

VULTURE

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Anna Uddenberg's Perverted Performative Sculpture

By Emily McDermott



Anna Uddenberg, *Pelvic Trust* (2017). Photo: OMAR LUIS OLGUIN

Arriving at Anna Uddenberg's studio on a quiet, tree-lined street in Kreuzberg, Berlin, she opens the door wearing plaid pajama pants, an oversize maroon mock-neck sweater, and what appear to be Balenciaga Triple S sneakers, which, she is careful to point out, are fakes.

“I prefer them to be fake,” she explains, after we’ve settled in with tea and coffee. “If they weren’t, then they’d show I am stupid enough to buy them for 800 euros, which would be so sad,” she laughs. We’re talking about her shoes because in a world where everyone is encouraged to be their truest self, according to Uddenberg, “everything is becoming increasingly fake.” Everyone, after all, performs these truest selves in accordance with various societal codes, most of which we’ve never consciously adopted. Part of what makes Uddenberg such an interesting artist, though, is that she somehow didn’t receive the subliminal message of how she was supposed to behave.

“In art school, people are very much supposed to be themselves and be authentic, but this sounds very strange to me because you can be so many things at the same time,” says Uddenberg, whose flamboyant figurative sculptures center the idea of performing the self and female sexuality through the inclusion of selfie sticks, latex, mesh, and tramp stamps — not to mention the poses in which they’re often frozen, mid-twerk or legs spread.



Anna Uddenberg,
*FOCUS #2 (Pussy
Padding)* (2018).
Photo: Gunter
Lepkowski Berlin

Uddenberg has been dealing with and working out her feelings toward gender, sexuality, and self identity, like most of us, since she was a teenager. Growing up in Stockholm, she arrived to school clad in platforms and lip liner, mimicking the boys in bragging about everyone she'd slept with, even if she hadn't. "Nobody told me that I shouldn't be saying that, that is it shameful for a girl," she remembers. Male classmates and teachers began calling her a slut on a daily basis for three years, but instead of getting angry or shy, she began dressing "ultrafeminine," with huge furs, higher platforms, and bolder makeup. A gender-studies student might argue that she did this to entertain the patriarchy, but Uddenberg says the exaggerated style was only for herself. "I never did it to please — and nobody was pleased by it either! People would say, 'You know, Anna, if you're trying to look good, it's just not working,'" she admits with both a sense of strength and slight embarrassment. Now, she says, "I'm channeling this in my art rather than in myself."

She started making art about sexuality and performance while studying at the Städelschule in 2009, becoming obsessed with advertisements for escorts. In Frankfurt, where sex work had been legalized in 2002, she was inspired by the language of ads that marketed a certain performance of intimacy and created *Girlfriend Experience*, a sort-of subtitled video résumé where Uddenberg lists off her qualifications, like a "university education" and a "flair for style." Her grad-school experiments in performance soon gave way to exploring figurative sculptures. "As a performer, I felt like I was in my own blind spot. I wanted to move the works outside of myself. I didn't want my whole practice to only be me," she explains.



Disconnect (2017). Photo: OMAR LUIS OLGUIN

The sculptures at first took the shape of semi-nude, often contorted, female figures. *Journey of Self Discovery* (2016), one of the most Instagrammed works from the DIS-curated 2016 Berlin Biennale, for example, shows a woman whose skin and clothing are pale shades of blue crouched on all fours atop an ottoman, using a selfie stick to capture her crack. The title is a bit tongue-in-cheek; with imitation Crocs and an on-trend windbreaker, we wonder whether she is doing this for pure self-discovery or rather a performance thereof? Wannabe UGGs, Adidas slides, trekking backpacks, and overpriced baby carriages find their way into other sculptures, and female figures straddle sleek suitcases like submissive lovers, arching their backs at uncanny angles with partially or fully exposed chests. Recently, however, Uddenberg's work has taken a turn toward the functional, her sculptures increasingly resembling furniture-cum-sex-props — pun intended.

This shift started last year when she made *Pelvic Trust*, part of her solo show at the House of Gaga in Mexico City, which went by the same title. In the piece, a figure thrusts her ass in the air and plants her face in the center of an abstract piece of fluffy green furniture. Since then, Uddenberg has become increasingly interested in leaving the figure behind and seeing how the piece of furniture might be interpreted if seen alone. With this move, Uddenberg again returns to a type of performance, one that the functional object demands from the user.



Cozy Stabilization Unit (2017): Styrofoam, polyurethane foam, aqua resin, fiber glass, coffee table, spray paint, vinyl flooring, faux fur fabric, foam carpet, backpack, car interiors, vinyl foam strings, LED lights, Crocs, climbing gears. Photo: Gunter Lepkowski Berlin

Back in Uddenberg's studio, a raised platform made of interior auto parts and plaster gives way to two clunky columns that connect a type of back support adorned with armrests and hand grips, also taken from inside a car. It's still a work in progress, with a second, separate but interconnected structure to come. Uddenberg demonstrates how you'll be able to mount them — in one position, one must spread their legs wide and hold on tight, and in the second, one must lie down on their back. In short, it's a mechanism designed specifically for face-sitting. "I think of these new works as sculptural scripts that embody and suggest a perverted performative version of reality the way I experience it," Uddenberg says.

But despite the visual cues these sculptures give, in a gallery or institutional setting, where Uddenberg wouldn't be able to step in and show how-to, you could easily project your own ideas and narratives onto the objects. These imagined stories might take you straight to a sex dungeon (albeit one fit for a Furby), although Uddenberg is quick to catch herself when she mentions BDSM. "Every time I say BDSM it sounds wrong because [my work] is not about that," she says. "It's about control."

Uddenberg might be able to control the appearance of her sculptures in the studio, but when they leave the private room in Kreuzberg, she relinquishes her position of power,

much like how we, too, can direct the performance of our identities, yet we cannot control the larger context in which we exist and how we might be read. “At the end of the day, it’s about the branding and commodification of the self. Although I don’t necessarily like or enjoy this performance-driven consumer culture, it’s the world we live in and the culture that people know,” she says. “So all I can really do is work with this dominant culture and flay it, rip it apart, reconfigure it.”

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