

INES BOROVIAC: XSENOFOLK

Upon entering the VR installation "Mint me, I'm an Artist!" by the collective Xsenofemme and Nika de la Loncha, I come across a metal shopping cart, and a dusky-pink aura that envelops me, transforming the act of shopping into an extraordinary experience. As I climb the floors of the store, female body parts float around me, depersonalized carnal items marked with tattoos or freckles (Girl, so confusing...). Grotesque scenes from *The House That Jack Built* flash before my eyes, but rather than conveying a sense of general nihilism, these grotesque, floating, dematerialized body parts strongly indicate a materialistic foundation in the work of Ines Borovac. Virtual reality, as an immersive technology, is an appropriate and well-thought-out choice for the format of the artwork, because the act of immersion and merging, inherent to this technology, often points to the blurring of boundaries between users and the algorithms designed to exploit their data. In contrast, the installation "Mint me" uses the quality of immersiveness to awaken us from that state of 'slumber,' while the disembodied, computer-modified voices of the artists inform us about the precarious working conditions of performance artists and the potential for harnessing the effects of the crypto market to achieve some different goals.

Operating at the intersection of performance and new media, i.e., pervasive digital tools, the artist, in the spirit of xenofeminism, advocates for the strategic use of existing technology to reshape and rebuild the world around us, both material and cybernetic. Her artistic practice cannot be viewed outside a strong feminist lens, and themes such as girlhood, sexuality and romantic love, the female body, and autonomy. Using tools developed in the decidedly techno-masculine climate of Silicon Valley, Borovac uncovers some completely different narratives. For example, in the work "Why Wouldn't You Date Me?", she explicitly gamifies the dating experience using a dating app to highlight the inherent calculation and determination of these rituals, which, in the European context, trace back to the Middle Ages, in a similar form, but cloaked in the chivalrous ideal of romantic love. The apple that a young woman would give to her beloved, as the only sign and gesture of autonomy, today symbolically shines from the background of our phones, whose screen-time warnings we persistently ignore. The phenomenological body is annulled, merging with the device that becomes the main interface for creating romantic, sexual, and emotional connections.

Ines Borovac's artistic work is also characterized by a combination of the traditional heritage of her background and contemporary artistic currents and technologies. Local folklore motifs are conveyed using modern technologies and feminist, emancipatory language, and they also contain a pronounced critique of the capitalist system in which these social rituals take place. The performative component, i.e. the use of her own body, is almost always present and charged with critical potential in the sense of provoking, seeking, speaking out. Thus, in the introductory performance "I do not dream of network, I dream of rest and compassion", with which she welcomes the audience at the opening, the artist

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paraphrases in the form of online *memes* a widely shared saying – *I do not dream of labour*. The Gen Z population does not seek a dream job and refuses to dream of work.

By putting the visitors in an uncomfortable situation, the artist confronts them with the reality of a performing artist who constantly gives away and loses a part of herself in the work process. By thematizing the working conditions of artists, uncertainty and burnout, she tries to raise awareness among the audience and evoke empathy. It is also worth noting that Borovac is formally trained as a designer, specifically in the field of social design, a field that significantly impacts her artistic work.

The artist's own identity is, in a sense, split between Croatian and Dutch cultures, which is also reflected in her work. In the installation "Crossing Fences", Borovac takes a comparative perspective on privacy from both Dutch and southern Croatian viewpoints, exploring how cultural norms and codes shape our attitudes towards exposing and hiding our bodies and private lives. By juxtaposing two materials with different properties, the artist questions the relationship between the observer and the observed, exhibitionists and voyeurs of Protestant or Catholic provenance.

The project "She Posted Happily Ever After" connects Matovilka, aka Rapunzel, with the so-called *tradwives*, two 'fairytale' scenarios that serve up a dangerous ideology, promising protection and freedom from burden, much like Bluebeard once did. Through the phenomenon of *tradwives*, she points to the paradox of monetising female passivity, submissiveness and domesticity, which appears to spring directly from the nightmares of Betty Friedan. Yet, all these housewives, mothers, homemakers have millions of followers on social media and are, in fact, earning substantial incomes by presenting their perfect lives and 'liquid bodies' as a sweetener to the bitter, reactionary message they promote.

Ines Borovac swipes left on this and refuses to perform to please the audience or social conventions. With her work, she uncompromisingly brings us back to the space-time coordinates we inhabit, advocating not 'freedom from' but for 'freedom to' actively redesign our reality using tools from which we can no longer escape.

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