

# Body Surrogates

## Mannequins, Life-Size Dolls, and Avatars

Francesco Spampinato

One of the tropes of these early years of the twenty-first century is that of the avatar, a virtual representation of a human being used for entertainment, educational, technical, or scientific purposes. The avatar is a product of digital culture, but its origins are coeval with those of the human being and its evolution is affected by material conditions and the level of technology currently achieved by a given society. The origin of the word “avatar” has a spiritual connotation: It was associated with Hinduism and used to describe a deity who took a terrestrial form. More generally, however, whether in terms of religion or computing, we could define the avatar as a surrogate, a body—real or virtual—that replaces another.

The origins of the avatar in Western societies date back to the modern era, which was founded on mechanical technology and marked by the birth of urban culture. At that time, between the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a typical surrogate for the human body was the mannequin. Mannequins were displayed in shopping windows, bearers of fashion trends and styles. They later became a symbol of conformity that reached a peak under totalitarian governments, embodying those values of efficiency that put the human body on the same level as machines, both the machine of industrial production and the war machine.

As a substitute, the mannequin in society played a purely functional role, taking the place of the human body in activities that the human being, out of dignity or resistance, wouldn't perform. These included mannequins used for commercial purposes as well as those later used for testing in the automotive industry and military engineering. Other mannequins, meanwhile, had a completely different fate: They became the subject of photographs and paintings, employed as cultural artifacts, fetishes or symbols of a mass culture that artists were either fascinated by or wanted to criticize.

Two recent exhibitions have been devoted to the history of mannequins in art history: *Silent Partners: Artists & Mannequin from Function to Fetish* at The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (October 2014–January 2015) and *Mannequin d'Artiste, Mannequin Fetiche* at Musée Bourdelle, Paris (April–July 2015). While they focused mainly on lay figures—those mannequins used by artists to study proportions and composition—from the Renaissance to the modern era, with few incursions into the contemporary, my focus explores a more articulated series of correspondences between visual culture and the arts, organized around several main areas of interest—metaphysical art, fashion, the fetish, surrealism, commodity culture, postmodernism, abjection, post-humanism, and digital culture—spanning the modern until today.

Substantial psychoanalytical thought is associated with mannequins and dolls, particularly as framed by the lens of fetishism. The idea of the fetish, indeed, represents a guiding thread through the survey here. “Puppets, mannequins, waxworks, automatons, dolls, painted scenery, plaster casts, dummies, secret clockworks, mimesis, and illusion: all form a part of the fetishist’s magic and artful universe,” wrote French psychoanalyst Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel. “Lying between life and death, animated and mechanic, hybrid creatures and creatures to which hubris gave birth, they all may be liked to fetishes. And, as fetishes, they give us, for a while, the feeling that a world not ruled by our common laws does exist, a marvelous and uncanny world.”<sup>1</sup>

While the general category defined by Chasseguet-Smirgel incorporates marionettes and puppets, I am considering only on mannequins, life-size dolls, and avatars—lifeless anthropometric surrogates of the human body. They are unlike dolls, marionettes, and puppets—also lifeless, but smaller and roughly controlled through wires or software. Mannequins, life-size dolls, and avatars are uncanny doubles, meant for a function that human beings would or could hardly perform, human bodies turned into objects or images, available to be exposed, exploited, or abused.

The matter of scale was crucial in selecting the artworks, objects, and artifacts to be discussed, as it was crucial for the artist Mike Kelley when he curated a seminal exhibition that addressed similar issues: *Uncanny* (1993) at Gemeentemuseum for *Sonsbeek '93* in Arnhem, the Netherlands, restaged in 2004 at Tate Liverpool and Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna. Writing in the catalogue, Kelley explains:

It is important to me, first of all, that the objects displayed maintain their physical presence, that they hold their own power in relation to the viewer. I decided, therefore, to exclude miniatures—smaller than life-size

statues, dolls, toys, figurines, and the like—from the exhibition. Generally, I believe that small figurative objects invite the viewer to project onto them [. . .] On the other hand, I am interested in objects with which the viewer emphasizes in a human way—though only as long as the viewer, and the object viewed, maintain their sense of being there physically.<sup>2</sup>

## THE MODERN MANNEQUIN

Since the Renaissance, lay figures have been employed by painters and sculptors to study proportions and composition, but in the modern era the mannequin becomes more and more the subject of artworks rather than a mere anthropometric reference. Mannequins recur frequently in the art produced by historical avant-garde movements such as Expressionism, Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, and Bauhaus. An interesting early case is that of Austrian painter Oskar Kokoschka, who in 1918 commissioned a doll maker to produce a life-size doll in the image of his former lover Alma Mahler, the widow of the composer Gustav Mahler. Alma and Kokoschka fell in love in 1912, but broke off after her abortion and World War I. Upon returning from the war, he discovered she had married the architect Walter Gropius.

From a correspondence between Kokoschka and Munich-based dollmaker Hermine Moos, we know he gave specific measurements and instructions regarding proportions and materials to be used. The resulting doll is not the erotic fetish one would expect, but a creepy primitive-looking creature more in the style of the Expressionistic figures he used to paint—yet apparently functional enough to fulfill his desire: to get over her. “Finally, after I had drawn and painted it over and over again, I decided to do away with it,” he confessed. “It had managed to cure me completely of my passion. So I gave a big champagne party with chamber music, during which my maid Hulda exhibited the doll in all its beautiful clothes for the last time. When dawn broke—I was quite drunk, as everyone else—I beheaded it out in the garden and broke a bottle of red wine over its head.”<sup>3</sup>

Between the late nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth, mannequins were the subject of the photographs of Eugène Atget and Germaine Krull; appeared in paintings by Giorgio De Chirico, Alberto Savinio, and Carlo Carrà; and stood in as surrogates for actors in Fortunato Depero’s and Oskar Schlemmer’s performances. A representative use of mannequins is the well-known assemblage by Raoul Hausmann, a key figure in Berlin Dada, entitled *Mechanical Head—Spirit of Our Age* (1920): It is the decapitated head of a wooden mannequin with various measuring devices attached to it, including a ruler and the mechanisms of a pocket watch and a typewriter. The artwork is emblematic

of what mannequins stood for in society: symbols of precision, smoothness, and functionality, to be taken as models by human beings.

A group of Italian artists including De Chirico, his brother Savinio, and Carrà was particularly interested in mannequins. Expressionless and featureless wood surrogates occupied a landmark position in the current labeled “metaphysical art”—of which these three artists were the most representative members. They used to represent mannequins within deserted public squares, usually marked by the presence of bold areas of light and shadow. The space depicted is that of Italian cities as if they were abandoned by human presence, as if their historic beauty—characterized by the juxtaposition of ancient Greek and Roman ruins and glorious Middle Age and Renaissance buildings and infrastructures—could not accommodate modern life.

De Chirico used the term “men-statue-object” to describe a series of mannequins he painted in the late 1920s combining human, mannequin, sculptural, and architectural forms: not properly lifeless creatures, but monumental repositories of ancient civilizations, men left mute and immobile in front of technological progress. It is not a coincidence that metaphysical art is also symbolic of a larger phase of European art between the two world wars, dubbed the “return to order.” That phase reflected a step back from abstraction, which had to that point characterized most of the European avant-gardes, in search of a utopian purification from war and its connotations of death and destruction.

Unlike metaphysical art and other currents associated with the “return to order,” the other avant-gardes celebrated industry and machines. Futurism and Bauhaus both endorsed an idea of progress that encompassed a trans-disciplinary set of activities including visual arts, theatre, architecture, publishing, and design. Rather than mannequins, however, the humanoid figures that populate the universes created by Futurist artist Depero and Bauhaus member Schlemmer are more similar to robots or cyborgs, symbols of the new efficient bodies at the service now of industrial production, now of some totalitarian ideology. Not surprisingly, both artists anticipated the dystopian future soon to be brought by Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany.

## FASHIONABLE DUMMIES

The idea on which both Depero and Schlemmer speculate—the mannequin as a symbol of efficiency, production, and perfection—is strictly linked to the role that mannequins play in society, which in the 1910s and 20s was mainly associated with retail. The main function of mannequins was to serve as body surrogates in the store windows of the first modern Western cities like Paris, London, and



Nancy Grossman, *T.O.K.*, 1969. © Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

New York. As such, the mannequin also becomes the symbol of the new mass culture, a tool to display commodities, and an instrument of standardization of the body according to measurements and proportions set by the fashion and advertising industries. Incidentally, a store mannequin is also called a “dummy,” a word that in English also means “a stupid person.”

Paris was certainly the most representative as well as the most represented of the modern cities. Artists moved there from the French countryside as well from other countries, fascinated by the experimental lifestyle the city offered and by an environment equally given over to work and to leisure. Culture, entertainment, media, and commerce as they were known before had all been reinvented in modern Paris. Since Baudelaire’s first usage of it in 1860, the word *flâneur*—literally, someone who strolls through the city—has become synonymous with leisure and urban life. As someone who knows the city but also likes to get lost, the *flâneur* enjoys the entertainments the city offers: bars, cafes, cabarets, sports, theatres, brothels, and malls.

Renowned French photographer Eugène Atget took over 10,000 photos of Paris street life during the first three decades of the century. He shot bars and gypsies, prostitutes and vehicles, circuses and gardens; but one of his favorite subjects was definitely store displays. The mannequins populating the shopping windows give us a pretty clear idea of the style, taste, and ideal of beauty possessed by modern Parisians. Male but more often female busts and mannequins were installed within dioramas that replicated an ideal society, where everyone smiled and each body had perfect proportions and shape. The surrounding city usually reflected on the glass, intensifying the clash between reality and representation.

The ethereal atmosphere rendered through these photographs made Atget a model admired by an emerging group of artists living in Paris at that time who called themselves Surrealists. For them, the mannequin as a surrogate of the human being was a particularly powerful symbol to explore the liminal space between reality and subconscious upon which Surrealism focused. Mannequins appear in the photos of Man Ray as well as Germaine Krull—who, although not officially a Surrealist, was close to some of the group’s founding members. Krull’s *Étalage: Les Mannequins* (1928) shows the window of a store in Paris with seven female mannequins without clothes on, exposing their artificial quasi-android nature within the abstract environment of a store window decorated in typical modernist style.

Man Ray’s *Mannequin on Balcony* (1930) increases the surrealistic nature of mannequins, bringing one outside of a store’s display, dressing it with elegant clothes, and portraying it on the balcony of a residential building. A similar fascination

with mannequins as repositories of an ideal as much as an uncanny form of beauty will inform the production of several photographers to come. A few examples from the following decades are Erwin Blumenfeld's *Mannequin* (c. 1932), Elliot Erwitt's *Wilmington: North Carolina [Mannequin Looking at a Woman]* (1950), and Ralph Gibson's *Untitled (Oaxaca)* (1968) and *Untitled (From "Deja-Vu")* (1972).

An extreme degree of fetishization of the female body is reached by renowned fashion photographer Helmut Newton with a 2002 photo shoot commissioned by the magazine *Playboy*, in which the female models are replaced by life-size sex dolls photographed in domestic settings. Despite the longstanding collaboration between Newton and *Playboy*, the magazine refused to publish the photos. Clearly, Newton intended the photo shoot as a sort of metalinguistic operation, a way to reveal the mechanism of voyeurism and objectification of the female body enacted by photography—particularly fashion and erotic photography—through its material replacement with a silicon and hyper-sexualized surrogate.

## UNCANNY BODIES

In turning the female body into a fetish and literally objectifying it, fashion and adult industries are as much responsible as advertising for imposing stereotyped bodily features and lifestyles through which a male-dominated society maintains control over women. However, as an art movement centered around an interest in the subconscious, Surrealism played an important role in exploring how the fetish is first of all a psychoanalytical rather than a social issue. The word "fetish" comes from the Latin *facticius* ("artificial") and was initially used to refer to man-made objects believed to be carriers of supernatural powers.

In the modern era, "fetish" assumed a sexual connotation to refer to objects and body parts that produced sexual stimulation. Writing in 1927, Sigmund Freud famously interpreted this non-living object of desire as a substitute for the penis,

not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular and quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but had later been lost. That is to say, it should normally have been given up, but the fetish is precisely designed to preserve it from extinction. To put it more plainly: the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and—for reasons familiar to us—does not want to give up.<sup>4</sup>

Less than a decade before, Freud theorized another concept interestingly associated with that of the fetish: the uncanny. In 1919 he wrote: "It may be true that the uncanny is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone

repression and then emerged from it.”<sup>5</sup> Earlier mentioned by the philosophers Schelling and Nietzsche, the concept of the uncanny was first explored in psychology by Ernst Jentsch in the 1906 essay “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” in which he refers to German writer E.T.A. Hoffmann’s invention of the life-size doll Olympia in the short story “The Sandman” (1816). Mannequins and life-size dolls have served since then as ideal cultural symbols of the uncanny, being repositories of hidden emotions, complicated processes of split identity, and repressed sexual desires.

Surrealism happened at the same time Freud interpreted the uncanny and fetishism, and whether or not Surrealist artists and intellectuals understood or believed in these concepts, their work certainly provided the perfect visual component to the father of the theory of psychoanalysis. “The body was a site for Surrealist experiment and a conduit for the transmission of ideas,” wrote Ghislaine Wood in the catalogue of an exhibition on Surrealism and the body. “It became the subject of intense scrutiny: dismembered, fragmented, desecrated, eroticized and eulogized in the pursuit of a range of psychological, sociological and sexual concerns.”<sup>6</sup>

The female body recurs in Surrealist artworks as does the mannequin as the quintessential fetish of the female body. With a few exceptions like Herbert Bayer’s *Self Portrait* (1932)—where he contemplates, amazed, his disjointed arm in a mirror—most of the mannequins in Surrealist artworks are females. Representative of the Surrealist objectification of the female body is the work of German artist Hans Bellmer, consisting mainly in the construction and representation of a series of female dolls, the first being made in 1933 in the image of an adolescent girl, constructed of *papier-mâché* and plaster molded around a structure made of wood and metal.

Approximately 4.5 feet (1.40 meters) tall, with movable head and limbs that could be assembled in different combinations, the doll became the subject of a series of photographs, *tableaux vivants* characterized by a decadent and dreamy atmosphere of mourning and nostalgia in which the doll is usually represented naked, dismembered, or unnaturally contorted. In December 1934, eighteen of these photographs were featured in a two-page spread of the surrealist journal *Minotaure*, edited by André Breton, with the title “Poupée, variations sur le montage d’une mineure articulée” (“Doll: Variations on the Montage of an Articulated Minor”).<sup>7</sup>

Bellmer’s subsequent dolls were headless, had more articulated joints, and were covered in glue and tissue paper painted to resemble human flesh. The artist kept photographing them in interiors or natural settings and collected the photos



in artist's books. Bellmer's peculiar production is one of the highlights in the relationships between art and the mannequin, despite the immoral connotations that come from its standing between masochism, misogyny, and pedophilia, as the artist confirms with his own words:

Fit one joint to the other, swivel the ball-joints full circle and test them for childlike poses, gently trace the hollows, savour the pleasures of the curves, stray into the opening of an ear, do pretty things while simultaneously scattering the salt of deformation with a hint of vengeance.<sup>8</sup>

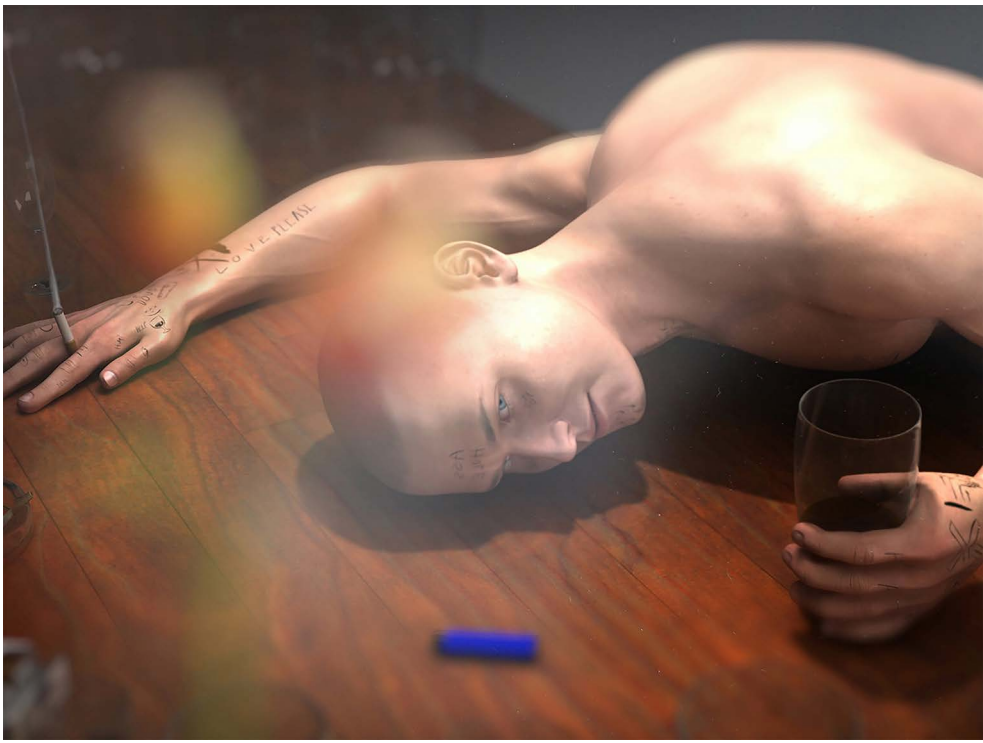
## SURREALIST SURROGATES

From a social perspective, Bellmer's mutilated and abused dolls have often been read as allegories of the bodies martyred in World Wars I and II, considering the peculiar moment when they were made (the years before and during World War II) and the artist's political inclinations, which set him radically against the National Socialist Party in Germany. But the main interpretation remains that of the fetish. What pushes Bellmer to build his own dolls, after all, is the same desire that brought Kokoshka to commission a doll in the image of Alma: to possess the objectified body of a woman in order to fantasize sexually or even interact with it one moment, and beat, torture, and even dismember it a moment later.

With Surrealism, the mannequin becomes a proper surrogate, no longer a lifeless anthropometric reference but a quasi-animate double of the human body, the quintessential companion for the Surrealist artists' alienated modern life. The apotheosis was reached at the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* of 1938 at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris, which included the installation of sixteen female mannequins, each customized by a different artist. The shopping mannequins turned into quasi-living objects of desire by the likes of Marcel Duchamp, André Masson, Max Ernst, and Salvador Dalí, were installed in a corridor dubbed *Rue Surréaliste*.

With the exception of Duchamp's, which was cross-dressed as a male (a possible extension of the artist's self-portrait in drag as *Rose Sélavy*), the mannequins showcased female bodies turned into mythological figures or sexual fetishes through the application of everyday objects, fabrics, and extreme fashion accessories. Masson's mannequin, for instance, had a bird cage around its head. Man Ray, who photographed them, recalled:

In 1938 nude young women were kidnapped from the windows of the Grands Magasins and subjected to the frenzy of the Surrealists who immediately deemed it their duty to violate them, each in his own original



Top: Ed Atkins, *Ribbons*, 2014. © The artist and Cabinet, London.

Bottom: Allen Jones, *Table*, 1969. © Allen Jones. Photo: Deirdre Morrow. Courtesy the artist and Marlborough Fine Arts, London.

and inimitable manner but without any consideration whatsoever for the feelings of the victims who nevertheless submitted with charming good will to the homage and outrage that were inflicted on them.<sup>9</sup>

World War II spread soon after and images of bodies mutilated or dismembered became a constant daily horror. The fascination for mannequins survived, though, and it is still through Surrealist eyes that mannequins are represented in art right after the war. A particularly interesting case is Fernand Léger's contribution to Hans Richter's film *Dreams That Money Can Buy* (1947). Léger's *The Girl with the Prefabricated Heart*, one of the seven episodes, each commissioned to a different artist, pairs the love story of a real couple with that of two male and female shopping dummies immersed in a black dreamy space, whose mechanical positions and movements echo the post-Cubist automata for which the French painter is known.

Like many other European avant-garde artists, Léger had moved to New York in exile during the war. The film not only bears his fascination with the more spectacular forms of street folklore that New York offered as opposed to Paris, but also with a new idea of woman, more emancipated, dangerous, and no longer so easily available to submit to a man: "a femme fatale just as threatening to the modern psyche as any flesh prostitute,"<sup>10</sup> observes Alyce Mahon. The acknowledgment of a new social phase toward the empowerment of women transpires from a scene in which the male mannequin is decapitated while the woman rides frenetically on a bicycle.

Another French surrealist émigré in New York was Duchamp, who in the same years begins working at his last legendary artwork, *Étant Donnés* (1946–1966), permanently installed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It consists in a voyeuristic apparatus, a diorama that could be seen only through holes in a wood door, behind which a naked female dummy sprawls in the foreground, with open legs and shaved vulva. In *The Erotic Doll*, Marquard Smith offers several interpretations of it:

[I]t is a fetishistic and perverse peepshow, stereoscopic porn, an "obscene diorama" and a crime scene presenting a body, even a "sacrificial dummy." This body is, according to the extensive and paradoxical literature on the work, either anticipating the act of love-making or in satiated post-coital bliss, or—diametrically opposed to this—has been raped, soiled, mutilated and abandoned.<sup>11</sup>

## COMMODIFIED FETISHES

After the horror and the economic collapse brought by World War II, the 1950s saw a new celebratory phase of industry and technological progress in Europe and the United States, embraced in the name of economic growth. But we also immediately start seeing the first negative results of this rebirth, namely an increase in working hours and a mechanization of life in general. Many Surrealist preoccupations became the basis of a new international movement that flourished in Paris after the war: Situationism. Even more than Surrealists, Situationists positioned themselves as radically against work, progress, capitalism, entertainment, and mass culture—or what their founder Guy Debord famously named “the society of the spectacle.”

The sixth issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, the magazine published by the group, features an article on urban planning written by Raoul Vaneigem and introduced by an illustration showing the maximum and normal extension of the human arms on a horizontal surface. The image visualizes a series of calculations of the proportions and correspondences between the human body and the surrounding work area, exploring the maximum amount of labor that a human being can perform in a given space and time. The illustration is used here as the symptom of a larger process of mechanization of the city and the life of its inhabitants.

Shopping mannequins take back their position in window displays after the war, but somehow they have lost their fetishistic power. They are merely functional tools, featureless as never before, made of inferior material—initially it was *papier maché*, then wax, and then plastic—easily substituted and usually assembled into armies of dummies that populate windows and corridors of bigger and bigger stores and malls. In the modern era, shopping mannequins were fabricated by professional craftsmen, one by one, each with distinctive features. Since the 1950s, mannequins have been made industrially without any intent of customization, applying a series of mathematical proportions.

The memories of World War II are still vivid, and there is always an enemy, imagined or real, against whom it is better to be prepared. In 1953 J. C. Penney, one of United States' largest department stores, lent dozens of mannequins to the nuclear test Operation Doorstep, conducted in Nevada on March 17, where blast and thermal effects were tested on mannequins, automobiles, and fully furnished wooden houses. A series of photos pre- and post-blast documents an uncanny imaginary village with families of J. C. Penney-clothed dummies installed as if they were performing daily activities. Obviously, despite being dismembered and burned after the blast, they kept the same plastic smile they had before.

Other dummies, meanwhile, entered the public domain and fantasies: the crash test dummies. While cadavers, animals, and peculiarly motivated human beings had submitted themselves to this kind of test in previous decades, the automotive and military industries eventually developed more and more advanced anthropometric dummies to test the effects of acceleration and the results of impacts, to evaluate the percentages and also the conditions of survival of the subject after extreme situations. The first anthropometric device to be tested in mobile vehicles crashes was Sierra Sam, created in 1949 and commissioned by the United States Air Force, followed over the decades by Sierra Stan, General Motors' Hybrid series and THOR, and Toyota's THUMS, today the most advanced in the market.

Two interesting sets of artistic dummies in the years of economic growth, the 1960s and 1970s, are those of Allen Jones and Nancy Grossman. Jones was part of a young generation of British pop artists that, following the Independent Group, had celebrated technology, progress, and mass culture. His contribution to the history we're tracing here is a controversial 1969 series of fiberglass sculptures representing life-size female figures in leather lingerie, two of which are bent in order to assume the shape of a table and a chair. Similar references to bondage and fetishism inform Grossman's carved wood heads wearing leather masks. Although the former was accused of misogyny and the latter adopted a feminist perspective, the references to BDSM allow us to read both these artworks as surrogates of bodies now definitely domesticated through processes of masochistic domination, and somehow interchangeable with the furniture pieces that surround them.

## ABJECT MANNEQUINS

Since the late 1960s, European and American artists, intellectuals and activists, and later a more general public, have become more and more aware of the fact that the political, economic, and media power systems have practiced a slow but effective process of brainwashing since modernization. What has been called postmodernism, indeed, was a new era characterized by the critique of late-capitalist power systems and the adoption of a revisionist approach to history. Mass media, in particular, have been pointed to as the main culprit behind the transformation of reality into fiction through the bombardment of images of desire and fantasies impossible to achieve.

Cindy Sherman, one of the key postmodernist artists, has developed her entire production around issues like fantasies and the fetish, focusing on women as objects of desire. Her first official artwork, *Doll Clothes* (1975), realized when she was still a student, is a stop-motion animation in which a two-dimensional doll-like self-portrait of the artist makes its way out of a book and starts browsing its

pages to select the cutout clothes archived therein. Her following and more popular series, *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–1980), also explores the issue of objectification of women, in this case through the re-enactment of movie stills in which she performs female characters that are object of an external and invisible male gaze.

Neither of these artworks employs mannequins, but it is not difficult to interpret the figures represented as victims of someone else's will and trace a parallel with artists' mannequins and dolls like Bellmer's. Not surprisingly, Sherman uses dummies in a later series of works, *Sex Pictures* (1993), which consists in assemblages of body parts of medical mannequins, with a focus on genitals and sexual acts in reference to pornography and death. Like Jones and Grossman, Bellmer and Sherman are seen from opposed perspectives, one accused of misogyny and the other accepted as taking a feminist approach, but the ambivalence around their intended meaning is what makes their mannequins operate, as Rosalind Krauss suggests, "in a way that allows them to slide along the signifying chain."<sup>12</sup>

The ambiguous meaning of Sherman's preoccupations with horror and the mannequin is what brings them a step ahead from postmodernist feminist critique and toward that early 1990s phase of art that has been interpreted through the lens of another psychoanalytical theory: abjection. Indeed, in 1993 Sherman's *Sex Pictures* were featured, together with other artists' mannequins and life-size dolls, in both of the group exhibitions that defined this artistic phase: *Abject Art* at the Whitney Museum in New York, curated by the students of the museum's independent study program, and *Uncanny*, curated by Mike Kelley at Gemeentemuseum in Arnhem, the Netherlands, earlier in this essay.

The main idea retroactively associated with abject art was developed by Julia Kristeva in the book *Powers of Horror* (1980), in which the Bulgarian-French philosopher and psychoanalyst defines the abject as a repulsive reaction to a collapse of the distinction between subject and object. "Abjection is above all ambiguity," she asserts. "Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledged it to be in perpetual danger."<sup>13</sup> The concept is based on Freud's idea of the uncanny. Indeed, within the abject we can still recognize fragments of the original subject, that "hidden, familiar thing that," has Freud sustained, "has undergone repression and then emerged from it."<sup>14</sup>

In 1992 Kelley and Paul McCarthy made *Heidi*, a collaborative film project based on Johanna Spyri's novel, in which the two artists confront American media entertainment with the pastoral Swiss lifestyle of the original novel through the enactment of a situation of perversion and sexual abuse performed by rubber

figures. Most of the material Kelley exhibited in *Uncanny*, besides other artists' works, had been collected in preparation for the *Heidi* project and consisted "primarily of figurative sculptures, ranging from ancient to contemporary, which had an 'uncanny' aura about them, but also included nonart objects that had a similar quality, such as medical models, taxidermy, preserved human parts, dolls, life masks, and film special-effects props."<sup>15</sup>

*Uncanny* was restaged in 2004 featuring a slightly different list of artists. Besides Kelley and Sherman, the American artists McCarthy, Robert Gober, Charles Ray, and John Miller, and the British artists Jake and Dinos Chapman and Sarah Lucas, present in the original show or its restaging, are worth mentioning among those who make sculptural mannequins and life-size dolls. For Gober and Lucas, the mannequin is a lens through which they self-portray a fragmented identity. McCarthy and the Chapman brothers suggest uncanny connections between social reality, sexual perversions, and horror tales. Ray and Miller's mannequins, instead, are more similar to those of any American mall, taller than the average human being in the case of Ray, or anonymous and dressed with generic casual clothes in the case of Miller.

## POST-HUMAN DOLLS

Along with abjection, another cultural theory that dominated the 1990s was that of post-humanism. The post-human in art was addressed in the eponymous exhibition curated in 1992 by Jeffrey Deitch at Deste Foundation, Athens, and Castello di Rivoli, Turin. Representative abject artists like Sherman, Kelley, McCarthy, Ray, and Gober were featured in this exhibition as well. The post-human body had many things in common with the abject, one of them being the exposure of a body mutated under the influx of external physical or psychological factors. However, while the concept of abjection was developed through a psychoanalytical approach to the body, the post-human took into account mainly the social and cultural changes brought by technology, science, and mass media.

"A new construction of the self will take hold as ever more powerful body-altering techniques become commonplace. The new construction of the self is conceptual rather than natural," wrote Deitch. "The decentered television reality that we experience, with its fragmentation, multiplicity, and simultaneity, is helping to deepen the sense that there is no absolutely 'correct' or 'true' model of the self."<sup>16</sup> Images of artworks in the exhibition catalogue were paired with media images such as the last plastic surgery Michael Jackson or Ivana Trump underwent, advertisements for the newest cellular phone on the market, and images of bodies at the gym, during cosmetic treatments, or in sci-fi movies.



Above: Jennifer Rubell, *Lysa III*, 2011.

© Jennifer Rubell. Courtesy the artist.

Left: "Stacy," Real Doll. © RealDoll.com and Stacy Leigh Photography.



The main idea behind the *Post Human* exhibition was that certain artists acknowledged and exposed the increasing possibilities science and technology offered us to modify ourselves, pursuing an idealized image that is more and more similar to the models proposed by fashion and media industries. Abjection, from this perspective, could be seen as a result, or rather a reaction to, these models. The hyper-sexualized mannequins and dolls of Sherman and Kelley featured in *Uncanny*, then, could be interpreted as the result of a process of assimilation to the standards imposed by media fantasies, a process of assimilation obviously gone wrong.

Most of these media fantasies feature women, either because they are addressed to them or because they stereotype them. While in the 1980s and 1990s fashion pursued more and more androgynous standards, advertising and pornography insisted on prosperous models, hyper-sexualized through plastic surgery or more and more advanced digital effects. A symbolic doll of visual culture in the post human era is the hyperrealistic sex doll put on the market in 1996 by the California-based company RealDoll. Unlike any previous sex doll, a RealDoll has a “poseable” PVC skeleton with steel joints and silicone flesh and is designed to recreate the appearance, texture, and weight of a human body. Due to its uncanny resemblance to a real human being, the RealDoll immediately entered the public imaginary, appearing in movies, music videos, and documentaries.

For the 2002 *Playboy* photo shoot mentioned above, Helmut Newton replaced models with RealDoll products. A more critical approach was that of Laurie Simmons. The artist, part of the same Pictures Generation to which Sherman belongs, always worked with dolls. She started with small dolls photographed in domestic toy settings, but recently she has turned real women into dolls through masks or heavy cosmetic treatments. For the series *The Love Doll* (2009–2011), Simmons photographed Japanese sex dolls—detailed like the RealDoll products but with Asian traits—in daily settings, walking on the snow, resting on a bed, or posing as a bride for a wedding photo.

In a recent conversation with Sherman and other artists regarding the use of dolls and toys in art, Simmons asserted:

I thought if you assigned an expression to a doll, it could be more powerful than a human expression. The doll becomes hyper-real. I wasn't making a conscious critique of a woman trapped in a kitchen or a bathroom. I had decent memories of my own early childhood and my mother's role in it. Things didn't get weird for me until adolescence. I was kind of obsessed with the white-washed perfection of the ads that I saw about homemaking and post World War II life. I love the clarity.<sup>17</sup>

## ALIENS, ANIMATRONICS, AND AVATARS

Simmons' feeling of "perfection" in the domestic setting corresponds to a model imposed by media that is impossible or rather unnatural to achieve. And the same could be said for the human beings inhabiting these settings, mostly the women who have traditionally been associated with values of domesticity. However, more sexualized models and new forms of emancipation have set women at odds with the domestic settings to which they supposedly belong. Although many women have not really changed their status, they have definitely changed their shape in the attempt to adhere to the ideal perfection proposed by the cosmetic and fashion industries.

The transformation of the social role of the housewife could be examined through the evolution of the TV shows that have it as the protagonist, from soap operas to recent reality shows like *Real Housewives*. What emerges from the past few decades is that we have apparently more and more emancipated housewives, but still embedded within a mechanism of control and submission to the will of men or to greater power systems. And emancipation, if that is really what it is, often simply amounts to greater attention to the care of the self, which includes plastic surgery and cosmetics. The idea of housewives turned into sex dolls features in artworks such as Alex Bag's video *His Girlfriend is a Robot* (1996), perfect for cleaning and for sex, and Jennifer Rubell's *Lysa III* (2014), a large-breasted naked female mannequin, in horizontal position, whose crotch works as a nutcracker.

Often women's bodies have been paired with those of automata or alien figures, aliens and robots being another symbolic repository for desire that generates fear. Although the relation between art and robots deserves a dedicated study, it is sufficient here to mention Japanese artist Mariko Mori's early works from the mid-1990s, costumed performances in which she presents herself in an urban setting as a sexualized cyborg, mixing elements of Eastern philosophies and sci-fi culture. A recent artists' cyborg, instead, is Jordan Wolfson's (*Female Figure*) 2014 (2014), a platinum blonde life-size animatronic wearing a provocative white dress coordinated with latex boots, with a witch mask and evident burns on its smooth skin, who performs mechanical movements in front of a mirror to which it is attached, accompanied by a music and spoken-word soundtrack.

Wolfson's animatronic echoes several contemporary issues related with digital culture, like the advancement in robotics applied to both entertainment and production, and the identity split induced by a more and more active interaction with social networks and the Internet. Doing so, it brings us to a more contemporary form of mannequins: avatars. Like mannequins, avatars were born for functional

reasons, employed in virtual simulations for technical or scientific purposes. And like mannequins, avatars became fetishes, projections of sexual desires, from videogames to virtual sex. Besides their material existence, the only thing that apparently differentiates mannequins from avatars is the scale. However, since they are conceived for a virtual world that is supposed to replicate the real one, we tend to identify with avatars and their environment on a human scale.

An emerging generation of artists is using avatars in the present decade to explore uncanny sides of their identity, projecting fetish values onto them or assigning them duties they wouldn't be able to perform in real life. In French artist Cécile B. Evans's video *Hyperlinks or it Didn't Happen* (2014), a digitally rendered likeness of late actor Philip Seymour Hoffman introduces himself saying: "I'm not magic, and please don't call me uncanny. I'm just a bad copy made too perfectly, too soon." In American artist Jacolby Satterwhite's series *Reifying Video Desire* (2014), the artist's avatar wanders through a floating sci-fi universe where the exploration of a fantastical world equals a new form of gender liberation through dance.

The most uncanny artists' avatars are definitely British artist Ed Atkins's hyperreal self-portraits, which perform streams of consciousness, imprisoned in a limbo between memory, melancholy, and death. Atkins realizes them through software like *Faceshift* that maps specific features of the user, in this case himself, onto standard virtual figures. The resulting avatar is an uncanny surrogate of the artist, who in speaking regresses to the past, disclosing feelings and emotions that social reality tends to hide. Hence the recurring talk of loneliness and illness, presented in alienated settings that function more as virtual replicas of states of mind than real places, with a soundtrack composed of fragments of pop music, body sounds, and ambient noises.

Contemporary artists' avatars prove that the cultural value that transpires from the body surrogates we have taken into consideration doesn't consist in their material essence but in the invisible relationships that connect them to their creator, owner, or whoever identifies or interacts with them. While mannequins, life-like dolls, and avatars have a function in real life, their use in art has to be intended as purely psychological: Their function, if there is one, is to expose the tendency of human nature to conceal, repress, and hide feelings and pulsations. Following the psychoanalytical path, we should then conclude that these uncanny doubles are complex machines of introspection. We fetishize them in order to escape a confrontation with our real selves; we project ourselves or our fantasies onto them in order to bypass natural and social limits or real life.

## NOTES

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FRANCESCO SPAMPINATO is an art historian and professor at Rhode Island School of Design, a Ph.D. candidate in Arts et Média at Sorbonne Nouvelle, and author of *Come Together: The Rise of Cooperative Art and Design*.