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AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

The Erotic Doll: A Modern Fetish, by Marquard Smith

13 March 2014

An exploration of mannequins as objects of lust makes fascinating reading for Laura Frost

Ladies and gents, welcome to the museum of the erotic doll. Step right up and feast your eyes on modern man's curious contraptions. If the saucy blow-up doll makes you squeamish, brace yourself for the Dutch Wife (a sailor's delight!), lubricating robot ladies, surrealist brides stripped bare, state-of-the-art RealDolls, and the iDollators who love them.

Marquard Smith is the curator of this collection of men's dolls, rendered in a lavishly illustrated volume. Here mannequins created by artists such as Oskar Kokoschka, Salvador Dalí, Hans Bellmer and Marcel Duchamp sit side by side with commercial sex dolls and other "penetrable and participatory sexual devices". Smith argues that the erotic doll is a "decidedly modern" fetish, with all the anthropological, economic and psychological implications of the commodity fetish and the sexual fetish. However, rather than interpret the doll as a symptom of regression, gender trouble or the uncanny, as many art historians have, Smith insists on its materiality and autonomy as an object. In order "to tell the story of the erotic doll from and through the doll itself", Smith aligns himself with contemporary "thing theory", which shifts attention away from the producer/consumer to the artefact itself. This Heideggerian manoeuvre has the virtue of sidestepping predictable psychoanalytic readings, but also the drawback of tautological formulations such as "The doll is a thing, a thing that things. The doll things."

Even as Smith wants to grant these dolls lives of their own, the obsessions and proclivities of their creators constantly assert themselves. For example, Kokoschka's life-size companion, custom-designed to resemble his ex-lover Alma Mahler, leaves Smith a bit baffled. If this doll was supposed to be a replicate of Mahler, why was it covered in fur? Was Kokoschka a trichophiliac? Smith isn't sure. Nor is he sure what exactly Kokoschka was *doing*, sexually, with that "monstrously furry...freak". Smith wants to give a phenomenological account of his subject, but understanding someone else's fetish can be tricky, especially if it is one as culturally loaded as men playing with dolls. By Smith's account, there is nothing queer about these dolls: they are a manifestation of "banal" male "heteronormative" desire.

The delicacy in the chapters on modern artists is offset by the profusion of detail about the design and use of contemporary sex dolls. These prosthetic lovers are blatantly built for copulation and still, Smith suggests, inspire romantic feelings in some men. But the story takes a dark turn when Smith reports that some owners “brutalize” their mannequins. Is damaging a doll ethically wrong? Can a doll give consent? After defending the honour of RealDolls, Smith shifts course and concludes that they are just “elaborate aids to masturbation” signifying “nothing more or less than unadulterated male heterosexuality itself... The doll is not a desired and desiring fetishistic thing... For it is a sex doll, an object, not, I repeat not, a woman. The doll is realistic but it is not real.” Did anyone ever think it was? Representations of sexualised dolls by female contemporary artists such as Cindy Sherman and Sarah Lucas appear, unanalysed, as a kind of silent retort to all this.

Seeing these morphologically similar models gathered together is certainly provocative. However, the differences between the artists’ dolls – crafted and displayed as aesthetic objects – and the commercial sex dolls are essential. Duchamp’s mysterious, obsessively fabricated *Étant Donnés*, a female form sprawled behind a peephole in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, seems a world away from the portable Fleshlight, with adjustable orifices through which to please oneself (a “honeymoon in the hand”, as James Joyce might have put it). More attention to the rich repertoire of writings about automata and puppets by Rainer Maria Rilke, Heinrich von Kleist and the like, not to mention the dolls of female artists such as Lotte Pritzel and Hannah Höch, would have deepened the historical contrast and gender analysis.

Throughout *The Erotic Doll*, there is anxiety that intimate attachments to things may erode human relationships. However, that ship has already sailed. Virtual sex is far more mainstream than sex with dolls, and it raises the question of what happens to eroticism when the body disappears altogether. The doll already feels like a quaint artefact, a nostalgic throwback to the childhood of our posthuman age.

The Erotic Doll: A Modern Fetish

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