

Kunstverein

An Emergency Exit Sealed Shut

April 22 - June 3, 2023

Opening April 21, 6-9pm

Fetishism and a hint of S&M lurk just beneath the surfaces of Alexis Hunter's photographs... Her rage at capitalism is focused upon the mass media which have, as Judith Williamson puts it, been 'selling us ourselves' for profit.

— Lucy Lippard

The materials I am drawn towards are manufactured in global quantities and are of institutional utility. These materials are tried and tested when subjected to acts of control and duress, measure and fitness. Sometimes this process is witnessed and captured through a camera lens, resulting in documents that play on photography's power to empirically index untenable actions.

— Lou Hubbard

This exhibition begins with a plot twist: an emergency exit, sealed shut. In the first instance, a crisis. Fashioned as a safety measure, the emergency exit should be able to be relied upon, the last resort and a first point of call wrapped up into one. But when that falters, when the structure supposedly there for your protection fails you and there is no possibility of escape, what next?

Taunt the structure, said New Zealand artist Alexis Hunter (1948–2014), whose work spanning photography, painting and organising was a key contribution to the feminist art movement of Britain in the 1970s. Included here are a collection of her 'narrative photo sequences' made between 1974 and 1978, produced in Hunter's quintessentially serial fashion. The works forensically detail her manhandling of objects of patriarchal oppression. In each individual series, she serves up the objects and their accompanying contexts on a photographic platter, storyboarding her fornication with mechanical objects, bulging crotches and domesticity as a way to subvert the dominant narrative of the male gaze, instead writing her own path to independence and sexual expression.

Due to the overtly feminist nature of Hunter's work, it didn't get the exposure it deserved at its time of making. This is evidenced by an incident in 1978, when a group of male museum workers busy with unpacking her works in Belfast objected so strongly to their content that they were withdrawn from the exhibition. Nor did she receive the professionalism she demanded, a request insisted upon through how she organised

her practice, working two days a week on 'creative explosions' and managing everything else around them the other five, steadfastly intent on establishing herself and the work of other women artists, her advertising background put to use in full force. This is evidenced in her activist work with the Women's Union, for which she organised slide nights at the well-established Hayward Gallery, empowering women to show in an institution they otherwise wouldn't have access to, as well as her friendly (though unrelenting) lobbying of the Women's Slide Library to include anyone she saw fit (so long as they too subscribed to a certain level to professionalism).

Twenty-eight years later we meet Lou Hubbard (1957–), an Australian photographer and sculptor pushing at the integrity of structures through often eerie sculptural configurations and processes, sometimes recorded on film. She uses everyday domestic objects in her work—brushes, clothes, ornamental figurines—which she submits to odd, often-violent procedures, recombining them in unexpected ways. From surgically operating on marshmallow eyeballs with dexterous precision to working en masse with comically inflatable (and therefore defunct) walking frames, Hubbard's work is as much about the narrative absurdism of expectation and preconception as it is about an almost mundane trialling and testing of the durability of materials.

While Hubbard and Hunter have many things in common—long periods teaching countless students at art academies, a background in commercial photography and film, a keen sense of humour, a narrative impulse, an investigation into the body's relation to and with standardising structures and, though less overtly in the work of Hubbard, the formative context of Antipodean feminist thought—what sits central to this story is their shared enquiry into the submission of materials and structures when force is applied. For Hunter this was an unyielding reckoning with a stifling political order, for Hubbard this is a sculptural and linguistic exercise geared towards interrogating conditions of control. For both, in these narrative arcs and plot twists from the status quo, the material generated speaks for itself: resistance is waged in the fullest, sealed doors will be pushed open with force.

Kunstverein would like to thank the artists; Althea Greenan and the Women's Art Library at Goldsmith's University, London; SaraH Scout Presents, Melbourne; and Richard Saltoun Gallery, London. We would also like to thank our members and Amsterdam Fonds voor de Kunst for their continued support as well as VCA Art Dialogues for their project specific contribution.