

CAPITALIST CONSUMPTION: THE INSTITUTE FOR NEW FEEL- ING AT BALLROOM MARFA

By Brandon Zech – December 30, 2016



The Insitute for New Feeling
Pillow
cast concrete
Courtesy the artists and
Ballroom Marfa

We live in a world where everything can be bought and sold for a price. Food, services, and art all fall prey to the same capitalist venture, and while some artists try and resist this mode of thinking, others, like the Institute for New Feeling (IfNf) plunge headfirst into the concept of creating goods for consumption. But IfNf does this with a twist; the collective is not selling paintings on Etsy and they don't have a Big Cartel store. Instead, they make functional useless objects.

At first glance, the Institute's products appear normal—an air freshener, earplugs, a travel pillow—but the more time you spend with them, you realize they're not quite right. The air freshener emits oxytocin, a hormone that facilitates both intimacy and envy. The earplugs are created from mochi (rice powder, corn syrup, glycerin) and are

edible. And the travel pillow, made from cast concrete, is likely the most unusable object of them all.

The IfNf was founded by artists Scott Andrew, Agnes Bolt, and Nina Sarnelle as a “research clinic committed to the development of new ways of feeling, and ways of feeling new.” Their website mimics that of a health-conscious lifestyle brand and they produce both “products,” like the ones listed above, and video works. A number of these videos act as sales pitches for their wares. Coming in at a palatable length of around two minutes, each commercial features pulsating, meditative music along with beautifully set-up shots of each object. Though the advertisements vaguely reference the intended benefit of each product, they end up (like so many other commercials) offering only buzzwords.



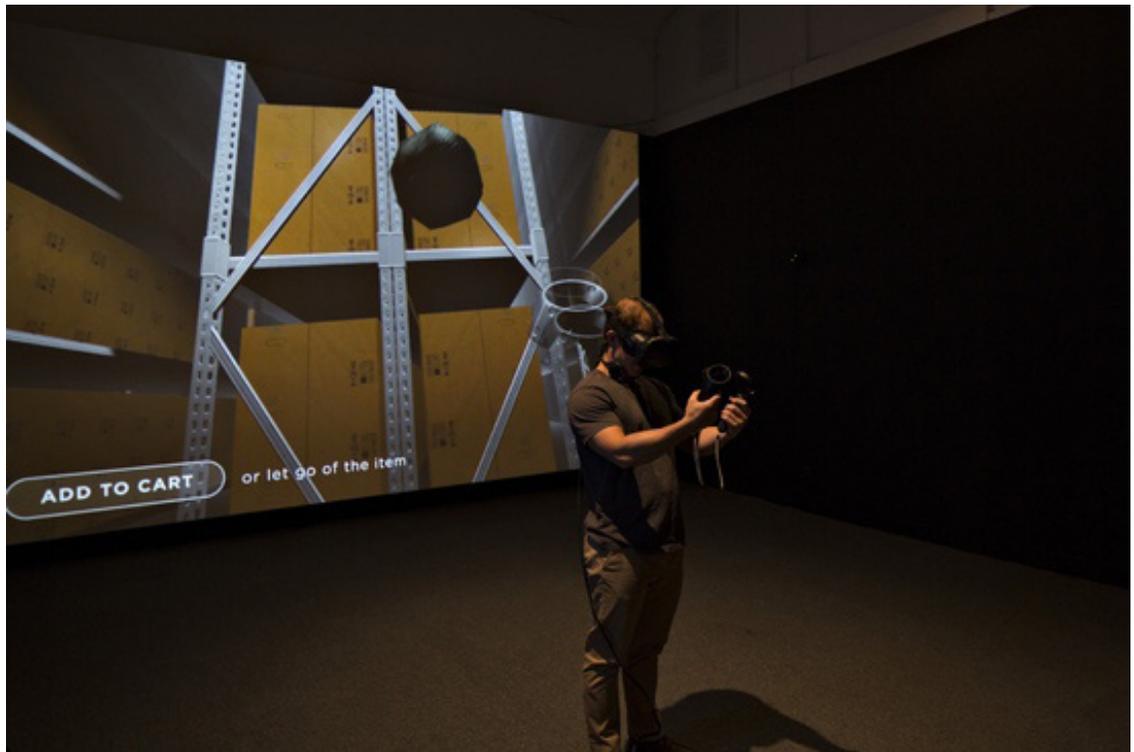
Installation view of
This is Presence
Courtesy the artists and
Ballroom Marfa

This is Presence, the IfNf's exhibition currently on view at Ballroom Marfa, presents a host of its products to a public that is familiar with small boutique-style shops. Set atop clean white pedestals, each object is displayed with a retail sensibility, just begging the visitor to reach out and touch. This, ultimately, is where the idea of each object as a product comes crashing down. You can't pick up the concrete neck pillow and feel its weight; you can't stick your hand into the spinning vat of furthering cream, and you definitely can't pick up and eat a mochi earplug. And this realization does one of two things—it either tickles you because you realize that the IfNf knows they are creating absurdist objects that parade around as consumer goods like a wolf in sheep's clothing, or, it makes you wonder why the IfNf didn't go whole-hog and actually create consumer objects in an attempt to subvert the art world.

Either way, the one thing that lost me was the fact that there was no reason to buy.

There was no on-the-ground sales pitch. If I walk into a boutique, I am going to be met by an enthusiastic person ready to show me everything. At Ballroom, however, the products were idolized and out of reach. They needed that personal touch, that interactive element, that excited explainer. In this regard, the display of the products on the IfNf's website is very successful. It's hard to replicate a personalized online shopping experience in a white-walled gallery—which brings me to my favorite element of the show.

Ballroom Marfa commissioned the IfNf to create Ditherer, an interactive virtual reality shopping experience. For this, the visitor dons a virtual-reality headset and holds a trigger controller in either hand as they peruse an infinite warehouse piled high with boxes. Immediately accessible are stacks of specific objects: avocados, The Universe: The Mega Collection on blu-ray, and jet-lag pills, just to name a few. When 'picked up' by the viewer, each object is supposed to



Installation view of
This is Presence
Ditherer
2016
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transport them to a setting where they encounter an experience related to the object itself. Though many of the worlds were still being built out and weren't yet accessible, picking up the avocado transported the viewer into the bed of a truck that was backing up through a lush landscape into the open-aired living room of a house. Virtual reality has come a long way in the past few years and the IfNf are smartly using it to predict a world where knowing where your food comes from means experiencing a VR simulation of a landscape that supports the growth and harvesting of that food. I can be sold on this because this actually is the future.

Though lacking a salesman-like element,

the IfNf's show at Ballroom Marfa is well put-together. This young collective is establishing what it means to create products in a world where art objects and consumer goods are at odds with each other. From insoles to perfumes, they have made commodities that flirt with the line between both worlds. I'll be looking on expectantly to see where they go next.