

REVIEWS

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ED FORNIELES

Arratia Beer
Berlin

Thomas Bettridge

'It's scary to think about all the potential that is lost by those who do not use it.' This is the opening line of Ed Fornieles's video *Der Geist* (2016), shown at Arratia Beer for Fornieles's solo exhibition 'Der Geist: Flesh Feast', which features figurines, printed wall-carpets, diet-packs, and other motivational messaging centred on the story of a cartoon fox and his success with the Bulletproof Diet. The words remind me of the film *Limitless* (2011) with Bradley Cooper. In this blockbuster pharmaceutical, Cooper plays a novelist with writer's block who gets his hands on a new smart drug that unlocks unused parts of the brain. He finishes his novel and immediately moves on to more 'challenging' endeavors, like playing the stock market and getting involved with shady billionaires. His world becomes a space of sleek hotel interiors, sports cars, and poorly-drawn female love interests: showing us the 'potential' that lays dormant within the fog of lethargy, obesity and boredom beset by contemporary bourgeois culture. Our brain is just blocking us from achievement, stilted and frozen as our bodies turn into a Netflix-flavored bisque.

Although Fornieles's video deals in different imagery – corporate self-help rhetoric as opposed to post-adolescent notions of what it means to be a baller – it operates, like *Limitless*, through the same cyclical economy of desire-as-fear. Here, self-actualization is attained without any notion of transgression. The 'unlocked' mind does not escape the machinations of white collar living, but is simply able to navigate it more quickly:

to produce faster, to spend faster. This is what freedom looks like when it is cold-pressed into green juice: 'S-U-C-C-E-S-S'!

I always had a feeling that *Limitless* was a long-form advertisement for Adderall, the prescription amphetamine that fuels American college campuses and hedge funds. Fornieles's exhibition bears a similar relation to the Bulletproof Diet, a high-fat, low-carb diet trend invented by a man named

Dave Asprey. The cover of Asprey's bestseller reads 'Upgrade your LIFE' – showing us where Fornieles found the libretto of his film. 'Der Geist: Flesh Feast' is a constellation of motivational objects, or rather propaganda, churned through the processes that create a contemporary art patina. Posters made of digitally-printed carpeting advertise slogans like 'control the things you can control' and 'don't believe everything you think'. One is shaped like a clock, the other like a food pyramid.

Time and nutrition here are the x- and y-axes of Fornieles's depiction of bodily anxiety. There is a sculpture featuring two creatures made of vegetables and lemons, while mounted on the walls are vacuum-sealed packages containing espresso beans and fabric that I assume is clothing. These allude to the starter-packs that Fornieles was selling at the exhibition, the espresso beans being the basis for Bulletproof Coffee: a mixture of espresso and butter is the staple of the diet. A series of glass vitrines holds 3D-printed figurines of a cartoon fox, a recurring character in Fornieles's work, both on- and off-line, which stands in as a surrogate for the artist. They depict various scenes of self-improvement: the fox lying on a psychoanalyst's couch, the fox doing posture exercises on a chair, the fox sitting at his desk with eight Shiva-like arms that hold various corporate utensils. The video tells this character's story, starting in a quagmire of listlessness before embarking on a project of self-optimization: dieting, exercise, self-control. The press release reads like a pyramid scheme: 'Read as though you must teach this to others.' It refers to the viewers as eaters, slimmers and improvers. The text even references Ockham's

razor: everything superfluous must disappear. I sit in the plastic lounge chairs provided by the gallery and watch the film three times, wearing shorts and still covered in dry sweat from the 5k jog I took prior to my visit, doubtlessly implicated in the subject matter: 'You are fantastic. Your mind is full of strength.'

In Marx's breakdown of capital, surplus is a faceless variable that may or may not be reinvested into production. It is not until Georges Bataille's theory of political economy that we get an account of what excess really entails – the occult and opulent ways in which the extra must be spurned and burned off. The present-day service economy trades almost entirely in the management of this dilemma. Excess body weight, excess time – there are apps to help us with this: tools for self-control that now dominate the luxury market. But what Fornieles's film bypasses in its rhetoric are the ways in which self-control and control proper are one and the same. On second view, I realize that the computer-like female voiceover MC'ing the video is almost exactly like Siri, Apple's take on the (female) digital secretary. Though Apple thought of women when creating its digital concierge, it curiously forgot to include menstruation in its earliest incarnations of its 'Health' app. Details like this suggest that the endgame of the tech industry is to create a new Eden where slim and focused Bradley Coopers mingle freely with female sex-robots. It makes me wonder: Is Fornieles's fox an average Joe trying to crush more to-do lists, or is he a Marinetti-style proto-fascist?

Before visiting this exhibition, I wondered why I had been seeing so many kettlebells in artists' studios. It is a relief that the era where exercise and nutrition were only yuppy pastimes has faded, all while the cultural capital of the cigarette-smoking, beer-bloated radical à la Martin Kippenberger is also on the wane. But there seems to be something inherently *corps-orate* about how the body is self-administered in these lifestyle regimes. In an era in which power and its oppositional forces have merged, many artists have become managers and gym-rats. This should not be lamented, nor should

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Ed Fornieles
Der Geist: Flesh Feast
2016
installation view

