

ANNA UDDENBERG

Text by
DAVID ANDREW
TASMAN

210









STANDARD DEVIATION

Anna Uddenberg—Premium Economy, an exhibition by the Swedish-born artist at the Kunsthalle Mannheim, is the culmination of her Hector Art Prize award, granted once every three years by the museum and the Hector Foundations to a contemporary artist or collective.

In the museum's largest atrium, a gray carpet covers the floor from wall to wall. A dropped acoustic ceiling, such as is found in generic office spaces, hangs in the center of the room compressing the space and turning the hall into a stage. Under the ceiling, crowd control stanchions create parallel rows between their red retractable belts. The completeness of the installation architecture temporarily turns the museum into an airport security checkpoint of sorts. Interspersed along the rows are eight intricate totemic sculptures. Some have small ladders at the base and seem capable of accommodating a body, though if so, in an unfamiliar way.

For the show's opening night, several performers guide the audience into a queue to approach the sculptures. With their tailored skirt suits, tightly drawn hair, and button-down shirts, the performers resemble airline stewardesses in the familiar vestments of a commercial ritual. The performance unfolds as the stewardesses direct the audience into position to view the sculptures. When the queue is full, the belt is drawn closed and others in the crowd are made to wait their turn. Next, uniformed performers approach the sculptures and carefully, one after the other, draw on black leather gloves and climb onto the works, allowing their forms to position their bodies into a partial kneeling handstand, hands nearly folded, knees planted in stirrups, asses and high heels pointing upwards.

Unlike a typical transit checkpoint, Uddenberg's audience-travelers do not have to stand with their legs apart and hands up inside the millimeter-wave scanner to pass unmolested. Here, they need only watch would-be authority figures themselves strike a submissive and vulnerable pose—a carnivalesque inversion. Travel is a recurring motif in the artist's work, seen first in her now iconic *Savages* and *Transit Mode* series of female figures set atop roller suitcases. While Uddenberg's early works pantomimed travel in part as a stand-in for the real demands she felt herself as a young artist, her recent meditation offers an expanded perspective, using the airport to frame surrender and obedience as a requisite compromise within a closed capitalist system.

As the stewardesses hold their pose for several minutes, the audience takes in the controlled scene. The position is sexual but the performers are impassive, exhibiting neither pleasure nor pain. After a period, they dismount the sculptures and remove their gloves. Their indifference to the humiliating pose could be a mirror to the partial detachment necessary to navigate the absurdity of consumerist stimuli embedded in everyday experiences, such as when surveying social media and marketing schemes that attempt to pass off the tail ends of the bell curve as the mean, artificially shortening the standard deviation with clickbait and influencers' attempts to standardize identity—making one think, for example, that everyone should be able to twerk while upside down, hands planted on the floor and feet up against a wall like one of Uddenberg's sculptures from her 2017 exhibition *Pelvic Trust*. After dismounting the artworks, the hostesses direct the audience out of the viewing position as if nothing unusual had occurred, and those who have been waiting are advanced in the queue in preparation for the performance to repeat.

"We are very used to lining up on different sides of the stanchions," Uddenberg says, "the performance in New York at Meredith Rosen Gallery could have been theatrical but we are so used to complying with rules, sometimes it is not clear why the rules are in place." That performance and exhibition, *Continental Breakfast*, was a dress rehearsal of sorts for *Premium Economy* at Kunsthalle Mannheim. Performances were impeccably led by Uddenberg's longtime studio manager and collaborator, Berlin-based artist Sally von Rosen. A video of the performance was commissioned by Black Cube chief curator Courtney Lane Stell and is forthcoming.

While the blue of Balenciaga's epochal Summer 2020 show participated in a conversation around the political state and restructuring of the EU, Uddenberg's blue airport shifts the conversation to the present moment and the fissures widening in the consumer/capitalist state.

During the event, discomfort settles as the audience questions whether this performance of control is for their pleasure, or rather, a demonstration of the contortions that will be expected of them, before realizing that what is being witnessed is a metaphor for the contortions capitalism already subjects us to, forcing us to submit, to bend over in pursuit of services, goods, and architectures that are high in price and low in value. The title of the exhibition, *Premium Economy*, reinforces the oxymoron inherent in contemporary consumer culture—and our voluntary submission to the siren song of its glittering urbanism. Through another lens, this is Antonin Artaud's *Theater of Cruelty* performing a rendition of Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society*.

The artist deepened an ongoing interest in urban and architectural issues when preparing for her exhibition *FAKE-ESTATE* at the Shinkel Pavillon in 2022. During that time, she contemplated the many investment properties that had been built around the Pavillon and the Kronprinzenpalais off of Unter den Linden, as well as the 2020 reconstruction of the Berlin Palace, originally completed in 1894 before being damaged in WWII and ultimately demolished. To Uddenberg, these buildings represent an ersatz Berlin dislocated from the "socio-economic reality of the city."

Often begun on a large-scale 3D printer in her studio and finished in veneers of sprayed concrete, stamped metal, and rattan, the materiality of Uddenberg's sculpture references the artifice of these surroundings. She describes these buildings as having "fake value, veneers of assimilation of whatever it wants to refer to, but without a real connection—a mutant, or a simulation of role play. Buildings that pretend to be something they are not—a performance." Architectural mock-ups also served as a touch point for the artist, the way they showcase the materiality of the building, condensing and abstracting it.

As compact "mock-ups," Uddenberg's sculptures relate conceptually more to architecture than furniture; and this makes sense when thinking about architecture's ease with overt and covert signifiers that might grace a building's cornices or embellish its façade. However, here signifiers draw from a surreal contemporary vocabulary of the everyday, including heat lamps, hair clips, and roll bars from convertible automobiles or radar arches

from speed boats, stanchions and bollards from the public sphere, or the back of headrests. "These forms have a strong relationship to the body, but the body is absent, and anything the mind might conjure in parallel is unfamiliar to us in daily life, like the body," Uddenberg says, "that we are told comes easily straight out of a gym."

In several works, hair clips have first been digitized and then enlarged as if on steroids; their industrial and organic form both supports itself and grabs onto the main sculpture—a parasitic grasp of consumer detritus of questionable necessity. For Uddenberg, these are utilitarian forms that represent the "overproduction of objects that under closer consideration beg the question, are they useful, or do they just appear useful?" One of Uddenberg's gifts as a storyteller is to magnify invisible forces and portray them with a hyperbolic clarity that makes once-hidden power structures that bear heavily on our subjectivity embarrassingly visible. The submission of the performers to her architectures could be seen as symbolic of the high sacrifice required to possess the asset of architecture itself. In the US, for example, 1 in 4 single-family homes are estimated to be owned by investors and more households are renting than at any time in the past 50 years. Germany, of all the countries in the EU, has one of the largest populations living in rental accommodation. In this light, the exhibition can be seen in part to explore Uddenberg's interest in the relationships between capitalism and consumer culture that have teetered out of equilibrium, their role in the formation of a submissive subject, and as a proxy, the relationship of building zoning to BDSM. "Some of the German past is very present," the artist says, "in drag and normalized through the familiar materials and protocols of where capitalism intersects with our exercise of freedoms, movement, and transit."

For the artist, rule systems, authoritarian social contracts, invisible boundaries, building zoning and BDSM are similar in that their contracts are very literal. "In other relationships," Uddenberg says, "you have to figure out the rules yourself, but in BDSM contracts everything is spelled out—these sculptures are questionable contracts themselves." For her, the generic buildings that served as reference points for this exhibition represent "big blocks of agreement, real estate, and the financial stress and pressures that are on physical buildings." Like buildings, these sculptures have their own zoning, they "don't take up more space than one square meter. Financial domination that keeps the person in its grip, really tight."

Premium Economy, installation views, Kunsthalle Mannheim, 2023. Photo: Jens Gerber © Kunsthalle Mannheim / Jens Gerber (pp. 211–217).
Continental Breakfast, installation views, Meredith Rosen Gallery, New York, 2023. Photo: Dario Lasagni. Courtesy: the artist and Meredith Rosen Gallery, New York (220–224).
FAKE-ESTATE, performance views, Shinkel Pavillon, Berlin, 2022. Photo: Anne de Vries. Courtesy: the artist and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin (pp. 225–229).







