through a dystopian account of present-day London, exploring various types of attachment, governance and surveillance.*

**SMH:** *End-Used City* is built around a game structure, where you can select and watch three short videos through the eyes of an animated figure. At the end you can decapitate the figure using a drone, through semi-automatic game play. The gaming format and narrative style in the video takes influence from walk throughs and trailers from a forthcoming game called 'Cyberpunk 2077', that features actor Keanu Reeves as a non-playable character.

*End-Used City* uses the Scottish female voice from the sex robot Harmony as a voice over. Her synthetic voice dubs the movement of the actress Anna Smith, who plays an agent who targets civilians while she moves through public, semi-public and private spaces in London. In my previous work, I've worked with 3D avatars and this is the first time I worked with an actual person. It is also Anna Smith's debut as an actress.

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Across the three videos Anna Smith acts as a 'playable character', who you control from the first-person perspective. She is wearing low-tech eye lenses, that give her augmented vision and make her look robotic. In connection to Zuboff's point about the disclosure of mental space, I started to like this classic sci-fi cross over where the actress gets to play a humanoid robot that looks exactly like a human.

Through the three videos there are ink drawings overlaid onto the footage, that give the viewer 'clues': The smart phone 'flight mode' symbol; an angry face of a passenger on a 'Boris bus' and the acronyms OCEAN which is the 'big 5 personality model' that IBS intelligence algorithms use for identifying consumers and voters etc. There aren't any info graphics in the videos and the concept of personal data is visualised more in terms of infrastructures, situations and spaces.

*EG: Could you talk about the spaces you shot the videos in?*

**SMH:** The first video is shot on the London Underground system after Transport for London (TFL) implemented their new WI-FI tracking system in July this year. TFL hung up a poster stating what they were doing, and informed smartphone commuters, that to opt out you had to put your phone on flight mode. Infrastructures within cities, like public transport, are complicit with the monetization of personal and behavioural data. So currently, around 5 million commuters a day gets tracked because they depend on public transport to get to work.

The second video includes footage from the residential block where I live in London and is based on interviews with two concierges, whose job is to monitor surveillance systems and to provide services to the residents locally. Personally, I have grown accustomed to CCTV cameras within the building. They seem to be from the 1990's where recorded material is stored locally and only observed by the concierge. But the newer cameras, at Kings Cross Station for example, are server based and laced with plug in's for face recognition and pattern recognition. So, in video 2, Anna Smith is dealing with this shift from closed-circuit television to artificial-intelligence equipped surveillance cameras from a residential perspective.

In the last video, Anna Smith is a drone operator and she becomes extrovert about her will as a surveillance capitalist. Footage shot from a drone inside my flat, moves through the balcony door, to the outside of the building, with a finishing close up shot of one of the concierge's cast as an elder version of Anna Smith hovering over the buildings. Her finishing line: "You are all breath-taking" is taken from Keanu Reeves' introduction to 'Cyberpunk 2077', at a game convention. I like the phrase partly because of Keanu's enthusiasm about the game and because it resonates with Edward Snowden's concerns about big internet

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companies, moving towards creating a permanent record of everyone on earth, recording the whole of their daily lives.

**EG:** *Through the use of a game controller audiences can interact with a 'menu' embedded in the eyes of an animated figure, who hovers over the city of London with a drone as his crown. What does the male figure in your video represent?*

**SMH:** The body scan for the animated character is produced by a Canadian company called ScanLab. They create animated digital doubles and virtual actors for films and games. The character is cast to look like a 'virtual leviathan', which references the engraved frontispiece of philosopher Thomas Hobbes' book *Leviathan*, made by Abraham Bosset in 1651. In the original book the torso and arms of the Leviathan are composed of over 300 humans supposedly showing how the people are represented by their contracted leader, who draws his strength from their collective agreement. Contrary to Hobbes' theory perhaps, I have been thinking about products such as Palantir Gotham; Harmony (which is operated by Android) and the end-user licence agreement that comes with them, as a corporate 'social contract' between user and providers. This is why the animated body in *End-Used City* is instead decorated with key figures from the overwhelming white and male population of Silicon Valley, who I think, cement this connection between consumer lifestyle and surveillance.

**EG:** *Before you can 'start the game' and view the three videos the animated figure gives an introduction. What is he saying?*

**SMH:** Contrary to 'deepfakes' that use artificial intelligence to create fake news by making realistic videos of events that never happened, the animated character in *End-Used City* lipsyncs a voice recording of Alex Karp, co-founder and CEO of the software firm Palantir Technologies. The recording that I have used in the work, is taken from an interview with Karp on CNBC where he explains the role his software plays in providing services to national military intelligence to approximately 30 nation states. One of the things Palantir is known for is intelligence for domestic tracking and real-time warfare. For example, ICE in the US, which has responsibility for the location, detention and deportation of undocumented immigrants uses their services. Palantir has a presence also in the UK and I've taken this specific sample, because Karp is promoting Palantir's software as a solution to state governance.

**EG:** *You've installed a new lock on our toilet door, which you have titled Keychain Secure (2019). To access the toilet visitors must attain a key from the front desk that is connected to a comically large key ring. Why have you included this intervention as part of this body of work?*

**SMH:** *Keychain Secure*, is a site-specific work that consists of a wall text, a key and chain and

a new, temporary lock on Chisenhale Gallery's public toilet. The work is about dependency and a system that is based on both trust and distrust. You typically come across the oversized keychain in places like Starbucks or in a petrol station, accompanied by the 'customer only' sign on the toilet door. The underlying logic of the keychain, is that you won't steal or forget to return the toilet key because it is too big to fit into your pocket and to limit the use of the toilet to people with purchasing power. The toilet sign that I have installed in the gallery limits the use of the toilet to the 99%. In Britain the 1% are defined as those earning more than £162,000 before tax.

<https://chisenhale.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Chisenhale-Interview-Sidsel-Meineche-Hansen.pdf>