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Müller-Tamm, Pia, and Katharina Sykora, eds.

Puppen, Körper, Automaten – Phantasmen der Moderne

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Just when you think that nothing more can be written about the „Body“ comes an exhibition that covers new ground, summarizing the uses in the historical avant-garde of dolls, automatons, mannequins, and mechanical figures of all kinds as referents and as objects for artistic manipulation. In the impressive exhibition at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, *Puppen, Körper, Automaten – Phantasmen der Moderne*, organizers Pia Müller-Tamm and Katharina Sykora have gathered works ranging from Suzanne Valadon's bourgeois portraits, complete with doll, to the erotic fantasies of Hans Bellmer's photographs. Prompted by the importance of hybrid human forms in contemporary art, this exhibition examines the complex manipulations of the artificial human form in the historic avant-garde.

In this ambitious exhibition, feminist and psychoanalytic theoretical terms are used in the material for the general viewer. The audio-text explicitly questions the role of the (female) doll as a liminal figure marking the boundary of the natural and the real, and discusses the presence of the grotesque, the uncanny, fantasy and eroticism, as well as the commercialisation and social construction of femininity. While the opening wall text for the exhibition questions the relationship between male artist and female doll-model, this question could have been repeated since it was rapidly lost among the seduction of the works.

The exhibition begins with the construction of female roles via the bourgeois childhood doll (Suzanne Valadon's paintings *Marie Coca et sa fille Gilberte* and *La Poupée délaissée*) and the erotic and uncanny manipulation of the adult doll commissioned by Oskar Kokoschka. Subsequent photographs by Herbert List and Horacio Coppola combine both poles, presenting the childhood doll in erotic poses.

From the childhood doll, the exhibition moves to photographs of the shop-window mannequin and the obsessive play and blurring of the border between the constructed femininity of „real“ women, and the female mannequin. Such enactments of femininity are contrasted with the role playing assigned to the sexless wooden artist's figurines by Man Ray and others. Yet the artists did not only play with constructions of gender: racial codes are evidenced in Germaine Krull's *Mauritius*, in which the richly bejewelled white woman's arm presses down on the bowed back of a dark-wood figure, surely a reference to European exploitation of the island Mauritius and other colonies. A brief mention of the racial coding in play here would have enriched the exhibition.

Moving on from photographs to paintings, drawings, and collages, the organizers constructed two broad opposing categories: works in which art approaches the doll [„die Kunst nähert sich der Puppe“] and works in which the doll approa-

ches art [„Die Puppe nähert sich der Kunst“].¹ The first category included works in which the human figure was abstracted and mechanized, approaching the formal qualities of the doll: the examples given included works by Léger, Malevich, Stepanova and Schlemmer. The second category, in which the doll approached art, included not just the depiction of the doll or automatic figure, as in works by Schlichter, but also the new hybridity of techniques such as collage, which utilized fragmentary, consciously artificial structures. While the development of these two categories in the catalog essay was persuasive, in the context of the exhibition it came across as forced. No matter. They enabled the exhibition of a wide range of material that was a pleasure to see.

In contrast, the marionettes by Alexandra Exeter and Sophie Taeuber-Arp were much more convincing examples of the avant-garde interest in puppets and artificial figures. While the horrendous results of the mechanization of the human body in World War I were biting satirized in Otto Dix's *Skat Players*, which depicts three grotesque war wounded, complete with prostheses.

One of the highlights of the exhibition was the Surrealist section, including reconstructions of the mannequins from the 1938 „Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme“ as well as numerous photographs from the original exhibition. Here were some of the more disturbing manipulations of the (female) mannequin, and the organizers used the words of one of the original Surrealists, Man Ray, to make apparent the fantasized sexual violence involved in the decoration and display of the figures.²

The manipulations of the female mannequin in the Surrealist exhibition pale in comparison to the fantasies expressed via the dolls created and photographed by Hans Bellmer with which the exhibition culminates. Bellmer's second doll, from 1932, is used for the exhibition pamphlet and poster, and one of Bellmer's photographs of the doll is on the cover of the catalog. And here lies one of the great challenges of the exhibition: how to discuss the pivotal works of Bellmer, analysing the creation and reproduction of the sexually charged, fragmentary nude child-doll. In her catalog essay, Verena Kuni rightly stresses Bellmer's sado-masochistic sexualization of the child-doll.³ I wish this critique had been made more explicit in the context of the exhibition, where these beautiful, yet disturbing, images are used to „sell“ the show.

The exhibition ends with two postscripts – Pierre Molinier and Richard Baquie – whose works, from the 1960s and 1991 respectively, fall outside the chronological frame of the exhibition. Both works require the viewer to take on the voyeuristic position. Molinier's small photographs are presented in a darkened corridor, within jewel-box vitrines, and the viewer must first adjust to the low light, and then bend towards the photographs in order to see Molinier's manipulations of pornographic poses, and self-masquerade in which he transformed himself into a double or a travesty of the female mannequin, breaking down boundaries between artist and model, real and artificial, male and female. Whereas the exhibition methods used for the Molinier photographs construct the voyeurism, Richard Baquie's *Sans titre. Étant donné: 1° La chute d'eau, 2° Le gaz d'éclairage*, explicit-

ly uncovers the voyeuristic mechanism of Duchamp's mysterious installation of the same title in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Baquie constructed his work precisely after the Duchamp installation, with one crucial difference. While Duchamp's scenario of *Lustmord* in landscape is visible only through the two peepholes in the heavy wooden door, Baquie reveals the scene on the remaining three sides: the partial female mannequin on bed of twigs, with comical landscape scrim behind her. Here the manipulation of the doll is laid bare, stripped of all eroticism, with the banality of the voyeur exposed.

The exhibition persuasively presented works from almost all media in which the avant-garde worked: drawing, graphic arts, painting, marionettes, costume design, sculpture, and photography. All that is, except one – film – which so many art historians and art institutes still struggle to incorporate. To be sure, the exhibition includes a small room with video of film clips organized around such titles as „Barbie meets the Terminator.“. Yet despite the introductory wall-text, the rapid interchange of clips ranging from *Metropolis* to the contemporary computer figure „Lara Croft“ is merely entertaining. A more detailed discussion of just *Metropolis* for example, would have placed the film within its historical context, and afforded it the same degree of analysis as other objects exhibited.

The exhibition and catalog represent a new and needed overview of the manipulations of the human form in the historic avant-garde. Despite the minor shortcomings noted above, the exhibition has an encyclopedic range, thought-provoking text, and establishes a new benchmark for an exhibition actively engaged with contemporary theory, yet accessible to a general audience.

1 Compare Müller-Tamm and Sykora, pp. 72-77.

2 „1938 wurden neuzehn nackte junge Frauen aus dem Schaufenster der Kaufhäuser entführt und der Raserei der Surrealisten ausgesetzt, die es unverzüglich für ihre Pflicht hielten, sie zu vergewaltigen, ein jeder nach seiner eigenen originären und unnachahmlichen Weise, doch ohne jegliche Rücksicht auf die Gefühle der Opfer, die sich nichtsdestoweniger mit reizender Gutwilligkeit der Ihnen zugefügten Huldigung und Schändung fügten, mit dem Ergebnis, daß sie das Begehren eines gewissen Man Ray erweckten, der seine Ausrüstung öffnete und hervorholte und die Orgie aufzeichnete, nicht mit Interesse

der Geschichte, sondern einfach, weil ihm danach war.“ Man Ray: *Les Mannequins. Résurrection des mannequins. mannequins présentés à l'Exposition surréaliste de 1938*, Paris 1966. Cited in the exhibition wall text and by Elena Filipovic „Abwesende Kunstobjekte: Mannequins und die 'Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme' von 1938“ in *Puppen, Körper, Automaten – Phantasmen der Moderne*, 214.

3 Verena Kuni, „Pygmalion, entkleidet von Galathea, selbst? Junggesellengeburten, mechanische Bräute und das Märchen vom Schöpferum des Künstlers im Surrealismus“ in *Puppen, Körper, Automaten – Phantasmen der Moderne*, 190.