

Sidsel Meineche Hansen and Joanne Robertson



SIDSEL MEINECHE HANSEN AND JOANNE ROBERTSON

Sidsel Meineche Hansen is an artist based in London whose diverse body of work deals with the industrial complex of daily life. Her most recent exhibition *INNER CHILD* (Bergen Kunsthalle, 2021) combined a series of sculptural objects entitled *home vs owner* (2020-ongoing) and a new VR piece. For the past decade she has been friends with Joanne Robertson, a singer, songwriter, musician and artist living in Scotland whose most recent exhibition, *Night* (Sandy Brown, Berlin, 2022) featured effusive, free-hand painting on large-scale canvases. In December 2021, Sidsel and Joanne released a limited-edition record, *ALIEN BABY 0 Rules for Life*, published by Tenderbooks London. The 16-track album, which originated in ambient field recordings, was born from the ritual and routines of the household, as well as from the pair's sustained and mutually informative collaboration.

Interview by Christabel Stewart
Portraits courtesy the artists

Christabel Stewart You two have different ways of working in visual culture. Sid, when I was able to visit your exhibition *Welcome to End-Used City* at Chisenhale in London, during the break in UK public-institutional-lockdown-stipulations, I had a very time- and context-specific reaction to the intimacy of watching the documentary *Maintenancer* [2018, with Therese Henningsen], that feature two women, Evelyn Schwarz and her assistant who works at a brothel with a doll outlet in Dortmund, Germany. The assistant was not only responsible for making the bookings, identifying and remembering the clients' needs, but also for cleaning the body of the doll to a standard she was happy with. I spoke about it with someone I know well and their response surprised me; they were dismissive of the value of seeing that level of clinical detail in an art-world setting. Does this kind of video work usually garner such varieties of response?

Sidsel Meineche Hansen It happens. The piece was first exhibited at the KW [Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin], and before the opening I was asked to introduce my solo presentation to the "friends of KW". One of the circle of friends didn't disguise her disgust while looking at the cleaning scene that involves the assistant "fisting" the silicone doll in order to disinfect it on the inside. I found her reaction upsetting because what she's looking at is work! *Maintenancer* is a portrait of an independent sex worker who owns her own business and the day-to-day routines of her employee, who is taking care of the sex dolls – albeit in a hyper-sexualised form. The video largely omits the male consumer because of privacy concerns, but it makes a specific gendered division of labour visible, which is valuable for me, in reference to your question about the art-world setting. My practice typically deals with "female gendered" commodities produced in the tech, pharmaceutical and porn industry and questions concerning ownership and who profits. The video is about the automatising of sex work by way of introducing sex dolls and robots and the other side of the coin in terms of the maintenance work that goes unnoticed. Evelyn Schwarz, who is the founder of Bordoll, works as a dominatrix and she has invested in these dolls as a kind of pension plan. I don't own anything besides the artworks that I've produced. In that sense, I feel a connection with how Evelyn conceptualises ownership and income in connection to these objects.

CS Both of you, Sidsel and Joanne, are on common ground in the discursive art world, but you're also doing extremely different things.

Joanne Robertson I've always wanted to be a bit perverse; I've always wanted to do the thing that I'm not supposed to do. In my painting I deliberately like to get loose and weird and not overly plan. When I started out I was drawn more to ideas surrounding process rather than subject matter. I think that's why I connected so strongly with experimental music. I was researching existentialism, war, and interested in feminism and literature and everything else, but kept coming back to the music scene and specifically free jazz, which influenced my focus on improvisation and spontaneity. The esoteric nature and language around painting – and the specific painting that I'm into – is similar to my interest in experimental music. Many artists I admire have often been connected to ideas happening simultaneously in the music scene. I don't like to use the word experimental too much but I probably should, because it really defines in a way that it doesn't overly contain; it's open.

CS To put together an album – even if recording is less arduous and more compatible with a life of various locations – is a great achievement. How did you begin a friendship that resulted in *ALIEN BABY 0 Rules for Life*?

JR Sidsel and I were both in the music world, the experimental, quiet, underground world, which was connected to the art world at that time, and still is. We met years ago and we've always been friends, but I think we're drawn to one another because of a shared sense of humour and a lateral energy. Even though we're different, we can communicate quite clearly, which corresponds to some of the best principles of the philosophy I'm interested in: you can talk to people from different contexts and find commonality, which is beautiful and quite poetic. Doing very similar work can sometimes be problematic because it can be almost too close, but the record was a different medium that neither of us had worked with. I mean, I work with sound, but we made this record in a way that felt new to me. We were almost inventing a new sort of language, which came out of our friendship.

CS I think that's the most respectful thing I've ever heard one person say about another.

SH The album came out of lockdown and making recordings in the flat in Seven Sisters, in the kitchen or in the studio, or in the toilet of the studio, and then sending them to Jo. Daily things like vacuum cleaning, peeing and moving from one place to the other... At that point, I had also broken my foot and I was moving around on crutches... I had this preoccupation with specific lines, "I want me and me to be happy together – forever" or thoughts in relation to a person or a relationship, and it's intimate in that way. We were speaking on the phone a lot, too.

CS A lockdown thought that has taken me a while to comprehend is that when I was growing up music connected me to the outside beyond any other genre; it provided the narrative that got me outside of what I was living with daily. How did you make this record together, living in different cities? How did it work, practically?

JR The internet!

CS Oh, that old thing...

JR No, but Sidsel also came up to Glasgow. I've always wanted to live in the countryside or somewhere else other than the city, and I can host people there because I get less anxious than when I'm out in a club or a bar, with the noise of the bar and everybody drinking.

CS My own response to visual culture is very connected to writing, listening, a long history of conversations, collaborations – "engagement", for want of a better word. Yet that materiality is the core tension of much art-making – there are differences between conceptual ideas of life and reality and actually trying to deal with it on a visual or even an aural level.

SH There are different things happening in terms of what sounds are being recorded and in the poetry of Jo's songs and then there's a third way that's more random and intuitive. For instance, the first track "Angel" came from Jo getting me to sing Aerosmith, which I obviously couldn't do. Some of it is a little bit like when you watch a dog on TikTok trying to sing to the radio – there's an approximation to singing, to music. ●