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Anna Uddenberg's sculptures of seduction, submission and control

Her body-warping works entrap performers and make audiences consider how and why we give away our power

Anna Uddenberg shot at Fragile Studio for the FT by Doro Zinn

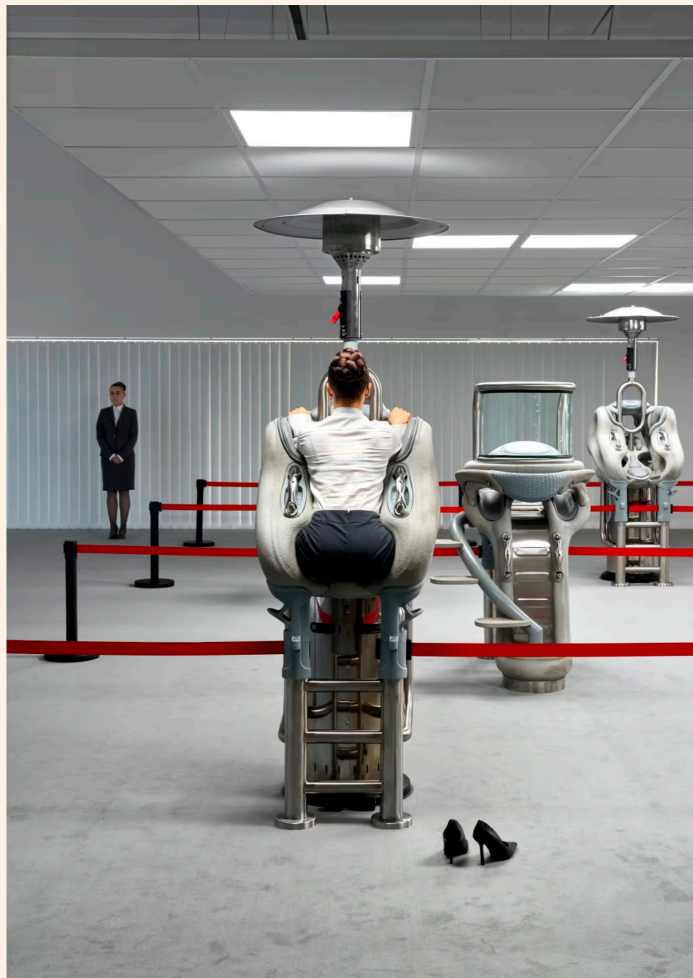
Kristina Foster JUNE 8 2024

Visitors more accustomed to flying first class may hesitate before approaching “Premium Economy”, Anna Uddenberg’s installation at Art Basel. In the Unlimited section for large projects, fair-goers will encounter her futuristic sculptures, but they might also find themselves being ushered around the work by performers resembling stewardesses, as if being directed through a transport security checkpoint.

“It’s about conformity and the willingness, maybe even the joyfulness, to get rid of one’s sense of identity,” Uddenberg says over coffee at Soho House in Berlin, where the Swedish artist is based.

“Premium Economy” is the latest in a string of installations where performers interact with her furniture-like sculptures to explore how objects and places shape bodies and behaviour. Uddenberg wants to examine, for instance, the way an airport is designed to direct the flow of people in transit, and thus their behaviour, or how the white-walled setting of a gallery prompts visitors to speak in hushed tones.

The artist staged something similar last year in New York when she installed crowd-control stanchions alongside her sculptures at Meredith Rosen gallery (which is presenting “Premium Economy” at the fair alongside Berlin’s Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler gallery). At the show’s opening, spectators were shepherded across the space by women sharply dressed in tailored skirts and high heels. At certain points the performers mounted the sculptures, bending themselves into sexually suggestive positions as they inserted elbows into stirrups, backsides and legs in the air.



Installation view of Anna Uddenberg's 'Premium Economy' at Kunsthalle Mannheim in 2023 © Courtesy Kunsthalle Mannheim.
Photo: Jens Gerber

Control and submission jostle together thrillingly in Uddenberg's art. For her first solo institutional show, at Berlin's Schinkel Pavillon, she had male performers dress up in diapers and crawl into contraptions reminiscent of baby car seats. Many critics read the work as a subversive response to commodity culture's infantilisation of adults, but the artist offers an even more sardonic explanation: "It was ultimately about the uselessness of people in general, and I guess the ultimate example of that would be an adult baby."

Uddenberg is trendily dressed and wearing big sunglasses; her cool exterior matches the dry humour she frequently displays during our conversation. When we meet she has just closed a show at Kunsthalle Mannheim, which awarded her a prize in 2022. As well as major institutions, her work can be found in private collections, Balenciaga campaigns and permanently installed at Berlin's Berghain nightclub — a reflection not just of her star status in the capital's art scene, but also of an art practice that defies easy categorisation.



Installation view of Anna Uddenberg's 'Continental Breakfast' at Meredith Rosen Gallery, New York, in 2023 © Courtesy Meredith Rosen Gallery. Photo: Dario Lasagni

Born in Stockholm in 1982, Uddenberg studied at the city's Royal Institute of Art and Frankfurt's Städelschule before coming to prominence in the late 2010s with her striking sculptures of hyper-flexible feminine figures. Probing the tangled lines between gender, sexuality, social media and fashion, these talented contortionists held a mirror — or often a selfie stick — to our consumerist, screen-addicted lives.

Recently the artist has shifted focus to scrutinise the unspoken social codes of everyday spaces. She evokes the sterile settings of airports, hotels and medical centres to highlight, in her words, "the invisible boundaries in a social setting that dictate people's behaviour".



Anna Uddenberg: 'I'm interested in ... this obsession with "being you" which is now also what social media is all about' © Doro Zinn

The way that we present ourselves in public is an important theme in Uddenberg's art, something she traces back to her fascination with performative identities on social media and reality TV. "I'm interested in the tension between an obviously artificial environment in which the characters are enacting what they are expected to do and that idea of the authentic self, this obsession with 'being you' which is now also what social media is all about."

If these latest installations can be interpreted as metaphors for this public performance of identity, then Uddenberg's sculptures could be seen as props or, as the artist describes them, "sculptural scripts" that direct the body in the same way we must navigate social norms. Made using 3D printing and digital tools, they resemble hellish dentist chairs or aeroplane seats, amalgamations of industrial design which evoke the clinical veneer of everyday spaces. Their utilitarian aesthetic calls on us to recognise them as functional objects. Yet exactly what their function is remains unclear.



'Journey of Self Discovery' (2016) by Anna Uddenberg, installation view, The Perimeter, London, courtesy of Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin © Stephen James

Her interest in the artifice of object design — “a running shoe . . . pretends to look fast” — can be magnified to extreme levels, pointing out the intentions behind the apparent neutrality of our built environment. Her sculptures enact “a sort of entrapment . . . like safety equipment that is pampering the body but also locking it in”, which invites us to think about the control that we willingly relinquish not just in public spaces but also to products — especially relevant as AI programs and “user-friendly” technologies create automated surroundings.

These threads of power, artifice and social etiquette will become more pronounced within the transient, impersonal setting of an art fair, which the artist describes as an “artificial bubble . . . reminiscent of an airport”. Let's just hope Uddenberg hasn't recreated an airport's queues too.

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