

EXHIBITIONS

By **Chris Clarke**

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SM van der Linden, EXILE, Vienna

SM van der Linden at EXILE

Still from SM van der Linden, *Megaflittchen* (Megaslut), early 1990s, video animation, 10 min. Courtesy: the artist

In Vienna, a former sex worker's mash-up of broke pop, bad taste, and low-res funk beckons the outsider – and can be extremely slippery.

If you spend enough time on the internet, you'll eventually come across them: a terminally online, alt-right clique of embittered misanthropes, communicating through a shared vernacular of memes, GIFs, sneering sarcasm, and impenetrable in-jokes. When confronted with a solid argument, they retreat into solipsism, defiantly convinced of their unique, unmediated perspicacity. For they've already taken the red pill, the twist of fate that allows the hero of *The Matrix* (1999) to see the reality beneath simulated society. (Never mind that the Wachowski sisters have spoken of their film as an allegory for their own gender transitions.)

Borrowing its title from the third installment in the series (*Revolutions*, 2003), and curated by fellow artist and critic Oliver Koerner von Gustorf, SM van der Linden's (*1952) exhibition at EXILE, nevertheless presents a very different internet: one that is an entry point to an emancipatory, feminist, and queer culture. After all, van der Linden herself was immersed in the Berlin underground scene of the 1990s and 2000s as an artist and sex worker, and her practice, while not explicitly autobiographical, evokes that atmosphere (or, at least, how we imagine it nowadays). An upstairs room resembles a cramped, grotty squat, wallpapered with typewritten pages, many of its German lines crossed out or corrected: short stories, diary entries, mentions of *Genitalien* (Genitals), *Pisse* (Piss), *Nachtclubs* (Nightclubs). Against this backdrop, a pair of black-and-white photographs document

crude sculptural portraits made out of socks and underwear, rolling papers, jars of nail polish, and boxes of tampons, among lurid posters depicting masked gimps, erect cocks, and scenes of masturbation and bondage. Even when tied

and scenes of masturbation and bondage. Even when tied up or bent over, her figures always look like they're enjoying themselves.

In a dimly lit central gallery, three suspended screens fight for attention with a pair of large film projections. The monitors portray looped animations of cartoon characters, scrolling texts, and pulsating, pixelated lights, while snatches of instrumental jingles play on repeat. A mirror-image diptych, *Double Memoki* (early 1990s), shows the sparsely illustrated outlines of a seductive female face: a stroke of black hair, blue-shadowed eyes, bright scarlet lips. Her expression shifts seamlessly from surprise through satisfaction to anxiety, as if catching a glimpse of the nearby video *Megaflittchen* (Megaslut, early 1990s), where a naked Betty Boop figure jiggles and teases, before a chorus line appears and flashes the viewer. A logo emerges: "SM vd LINDEN CLASSICS POUR HOMME." So far, so harmless. But when the dancer grows a penis and transforms into a stylized, laughing, whistling black man, a more politically difficult question emerges: Does this caricature critique the racist foundations of early Disney-era cartoons? Or is van der Linden inadvertently disclosing the uncomfortable anachronisms in her own work?

On opposite walls are projected grainy documentations of two of the artist's *Depressiva* performances, claustrophobic and grubby, wholly devoid of the spectacle and exposition of any Hollywood blockbuster. *Depressiva (Subterranean)* (2011) observes a young girl methodically lowering a metal rod into a row of holes, each dug into a dirt patch on an Amsterdam city street. The camera pans downward slowly, sinisterly, to catch the tube entering the mouth of a buried man, soundtracked by guttural breathing, before withdrawing the rod and moving onto the next opening – and the next supplicant. In *Depressiva (W+me)* (2010), the artist appears in night-vision green, sporting striped pajamas, thick glasses, tattooed knuckles, and a grill. She huddles and whispers with a companion cloaked in a fur-lined hood, only for him to slump inexplicably forward. Van der Linden tries to rouse him, frantically running to the phone, before he recovers – and allows the whole scenario to play out again. At once too intimate and barely audible, it feels like we're eavesdropping on a private matter – or witnessing a crime.

For here is the tension that persists throughout van der Linden's work. Her aesthetic of pop-cultural touchstones, bad taste, and low-res funk is ideologically inclusive: It celebrates the outsider, the oddball, the deviant, the dissident. And yet, both the whole and its parts remain

cryptic, slippery, even determinedly alienating. They are addressed to an audience that, pushed out to the margins by the mainstream's cartoonish perfections, has been obliged to make their own subcultures – those of doms and subs, strippers and streetwalkers, punks and pinups. But unlike their red-pilled, red-capped haters, these communities of misfits neither bond over nor thrive on intolerance; rather, their seclusion is a condition of revolutionary survival, as much as an alternative for those who would opt into their ideals. If you know, you know. If not, well, that's your loss – but at least you're probably safe.

SM van der Linen

"The Depressive Revolutions"

EXILE, Vienna

5 Sep – 11 Oct 2025

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