

# ARTFORUM

## Tommy Hartung

ON STELLAR RAYS

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When a mannequin is in the gallery, Surrealism is on the table. That's been the case since 1924, when André Breton identified mannequins as a signature appearance of the "marvelous" (a romantic's term that mirrors Freud's *uncanny*). Sometimes the connection goes slack—for instance, during the grim cocktail party of waxwork figurines called "Skin Fruit" that showed at the New Museum last year. Lately, however, there's been a trickle of exhibitions being casually described as disturbing, creepy, or simply fucked-up—after-hours chatter that, when parsed more rigorously, spells out Surrealism. Consider Josh Kline's disembodied hands of cultural workers currently at 47 Canal, or Debo Eilers's distorted Elmo masks at On Stellar Rays this past May: Here we see treatments of the effigy and the found object that owe an (unconscious?) debt to Hans Bellmer or Man Ray, even as their immediate points of reference are the office cubicle or Sesame Street.



Tommy Hartung, *Anna*, 2011, still from a color video in HD, 20 minutes 37 seconds.

Nothing has announced a new Surrealist sensibility more programmatically than Tommy Hartung's video *Anna*, 2011, which stars eight mottled-plaster mannequins brought eerily to life by stop-motion animation. In contrast to Bellmer's notorious *poupées*—violently mashed bundles of feminine erogenous zones—Hartung's figures are androgynous and literally sexless. Hollow torsos swivel on mic stands, mechanically dispensing smoke or dribbles of salt through roughly fashioned orifices. Their patient, inscrutable actions take place in Hartung's studio, a setting so dim and dank as to conjure associations with ruins or keeps; tricky camerawork warps the space's perspective and scale, recalling the psychic vertigo of Max Ernst's 1920 *The Master's Bedroom*. Yet these borrowings from an interwar visual repertoire are not what make *Anna* so consummately Surrealist. Rather, it's Hartung's play with Surrealism's lingering political charge, what Walter Benjamin famously described as "the revolutionary energies that appear in the 'outmoded.'" On one register, stop-motion animation is itself outmoded, jerkily syncopated when juxtaposed with Hartung's computer-graphic sequences and high-definition recording. (A running horse motif harks back to animation's origins in Eadweard Muybridge's racetrack motion studies.) A second outmoded "object" is Soviet Russia, which flashes up through film clips from the workers' epic *Earth* (1930). What could be more outmoded, moribund even, than visions of a collective proletarian subject? Then again, the insertion of this film is rhetorically most stirring when it's projected against Hartung's mannequins; flickering motes of light catch the glitter in their curlicued plaster hair, creating the semblance of an undersea reef. Coral, of course, is another favorite Surrealist emblem, since it imbues petrified rock with the pulse of organic growth, an unsettling confusion between the dead and still living.

— Colby Chamberlain