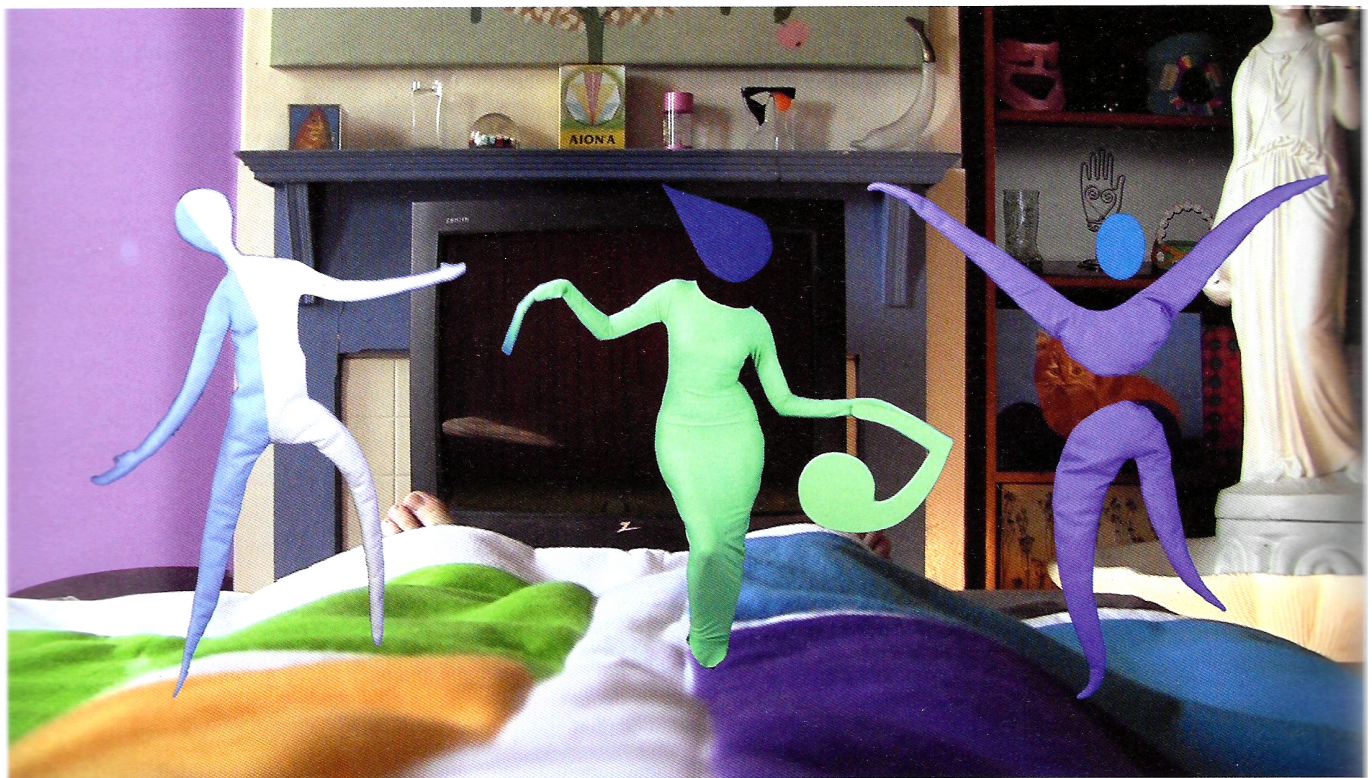


Crèvecœur

LE, Shana Moulton, *SYSTEMS FOR IMPROVING LIFE*,
ELEPHANT, autumn 2019



Shana Moulton *SYSTEMS FOR IMPROVING LIFE*

American artist Shana Moulton channels the mood of contemporary anxiety, and the self-help solutions marketed to aid us. Using film, performance and sculpture, she wittily creates the unusual world of her alter ego, Cynthia, who has agoraphobia and body dysmorphia and lives in a domestic sphere defined by surreal happenings.

What can we expect from your upcoming Zabłudowicz Collection show? It's divided into three parts based on the three main rooms of the venue. The large backroom includes *Whispering Pines 10*, which is a multichannel video installation based on a live performance in collaboration with Nick Hallett. The main room has a tree-like structure in the centre of the space, mirroring this idea of climbing a Giant Sequoia [the world's largest tree], which happens in *Whispering Pines 10*. It doesn't really look like a Giant Sequoia, it acts more like a cat jungle gym that functions as a vehicle for video monitors and other objects. The third space has another recent work, *My Personal Measurements*, which was originally for a group show called *Producing Futures* at Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich. It considers how new technology is mediating self-improvement and self-care.

Why have you chosen an alter ego, Cynthia, as a means of expression? I came to start working with her through these medical device dresses, which I'd started making as a student. Initially I imagined what kind of a person would need to wear those types of dresses. She eventually became more autobiographical and I realized that *I'm* the kind of person who needs to wear those dresses, because I'm a hypochondriac.

Why is it easier for that self-expression to happen through someone else? It provides distance so that I can make work that's about myself or my own personal issues but remain somewhat removed. I'm encountering the things that my alter ego encounters for the first time.

What are the specific reasons for setting Cynthia's environment in the domestic sphere? A lot of the existential questions or fantasies that I personally embark on take place at home, alone, rather than interacting with people out in the world. I feel that a domestic setting offers portals into her fantasy life, or desperation. The ways in which she populates her home are an expression of her own personal crises.

Is desperation born out of the domestic sphere being a gendered space? I suppose it is partially—in the sense of the book *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. When it comes to her seeking self-fulfilment, when it comes to her own spirituality, for her and me that is something that gets played out at home. Where Cynthia's desperation comes from is that urge to look for the ultimate form of self-improvement.

Has spirituality been co-opted by consumer society as a means of enabling people's self-care? Growing up in California, that's the main way of encountering spirituality: through products that have been advertised to me. And even though I'm sceptical of a lot of these, I'm also hoping to find whatever pathway in those for myself, and that's what I'm trying to communicate with this alter ego—that paradox.

Is there a relationship between escape and self-improvement? I think that ideas of self-care and improvement have been important, especially for women who have been historically tasked with taking care of everyone else. At the same time, it also feels very self-involved. Cynthia is a story about the self and not any sort of social atmosphere. Another thing I've been thinking about is the permission you give yourself, with self-improvement or self-care, to drop out of society and various expectations or duties. Is self-care the same thing as procrastination or neglect?

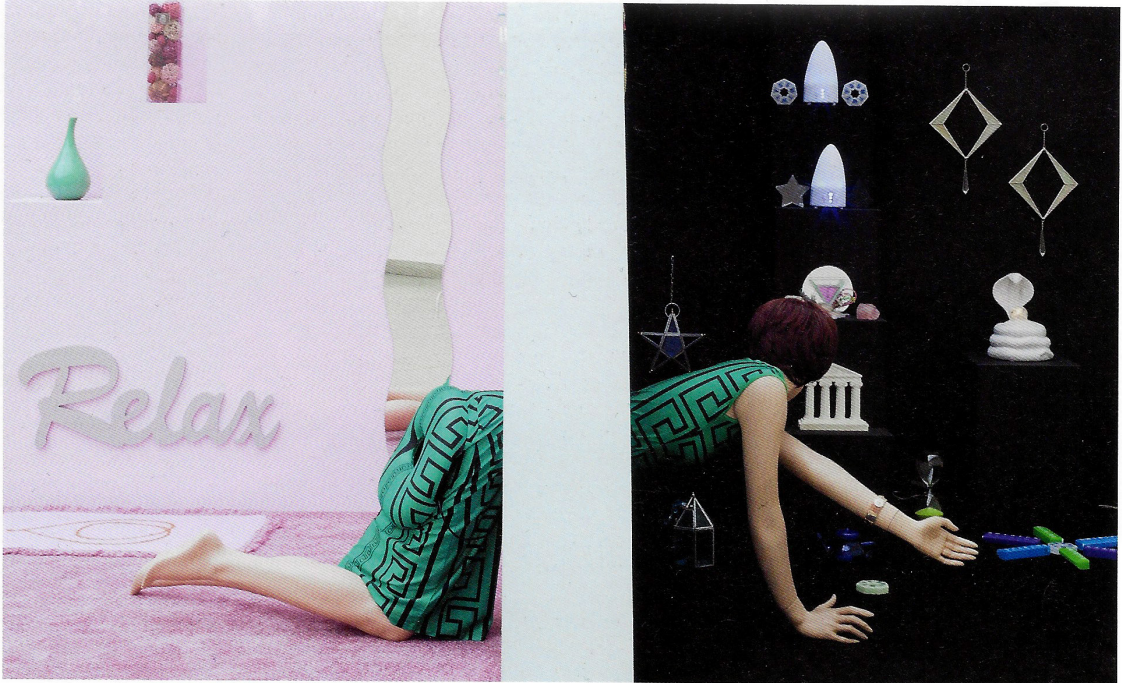
Why are you interested in using surrealism as a means of exploring self-care? One reason I like surrealism as a strategy is that it reflects the body dysmorphia that someone with hypochondria or issues with their own appearance has. It's one way to visualize that.

How does Cyberfeminism relate to self-care? I was [interested in] prosthetics and devices that help improve the body and I became aware of Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*. We're already becoming cyborgs with these medical devices. I'm personally going through this phase of testing whatever I can afford on myself. Recently I got a product called Thynk: it's a small device that attaches to your temple and the back of your head or neck and it creates these pulsations designed to improve your mood or energy, or help to calm you down and help you sleep. It's a hopeful use of technology.

Is capitalism co-opting spirituality and self-care exploitative? That has been a real quandary for me. For example, with transcendental meditation I'm still completely on the fence about whether it's exploitative or might still be something really great to practise. I did the first round of classes and I was committed for about three months, but as soon as I started travelling I fell off. By the end of the classes, it started to feel like Scientology to me: an attempt to sell you additional things.

Did you try Scientology? No, that might be where I draw the line. But you know, there's something tempting about it: this system for life and improving. To have all of the questions addressed. Of course it sounds terrifying in terms of the horror stories of escaping... but I also find it very attractive. (LE)

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE GREGOR STAIGER, ZÜRICH. PHOTO BY GUNNAR MEIER



Previous pages, from top
Every Angle Is an Angel, 2016
1-channel video projection,
colour, sound
6 mins, 19 secs

Restless Leg Saga, 2012
Video still

This page, from top
Every Cell Is a Bell, 2016
(detail)
Installation view at
Kunsthau Clarus,
Switzerland

Decorations of the Mind II,
2011
Installation view at Galerie
Gregor Staiger, Zurich

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE GREGOR STAIGER, ZÜRICH

