

74

Savage Space

Anna Uddenberg's
heterotopic forms

By David Andrew Tasman





i.

Anna Uddenberg's figurative sculptures — often lithe, dressed in complex and revealing garments, and contorted improbably into suggestive or explicit poses — embody the tension and hyper-normalized standards of a neoliberal feminine identity, reinforced through commodity culture's commercial imagery, social media celebrity influencers, the rise of reality television at the fin de siècle, and erotic subcultures more easily accessible than ever before due to the ubiquity of the internet. Her figures are distorted by these forces to the degree that the absurdity of what amounts to a collective fantasy — and the unfeasible demands it places on the body — becomes apparent.¹ While Uddenberg's critique of the millennial subject is one of the most cohesively formed of her generation, it is also a practice with subtle yet important ties to the past. Figurative works inflected by societal crises have a noteworthy antecedent in the output of European artistic communities formed around the Berlin Dada movement during the Weimar Republic. Relevant examples can be found in the work of Hans Bellmer, Hannah Höch, and many others. Combining the Dadaist and Surrealist obsessions with the *femme-enfant* and automata with an act of protest against intensifying pressure on artists to support the rise of fascism through the depiction of the idealized Aryan physique, Bellmer created and photographed life-size dolls of pubescent females, often startlingly depicted as amputees or as assemblies of their modular parts, for his 1934 book *Die Puppe* (The Doll).² Höch's series of collages from 1930, "From an Ethnographic Museum," depicts representations of Caucasian women crossed with images of tribal and non-Western sculptures or people to critique feminine alterity — society's portrayal of women as the exotic other. Höch's work was also a critique of overly simplistic representations of feminine identity found in commercial images portraying the Weimar Republic's idealized "New Woman."³ Despite providing a contemporary take on issues such as feminine identity, fashion, and sexuality in commodity culture, clues in Uddenberg's developing oeuvre link the work to this important artistic lineage. Take for example *Bad Girl* (2013), one of three customized stools from "Booty Dummy Demo," a solo exhibition mounted at Dold Projects, Sankt Georgen (Germany), where viewers, when seated in the work, appear as if adorned with a prosthetic tribal lower-back tattoo and round panty-clad buttocks — a type of interactive pseudo-performance that updates the spirit of Höch's collages. The tribal

tattoo also appears as a recurring motif in several of Uddenberg's other works, including *Jealous Jasmine* (2014) and *La Isla* (2014). In the latter, an erotic dancer, with legs scissored apart to reveal tribal markings on the back of her upper thighs, lounges atop a television streaming a three-hour compilation of *Cheaters – REAL Reality TV*. Coincidentally, the rise in popularity of lower-back tattoos and reality television would ascend in parallel during the last decade of the twentieth century.⁴ In a subsequent exhibition, Uddenberg frees the tribal reference from the body, allowing it to inform freestanding sculptures, as

rodeo or atop a mechanical bull in a western-themed bar. The female forms appear frozen in the middle of a wild ride and are posed with their hips shoved forward and legs and upper torsos swept dramatically back as if their mounts were kicking up their hind legs, forcing the riders deep into their saddles. Like real cowgirls, the "Savages" are wearing protective garments; however, while there are allusions to real western wear, such as chaps, their outfits are intricate and highly customized, with references to both sophisticated brands and mass-market trends alike. The pants Uddenberg designs for many of her

76



seen in *Tribal Tramp Stamp #1-5* (2015). While tribal references in the work of Höch are often metaphors for feminine alterity, in Uddenberg's these markings point to the extreme pressure of the cultural mandate on the millennial subject to *perform the self*. This phenomenon has grown in popularity with reality-style television programming in the late 1990s and has expanded exponentially through the landscape of social medias of the twenty-first century. One of Uddenberg's most recognizable series, "Savages," in name alludes to the primitivism of the prewar avant-garde. In this group of works, stylized figures sit unexpectedly astride wheeled hardside luggage, straddling and gripping partially extended handles like cowgirls riding bareback at the

sculptures recall Nicolas Ghesquière's iconic Balenciaga Spring/Summer collection of 2009, perhaps looks 10–13, echoed also in Spring/Summer 2010, looks 28–30. With feet clad in faux fur-lined Uggs, rubber crocs, or classic slip-on Adidas sandals, the cumulative look is one of off-duty porn star or yoga instructor of the future. While futuristic in their appearance, the "Savages" do appear in a productive, if unintentional, dialogue with the recent past, specifically several works by fellow Berlin-based artist Isa Genzken. Uddenberg's suitcases seem to engage easily with Genzken's installation "Oil" in the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, 2007; whereas Genzken's luggage obtusely references a crises-induced migration — travelers at the airport stranded by decades of various

ii.



iii.



iv.

- 1 While ideas and topics have been elaborated, portions of this text were previously published as the exhibition text accompanying Anna Uddenberg's exhibition "Sante Par Aqua" at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, November 4, 2017 – January 13, 2018.
- 2 Sue Taylor, "Hans Bellmer in The Art Institute of Chicago: The Wandering Libido and the Hysterical Body," *Art Institute of Chicago. Museum Studies* (Mary Reynolds and the Spirit of Surrealism), vol. 22, no. 2, (Fall 1996), pp. 150–165, 197–199.
- 3 Roxana Marcoci in discussion with the author, March 2019.
- 4 Sophie Saint Thomas, "An Ode to the Misunderstood Beauty of the Tramp Stamp," in *Broadly*, August 25, 2017, https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/mbb5y3/an-ode-to-the-misunderstood-beauty-of-the-tramp-stamp (last access, February 2018).
- 5 Michel Foucault, 1984, 1986, "Des Espaces Autres" (Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias), *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, no. 5 (October 1984), pp. 46–49; translated by Jay Miskowiec.



v.

- i. *Savage #6 (dirty raver)*, detail, 2017. Aqua resin on fiberglass, suitcase, acrylic nails, synthetic hair, windbreaker, faux fur, crystals, velvet, Ugg imitation shoes, backpacks, kites. 108×105×75 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin.
- ii. *Savage #5 (cozy crutch)*, 2017. Aqua resin on fiberglass, suitcase, acrylic nails, synthetic hair, quilted faux leather, puffed jacket, faux fur, velvet, mesh, crystal, rubber slippers. 108×105×75 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin.
- iii. *Cozy Clamp #2*, detail, 2017. Polyurethane foam, aqua resin, fiberglass, vinyl foam, wall-to-wall carpet, paint, synthetic hair, mountain bike helmet, flipp flopps. Courtesy of the artist.

iv. *Cozy Clamp #1*, detail, 2017. Polyurethane foam, aqua resin, fiberglass, vinyl foam, wall-to-wall carpet, paint, synthetic hair, mountain bike helmet, flipp flopps. Courtesy of the artist.

v. *Pockets Obese*, 2017. Shampoo chair, water walls, styrofoam, acrylic resin, fiberglass, polyurethane foam, HDF, automobile interior elements, synthetic leather, synthetic fur, vinyl floor, hiking backpacks, vinyl foam stripes, hairdresser sink. Photography by Gunter Lepkowski. Courtesy of the artist and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin.

vi. *Sisterunit on Fly*, 2017. Styrofoam, acrylic resin, fiberglass, coffee table, polyurethane foam, HDF, automobile interior elements, synthetic leather, polyester bathtub mat, carpet, vinyl floor, vinyl foam stripes, hiking backpacks, LED lights. Photography by Gunter Lepkowski. Courtesy of the artist and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin.

79 calamities (think 9/11 for instance) unpacking their prized possessions in search of any kind of comfort – Uddenberg's baggage seems to represent the permanent state of quasi-nomadism that is required of many young artists exhibiting on the increasingly international circuit of the neoliberal market. Other similarities between Uddenberg and Genzken are worth comparing briefly – paradoxically, for the distinctions they produce between different concepts of the subject in contemporary figurative art. Both have been developing bodies of figurative sculpture over the past several years,

the only sustainable subject will be the posthuman subject. Sexuality after the singularity, after robotics, artificial intelligence, and biological advancements: Will it allow for on-demand delivery to meet the needs of a godlike super consumer, impatient and able?

The artist's new nonfigurative work signals a shift in interest toward architectural space that also presents unrealistic ideals. Examples that speak of the covert insincerity of "luxury," "safety," "well being," or "comfort" abound in the first-class cabins of airliners, on super yachts, in well-appointed automobile interiors,

while the title's literal translation, "health through water," is mockingly repudiated through the humorous skepticism in Uddenberg's works.

Through Uddenberg's lens, the alien future of H.R. Giger is already in our midst, not as a dystopian vision – dark, industrial, and wet – but as a heterotopia of luxury, safety, and well being. For Michel Foucault, the heterotopia is a space for the body in crisis, "outside of all places ... absolutely other with respect to the places they reflect." Foucault argues that "the ship is the heterotopia par excellence," floating "from port to port, tack by tack, from brothel to brothel" as not only a "great instrument of economic development" but also "simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination."⁵

Uddenberg's often nautically inflected sculptures also operate as screenplays for potential performers to explore what these environments expect from us, investigating the possibility that we may live in a neo-Victorian era in which what appears on the surface to be banal and prudish is in fact sexually charged. In these works, both the forms and meanings of familiar elements are reconfigured into new furniture-like sculptures; their cryptic functions assert unexpected scripts for the bodies that might occupy them. Furniture – so often the site of the body's first encounter with capitalist commercial agendas – here becomes a proxy for architecture.

Uddenberg's methods allow her to infiltrate and rewrite the code of commercial products and environments, putting their concepts, shapes, aesthetics, and materials into new dialogues with one another. This process not only introduces complexity into the ways in which we interact with and interpret these sculptures, but also draws attention to how their ubiquitous source material affects our subject formation in daily life, while opening up rigid systems to new readings and suggesting new positions (both literal and metaphorical).



vi. but their work differs dramatically in subject matter and in methods of execution. These differences underscore a cultural tectonic shift from Genzken's "Actors" to Uddenberg's post-internet subjects. While the prewar figure is a fragmented body, the postwar figure is a hollow void whose form can only be understood by the trappings of capital that surround it. For Uddenberg, the body in the twenty-first century is also a fragmented body; however, like the architecture Koolhaas describes in his canonical manifesto "Bigness," the parts remain committed to the whole. In fact, at times Uddenberg's sculptures appear both impacted by the present-past as much as the present-future. They seem to posit that, because the pressures on today's subject are unsustainable,

and in transit spas with extravagantly bolstered massage chairs. As the artist has done with the body in figurative work, here quasi-functional objects also distort and accelerate the formal and material qualities they are based on to arrive at rational yet surreal conclusions.

For her recent solo presentation at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, three sculptures occupy the main space of the gallery, deployed in a small flotilla. Like strange ships they guard the back room, a harbor within which a sphinxlike flagship is at anchor. There, a veil of water walls shrouds the work in an illicit privacy, producing counterfeit serenity through endless sheets of synthetic rain. Spa, the short form of the exhibition title, "Sante Par Aqua," helps name the gallery's transformation,

David Andrew Tasman works at the intersection of art and architecture in New York. He has contributed writing to *Frieze*, *DIS*, *PIN-UP* and *Kaleidoscope*.

With Carson Chan and Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen he co-edited *Exhibiting Architecture: A Paradox?* (New Haven: Yale School of Architecture, 2015)