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art that returns the gaze: 'data dating' review

Wednesday, 29 January 2020



Ashley Madison Angels at Work in London - !Mediengruppe Bitnik

January 15 - March 1 2020 @ Watermans Art Centre, London

Across an awfully Americanesque McDonald's drive-thru stands a building emblazoned with gaudy text begging to be noticed. It's hard to miss when it's the only trace of colour amongst the lonely streets of Brentford- well, besides that unmistakable yellow glow of the universal 'M' from across the road. Again, that's not the only thing that's universal here, though. Housed in this building, the Watermans Art Centre, is an exploration of a similarly border-transcending phenomenon- online dating- by several international artists, John Yuyi and !Mediengruppe Bitnik to name a few.

At first glance, it seems like a stark contrast, something amiss- a local arts centre, frequented predominantly by seniors, juxtaposed with a state-of-the-art, hyperdigital exhibit that could easily be branded as a "millennial thing". But perhaps it's a sign of the times; as the Internet's sheer penetrative power comes to feel like a fundamental feature of the human condition, we're no longer able to classify digital romance as a discrete generational phenomenon. New means of connection are shifting the old paradigms of love, and upon entrance to the exhibition, this is immediately affirmed by Adam Basanta's assemblage of readymades.

Standing stiffly in the centre of the room is this interactive assemblage, *A Truly Magical Moment*. Comprised of two iPhones on selfie sticks facing one another, mounted on a revolving disk, the gadget invites two people to video call each of the phones. Once connected in a virtual face-to-face- voila! The sculpture begins to spin, reaching dizzying speeds while the image of your partner stays in focus. In its perfunctory methodicalness, it's a bleak recreation of that archetypal scene in romantic cinema: two star-crossed lovers, hands entwined, spinning whimsically in the middle of the dance floor. Gazing amorously into each others' eyes, the room begins to blur: it's just you and your one true love. Except it's two iPhones, and mosaics of 240 flesh-toned pixels.

At a point in time where corporeality is no longer a prerequisite to romance, definitions of intimacy are inevitably changing. Yet, despite the Internet's recent inception, these conversations on love in the digital age don't feel unprecedented. How could they, when we exist in an era that's borne witness to the birth of an entire online dating subgenre of rom-coms? But while it certainly can be taken with a grain of salt, there's also a more ominous underbelly brewing that resists the Hollywood treatment. In *Data Dating*, this disconcerting dimension is literally concealed behind a hot-pink fringe curtain that demarcates the family-friendly from the 'viewer's discretion' section.

Behind this veil, audiences encounter !Mediengruppe Bitnik's *Ashley Madison Angels at Work in London*: an army of five CGI fembots on mounted screens, with egg-smooth skin and unwavering, beady-eyed stares. It's a startling confrontation to say the least; you're outnumbered, one to five, as the cyborg clan returns the gaze you're expecting to take a one-way course. Referring to the Canadian extramarital dating service, Ashley Madison, the installation deploys the breached user data which revealed the 75,000 female chatbots the service had created to compensate for their disproportionate male-to-female ratio. These bots- crisp, fine-tuned- contrast sharply with the glitchy jigsaws of actual humans in *A Truly Magical Moment*, prompting a reassessment of any preconceived notions on authenticity and what it may entail. But while the screens' clarity stand in obvious distinction, the line dividing machine from human may not be so conspicuous.

In all areas, preconceived notions seem to be what needs to be suspended; stepping foot into Watermans for *Data Dating*, one may anticipate something a little ho-hum, watered down to cater to the suburban Brentford family. Yet, with its mishmash of oddities- fembots, disgruntled seniors, a Maccies across the road- *Data Dating* proves to be a surreal, prodding experience certainly greater than the sum of its parts.

Data Dating is at Watermans Art Centre, London, until 1 March.

about



danni * capricorn sun, scorpio moon, gemini ascendant

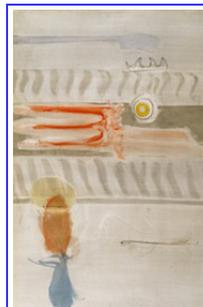
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