



ARE YOU DIFFICULT TO WORK WITH?

# Sidsel Meineche Meineche Hansen: The Artist's Guide to Stop Being an Artist

*She isn't making pictures: these are diagrams.  
She isn't an artist, but a software engineer.*  
–Sadie Plant<sup>1</sup>

*Faking ... is extra work ... because when you are faking  
it you never know how far you should go, and you always  
end up doing more for fear of not doing enough.*  
–Silvia Federici<sup>2</sup>

Under the emergent regime of what scholar and researcher Shoshanna Zuboff has named *surveillance capitalism*, the structure of waged or remunerated work – that is, livelihood – has declined in proportion to the 'behavioural surplus' appropriated, at scale, by corporate technology companies from the daily experience of billions of more or less oblivious users.<sup>3</sup> Once considered extraneous information, data collected from search engines, social media platforms, cloud servers, apps and mobile devices is analysed to develop prediction products, with the ultimate potential to forecast or even direct future behaviours, en masse; a form of captive social control derived from the only slightly less nefarious objective of targeted digital advertising. That it is increasingly difficult for young people, particularly in the cultural and academic sectors, to secure salaried employment – to both sell and reproduce their labour power – portends the ongoing transformation of the professional, middle, and working classes into surplus populations from whom much profitable data can be extracted (i.e., accumulated), even without the actual consumption of any good or service. In other words, in this nascent system neither work nor material survival is guaranteed, because neither is exactly necessary for the further expansion of capital. Filtered as complex computational information, human subjectivity itself has become a rich 21st-century resource.<sup>4</sup>

This exploitative, stress-addled context has led contemporary artists in the last several years to examine related themes of bodily exhaustion, dependency, or illness; to theorise various ethics and modes of care; and to re-examine historical feminist critiques of political economy with the aim of exposing the gendered (and raced) dynamics of those seemingly banal online exchanges – trading personal information for 'convenience' and server space – that are rapidly reconstructing both our social imaginary and physical reality. The work of Danish artist Sidsel Meineche Hansen (b. 1981, based in London) performs a 'techno-somatic' critique from within the strict coordinates of this latest form of capitalism, by building on the legacies of 20th-century Kontext Kunst and Institutional Critique. Her previous research-intensive projects have probed the effects of anxiety on the intellect, drawing on sources from Søren Kierkegaard to Paul B. Preciado; the links between global pharmaceutical industries, the distribution of antipsychotic drugs, and the ideology of productivity; and the commodification, gendering and circulation of digital bodies in virtual space, especially as pornography. Her manipulations of the 'readymade' 3D

model EVA v3.0 – purchased from the American company TurboSquid, and custom-animated by the UK digital arts studio Werkflow, Ltd – experimented with ‘queering’ the featureless feminised avatar through simulations of legally censored masturbation (in the UK porn industry, specifically<sup>5</sup>) and vigorous post-human intercourse (partnered with an abstracted and lumpy clay-like 3D object). These almost absurdly ‘explicit’ screen tests (*No Right Way 2 Cum*, 2015; *DICKGIRL 3D(X)*, 2016) – programmed to highlight the unconventional expression and not only reification of female pleasure – also grapple with the limits of objectification and profiling as forms of biopolitical regulation, seen in the work of vanguard artists of the virtual, Peggy Ahwesh (*She Puppet*, 2001) and Lynn Hershman Leeson (*Roberta Breitmore*, 1973–78; *Deep Contact*, 1984–89). Meineche Hansen engages the very same offline-to-online translation issues – regarding arousal, satisfaction, contempt – in a highly networked, highly capitalised era that has witnessed both Gamergate and #MeToo.

Expanding on prior research into the growing market for cybernetic sex and predatory affection,<sup>6</sup> this solo presentation at the National Gallery of Denmark concludes a trilogy of exhibitions begun in 2018 at Kunsthal Aarhus (‘End-user’) and KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (‘Real Doll Theatre’) that share a conceptual premise and a certain kind of economy. Grouped together under the heading PRE-ORDER I-III, Meineche Hansen has taken a cue from Silicon Valley start-up culture by ostensibly recruiting all three institutions to finance the development of a single prototype. According to this business model, the performative functionality of *Untitled*, 2018, on view here, ultimately determines whether it will be reproduced and sold; a mode of specialised craft production in which one-way fulfilment accords to particular client demand (not unlike sex work). An awkwardly reclining androgynous object based on an 18th-century ball-jointed figure, the expectant sculpture also recalls the dumb form of Lutz Bacher’s *Woodman*, 2015, or Sturtevant’s series of soft inflatable *Sex Dolls*, 2016. *Untitled*’s open orifices are precisely scaled for compatibility with mass-produced silicone oral and vaginal inserts that are sold for sex dolls currently on the market. Further supplementing this beta-version ‘body’ of work are various studies and sketches documenting the artist’s research process, including a series of rough laser-cut diagrams, among them: *Satans Museum for Kunst (Satan’s Museum of Art)*, 2019, showing a modified devil card from the Tarot deck with a deadbolt and upturned door handles in place of Baphomet’s horns<sup>7</sup>; *Auto-control*, 2019, describing a mechanical body locked into a chastity belt to which it holds the key; *N15*, 2018, designating the postcode for the artist’s gentrifying neighbourhood of Tottenham in North London; and *Alpha Product*, 2018, charting New-Age justification for profit. If non-reproductive heterosexual sex is still socially reproductive work, for women especially, does Meineche Hansen’s prototype presage a future of total sexual liberation and (human) autonomy? Possible freedom from obligatory sex, altogether, achieves a feat unanticipated in the heated anti-pornography debates of second-wave feminism and furthermore untethers the orgasm from any material use value (production of the family) – through the neoliberal fantasy of automating the intimate drudgeries of both care and sex.

Tracing real world repercussions of recent efforts to rematerialize the spectre of digital congress – via personalised physical interface – a second sculpture and short film demonstrate how advanced robotics, shortly to be integrated

with Artificial Intelligence (AI), are already enabling 'smart' (i.e., post-human) erotic encounters. Ever poised, the strategically stretched limbs of the bisected external shell *Daddy Mould*, 2018, express a rigid receptivity – to both silicone filler, and sensual fetish – even when slanted haphazardly against the gallery wall or floor.<sup>8</sup> *Maintenancer* (with Therese Henningsen, 2018) provides a view onto the specialised reproductive labour required to hygienically restore first-generation 'robots' – i.e., lifelike inanimate dolls – at the BorDoll brothel in Dortmund, Germany, after client sessions. A reminder that sex is messy. But in strangely affecting scenes of extremely deep cleansing, the firm gestures of the former elder-care worker assigned to bathe the dolls also seem to betray some tenderness.

A newly commissioned interactive installation debuting at SMK – *Difficult to Work With?*, 2019 – connects the controlled access point to the gallery with a video-based app and intercom system to *Untitled*. Entering the exhibition space activates a recording of the monologue: *An Artist's Guide to Stop Being an Artist*, delivered by a disembodied talking head (an avatar hybridised from a biometric rendering of Meineche Hansen and a 3D scan of the wooden sculpture's head).<sup>9</sup> The cautionary tale articulated here clarifies the link between the wildly speculative economy of cybersex – with its misogynistic deployment of women and woman-like objects – and that of contemporary art. As an allegory for this hyperbolic, financialised glamour industry, PRE-ORDER I-III explores the ways in which exclusive access, assuring digital presence and seductive performance are tactically deployed in relation to a rapacious market, and the struggling actors knowingly (or not) caught up in it.

Even before the mega proliferation of contemporary art through various online filters, and the subsequent professionalization of art practice globally (after the 2008 financial crisis sparked a market boom), art historian Rhea Anastas articulated the particular personal exploitations underwritten by the art system:

From within the art field, now undergoing rapid expansions, it is possible to locate this question of how art makes use, as in *puts to work*, its subjects in multiple institutionalizations—of art theory's social and political subjects and identities, of art practices, of art students.<sup>10</sup>

In part, her remarks stemmed from the small scandal that erupted around the racy contractual performance work by artist Andrea Fraser, *Untitled*, 2003, which also provides a 'working model' here for Meineche Hansen. As an attempt to qualify the artist's historical lack of control over her market production, Fraser's work commented:

... on social relations and the charged exchanges between dealer, artist, collector, and audience... . [and the] widening uncertainty about what, exactly, the nature of artistic commodification is with regard to the market, given the persistent fetish of the author function.<sup>11</sup>

Where does the artist end and the artwork begin? The user hew from her 'information'? Meineche Hansen is concerned with how both reproductive and social labour are instrumentalised by capital, through the art system in particular:

The work is about the experience of being emptied out by the art system's use of the artist's subjectivity, personal relationships and labour power. The locked door is one very basic way of trying to reinstate control over the work. *Untitled* on the other hand, is a proxy or replacement body for the reproductive aspects of my practice.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond actual materiality – as *artwork* – the Marxist-Feminist question as to whether all heterosexual sex under patriarchy is a form of prostitution, also applies here: is making art, in fact, a kind of work? Or: 'How is the making of a sculpture any different from the making of some other kind of commodity?'<sup>13</sup> The art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson suggests that the difficulty in answering may be twofold; first, under capitalism, art's utopian horizon 'also functions as the "outside", or other, to labour'; and second, beyond the perplexing cultural or capital valuation of technical skill and aesthetics is the 'perpetually unfixed nature of the artist's professional status *since roughly the fifteenth century*'.<sup>14</sup> This historical precariousness allies the figure of the artist with the more general condition of workers employed on zero-hours contracts across all sectors of the economy today. While offering a romantic possibility of escape – dropping out of the system altogether, à la Cady Noland or Lee Lozano – the space of the exhibition at SMK, and the artworks distributed within it, establish Meineche Hansen's dry verbal irony. Another precedent for the effusive 'post-performance' enacted – whereby the artist absents herself, in a direct role-reversal with her avatar – is the conceptualisation of artistic 'services' by Andrea Fraser and Helmut Draxler in 1994. After a torrent of exhibitions inviting artists to produce new work or research materials (*content*) for specific situations or institutions (*on demand*), they asked: 'Is it appropriate or useful to describe as 'service provision' the activities and relations which distinguish "project work" from other modes of artistic practice?'<sup>15</sup>

Rather than a canvas or a bronze sculpture, the commodity then being sold was the labour power – the performance – of the artist. It had only been four years since the invention of the world wide web, yet Fraser and Draxler were prompted to wonder about the 'nature of artistic commodification [in] regard to the market'<sup>16</sup> and whether the recent proliferation of project work perhaps also marked 'a transformation of the social relations in and around artistic activity?'<sup>17</sup> In fact, what they were observing was the transformation of social relations *at large*.<sup>18</sup>

Within the scope of Meineche Hansen's PRE-ORDER I-III project is also a reflection on the preconditioning of the targeted end-user, who likewise consumes the services provided by the hypothetically skinny or green-eyed or insecure AI sex worker (*sublimation via post-human sex*), or conversely, the avatar of the artist (*immersion in this exhibition*). In terms of the actual capacity for surveillance capitalism to fabricate prediction products<sup>19</sup> – unknown desires – using machine intelligence, the sex robot is a treacherous double agent whose cold substitution for reproductive labour recovers a surplus of personal information through transaction. And paradoxically, 'the more engaged (affectionate, violent, talkative)' the encounter, 'the more data is generated'.<sup>20</sup>

In terms of the art system, the danger may be greater, although its source is less clear. Certainly the artist-avatar both physically and theoretically enables a 'philosophy of access' (Meillasoux) to the exhibition space via controlled locking system. But access to what, and for whom? Perhaps there is still a utopian possibility to redefine 'the social relations in and around artistic activity'<sup>21</sup> – which necessarily implies an erotics (relations of penetration), too. Imagine, for example, the artist-subject or 'living object, source of emotion' (Klossowski) freed from art's institutions and circulating endlessly in mutual exchange, ecstasy, enjoyment; returning to the field of art a different form of use value: emotional, social, ethical, intellectual. There may not be much time left before algorithmically predetermined 'desires' are foisted upon us by the endless profiteering of surveillance capitalism and Big Tech—at which point we can expect to be far more than disenfranchised, but fully dispossessed of our selves.

In the midst of the roiling debate over female sexuality in the 1980s, the critic Ellen Willis assiduously warned: 'In the long run, we can win only if women (and men) want freedom (and love) more than they fear its consequences'.<sup>22</sup> But for the frenetically calculated, hostile era in which we live, joyful seizure of the means of production of human subjectivity – ecstatic self-love – comes via poet Dodie Bellamy: 'Know thy foes: the foul devil does not inside my cunt live'.<sup>23</sup>

Stop making art; start to breathe. Your survival is not guaranteed.

NOTES

- 1 Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997), 193.
- 2 Silvia Federici, 'Why Sexuality is Work' (1975), in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 27.
- 3 Sometimes even despite privacy settings. See Shoshana Zuboff interviewed by John Naughton, "'The Goal is to Automate Us': Welcome to the Age of Surveillance Capitalism', *The Observer*, January 20, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/jan/20/shoshana-zuboff-age-of-surveillance-capitalism-google-facebook>.
- 4 And enriching: after Microsoft, Google's parent company, Alphabet Inc., may be headed towards a market valuation of USD 1 trillion, a milestone crossed by both Apple and Amazon in the third quarter of 2018. For every dollar spent on online advertising in the United States, Google and Facebook earn 59 cents. See Matt Phillips, 'Apple's \$1 Trillion Milestone Reflects Rise of Powerful Megacompanies', *New York Times*, August 2, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/02/business/apple-trillion.html>.
- 5 The 2014 ban applies to the depiction of female ejaculation. As Angela Carter wrote: "It is fair to say that, when pornography serves – as with very rare exceptions it always does – to reinforce the prevailing system of values and ideas in a given society, it is tolerated; and when it does not, it is banned". See Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (London: Virago, 1979), 48.
- 6 Considering eroticised data capture.
- 7 "The Devil card indicates that you are tricking yourself into thinking that change is beyond your control". See Sarah Chamizo, 'Tarot Tuesday: The Meaning of the Devil Card', *House of Intuition blog*, June 14, 2016, <https://houseofintuitionia.com/blogs/news/tarot-tuesday-the-meaning-of-the-devil-card>.
- 8 Andrea Dworkin decried this pretended readiness in pornography as a tool of mental conditioning, encouraging men in general to imagine heterosexual sex as bound to women's subjugation.
- 9 The script for the monologue borrows from Alan Carr's guide, *The Easy Way to Stop Smoking* (1985).
- 10 Rhea Anastas, Greg Bordowitz, Andrea Fraser, Julia Koether, and Glenn Ligon, 'The Artist Is a Currency', *Grey Room* 24 (Summer 2006): 110–125. Emphasis added.
- 11 Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'Dirty Commerce: Art Work and Sex Work since the 1970s', *differences* 23.2 (2012): 100.
- 12 Sidsel Meineche Hansen, e-mail to the author, January 2019.
- 13 Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 26.
- 14 Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*, 27, 26. Emphasis added.
- 15 Andrea Fraser and Helmut Draxler, "'Services': A Proposal for an Exhibition and a Topic of Discussion", in Beatrice von Bismark, Diethelm Stöller, Ulf Wuggenig, ed., *Games, Fights, Collaborations: Art and Culture Studies in the Nineties* (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 1996), 196–197. Fraser and Draxler looked to the Artist Workers' Coalition (AWC, established 1969) to help formulate a framework for their own demands; while AWC members in New York had previously looked to artist guilds in Holland and Denmark as models for collectivity without, however, entertaining the possibility of funding from the US Federal government, then waging war in Vietnam.
- 16 Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'Dirty Commerce', 100.
- 17 Fraser and Draxler, "'Services': A Proposal'.
- 18 'The point cannot be emphasised enough: surveillance capitalism is not technology... [It] relies on algorithms and sensors, machine intelligence and platforms, but it is not the same as any of those'. See Zuboff, 'The Goal is to Automate Us'.
- 19 '... that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later', *ibid*.
- 20 Sidsel Meineche Hansen interviewed by Anna Gritz and Jacob Fabricius, PRE-ORDER I-III, 2018.
- 21 Fraser and Draxler, "'Services': A Proposal'.
- 22 Ellen Willis, 'Toward a Feminist Sexual Revolution', *Social Text* 6 (Autumn, 1982): 21.
- 23 Dodie Bellamy, *Cunt Norton* (Los Angeles: Les Figues Press, 2013), 15.





Maintenancer, 2018

Digital video with sound (13:05 min), (inverted video still)

# *An Artist's Guide to Stop Being an Artist*

Difficult to work with?

An Artist's Guide to Stop being an Artist is based on one simple argument; that it doesn't take willpower not to do something that you don't want to do. I understand if this idea makes you nervous. You may think that far from something that you don't want to do, you like the idea of being an artist and love making art. But on the other hand perhaps you hate being an artist.

One of the problems that many artists have when they think about dropping out is the fear that they will never be happy as a non-artist. Of course understandably they think they will have to go through the rest of their lives feeling deprived, wanting to make art but not having a place to exhibit. This is a scary thought, no question about that.

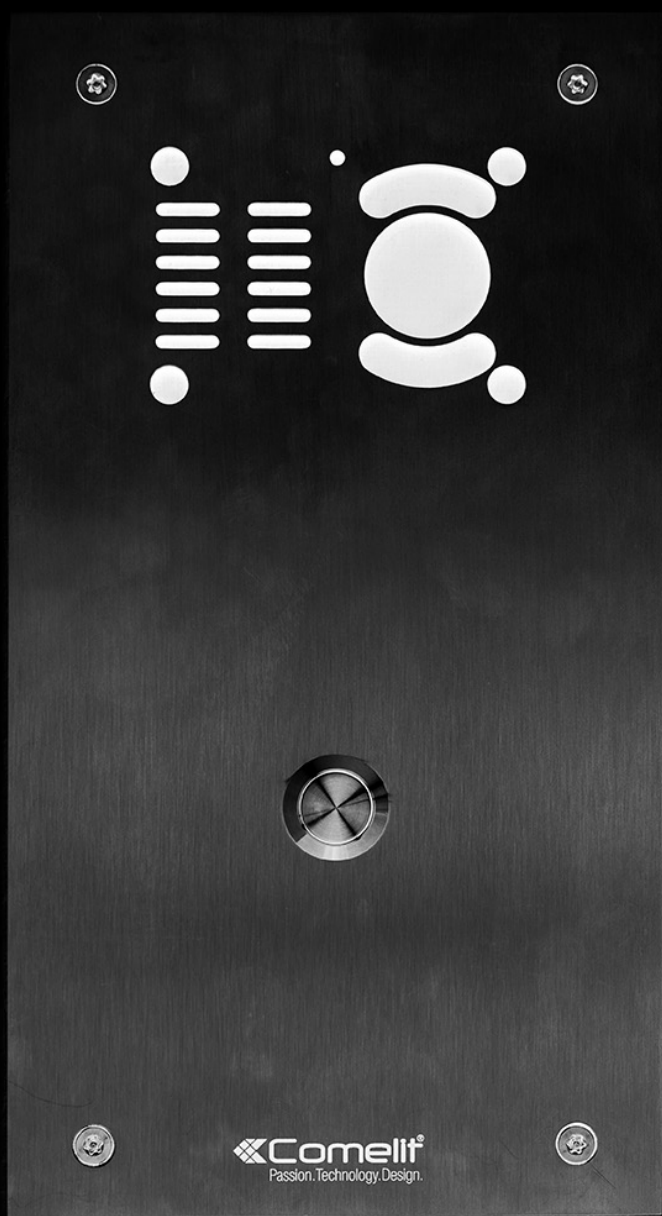
But if you think about it, this fear is not created by art, but by artists working conditions and the beliefs we have. For instance, we know that being an artist is bad for us in many respects but we think it's good in others. We seem to think that we are stuck at the bottom of art's supply chain. That it's hard to stop and that dropping out is extremely brutal. Before we even know how the art field operates – we are convinced that we are either going to make it big or fail. And it gets worse. These beliefs are also reinforced, not only through our own story but through the horror stories we hear from other artists who has testified to the misery of going down the artist career path. These artists experience terrible mental and emotional conflict from the quick turnaround in art. They want to drop out but they still want to make art. This is the conflict that grinds you down every time.

Every now and then you bump into a curator at an opening, who says 'that artist is difficult to work with'. Chances are that, that artist was using this guide. This guide introduces a way to remove the conflict between wanting to make art and wanting to drop out based on the realization, that the desire to be an artist is based on an illusion.

Over time, the cumulative effect of thousands and thousands exhibitions causes artists' brains to make what can be described as a mental filter with respect to being an artist. This filter tricks our brains into thinking that being an artist is in some way beneficial or desirable. For example that eventually the hours of unpaid labour will lead to some level of recognition and you will be able to do art full time. We know that these are illusions, even if they are very clever and subtle ones, because if these things were real, of course ALL artists would be compensated fully for their time. And they aren't.

Now, you might ask yourself, why don't they pay us? Do you believe that patrons, directors, gallerists and curators even, could meet at their own demands, flat broke, working a day job, without a team to support them? No.

To stop being an artist, you have to switch off the mental filter that creates the desire to professionalize as an artist, thereby effectively un-tricking your brain. This is the shift that enables an artist to become difficult to work with. Removing the filter, enables you to see the art field, the way a non-artist would, someone who has absolutely no desire to work for free. It doesn't take them willpower not to work under these conditions. So why should it take you?



Detail of the installation Difficult to work with?, 2019  
Intercom panel in stainless steel, 25×13,6 cm (inverted photo)

Sidsel Meineche Hansen  
AN ARTIST'S GUIDE TO STOP BEING AN ARTIST

X-RUMMET, SMK 29.02. – 29.07. 2019

## UDSTILLINGSGUIDE/BOOKLET

Tekster/Texts:

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Layout:

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Tryk/Printing:

Narayana Press

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## UDSTILLING / EXHIBITION

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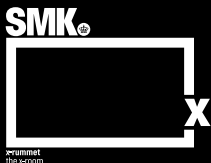
Særlig tak til/Special thanks to:

BorDoll, Povl Kjer, Therese Henningsen, James Wreford, Isaac Clarke,  
Jon Lewis, Holger Hartvig, Asger Hartvig

Udstillingen er lavet i samarbejde med/The exhibition is co-produced with:  
Kunsthall Aarhus & KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin



x-rummet er støttet af Det Obelske Familiefond  
x-rummet is supported by The Obel Family Foundation



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Cover

Untitled, 2018

Ball-jointed doll in wood, life-size, (inverted photo)