On Site

Exhibitions, installations, etc

Exploit.zzxjoanw.Gen
Punctum/Collective Gallery
punctumrecords.com/exploitzzxjoanwgen

Exploit.zzxjoanw.Gen is an audio magazine, art exhibition and sculpture all wrapped up in a small, customised USB stick. With a running time just over three hours, it contains 19 tracks by a variety of artists and musicians, along with a 60 page PDF publication.

Even though it's about the size of a pen, the object – designed by the Plastique Fantastique artist collective – is a remarkably unsettling thing in itself: a black perspex silhouette of a headless figure with a skull cut through its torso. Both its arms are raised, with one holding a sword skywards, the other clenching what looks like a flaming heart. Plugging it into my computer, a small red light starts to glow from beneath a layer of coloured, woven ribbon that attaches the small figure to the USB stick. On close inspection, all of the materials used are mass produced and cheap, but it's a brilliant example of getting the maximum effect out of humble means. Any sense of gimmickry is eradicated by the object's radiant oddness, its creepiness causing me to stash it away in a little box, like I was burying a malignant fetish object.

Sitting at my laptop alone at night, listening to the brain tweaking soundscapes and collages through my headphones, the little red light shimmering below the spiky figure has been an experience that's by turns intriguing and upsetting. The works are described by *Exploit.zzxjoanw.Gen* as sonic fictions, but what they create altogether is closer to a kind of sonic house of horrors, conjuring up anxious, if not sometimes outright paranoid worlds.

The absurdist pop collages of Andy Sharp's English Heretic project make two appearances. His "Space Time Ritual" kicks off the playlist with a snippet from a *Dr Who* episode: *"We have no need for symbols – you and I"*. The plummy voice is dubbed over a churning psych rock sample and turned askew, causing discomfiture. With their schmaltzy lyrics about life under digital culture ("*Singularity/Always online is where I want to be*"), Jillian Mayer's peppy Top 40 pastiche tunes are cute at first, but quickly gain a hollow eyed, sinister quality with repetition, especially when they segue into artist Christine Ellison aka Polly Fibre's "Bitstreams: Overture For A Post-Digital Opera". Beginning with the Apple Mac startup sound, the composition takes apart a variety of computer sound designs. The Mac chord is first bland, then cheery, then through the manipulation of sounds like the Skype ring tone, Ellison shows just how emotionally affecting these bleeps and chimes become to regular users, signifying conditioned types of hope and anticipation.

The sonic fictions here often have cinematic connotations. AAS's 30 minute, John Carpenter inspired doom dirge "Balancing Ritual" builds into a dark, occult crescendo, like music made to accompany a horror film or a ritual mass. The Cult Of RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ's "Cultiplicate" stays true to the surreal wit of its 1980s hiphop namesake, creating a rambling and energetic playlist collage that seems to dip in and out of a performance documentation. Benedict Drew's "Library" is an extended swim through a personal database of narrative moods and feelings revisited through movies, but with an underlying tone of anxiety ready to burst out at any time.

JG Ballard's shadow looms across *Exploit.zzxjoanw.Gen*. He's cited numerous times in curator/editor Dane Sutherland's accompanying text (along with a dose of Georges Bataille). The project is deeply enmeshed in picking apart our post-internet, post-digital, post-Web 2.0 (or post- whatever else you can think of) era. Life after the internet has taken hold and produced its first generation of web savvy humans. Indeed, the main chunk of the PDF is given over to Sutherland's outlining of recent ideas surrounding vaporwave, a loose field of theorising and art acitvities that tries to grasp the ephemerality of our lives under digital culture and capitalism, and possibly sets out to critique it.

The only drawback to fully embracing the *Exploit.zzxjoanw.Gen* headfuck is that it claims to be a zine, but its tone and jargon make it read more like an academic text. That said, it's still a good user's manual that points towards potentially effective ways of communicating obscure ideas while coming up with vibrant and engaging musical and artistic reactions. Further, its contributing artists aren't your obvious or cliched vaporwave choices.They're more likely to complicate and mess up any preconceptions about the aesthetics of the online world as something sanitised and cold, or new age-y and cheesy.

One of the most refreshing aspects of *Exploit.zzxjoanw.Gen* is that it never falls into simplistic and lazy ideas about the disembodied internet of the clouds, where digital culture takes place in nonspace and has no connection with the physical world.

At a basic level, *Exploit.zzxjoanw.Gen* could have simply been a downloadable .zip file, but the strange physical container people take away with them makes it so much more than just a playlist. It has a tomb of the undead vibe; that what's stored in it is meant to be, belongs or even needs to be in there.

Nathan Budzinski

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