

Laurie Simmons' *The Love Doll*: Looking at a Sex Doll Anew

Laurie Simmons' *The Love Doll*: Eine Sexpuppe neu betrachtet

Christophe Koné

ABSTRACT (English)

As a female photographer who has been interested in miniature dolls throughout her career, Simmons started in 2009 with a new series entitled "The Love Doll," featuring a life-sized sex doll. On a family trip to Japan, Simmons discovered love dolls. She ordered one of these life-sized high-end customized sex dolls from Japan and captured her evolving relationship with it in the hybrid form of a diary and photo journal. Simmons documents the doll's transformation from object to subject but also its transition from girlhood to womanhood. By closing her exhibit catalogue with images of the doll dressed as a traditional geisha, she uncovers twice the masquerade of femininity as artifice and artificiality. While engaging with the doll's uncanniness, Simmons' photographs display the inability to distinguish between animate and inanimate and the confusion between woman and doll as a result. Because Simmons casts a maternal, platonic, de-eroticizing gaze on her Love Dolls, she manages to "Look at a Sex Doll Anew".

Keywords: doll photos, Japanese sex dolls, geisha, Helmut Newton, love dolls vs. real dolls, uncanny, ambivalence, domesticity, intimacy.

ABSTRACT (Deutsch)

Als Fotografin, die sich während ihrer Karriere seit jeher für Miniaturpuppen interessiert hat, begann Simmons 2009 unter dem Titel „The Love Doll“ mit einer neuen Serie, die sich eine lebensgroße Sexpuppe bezieht. Auf einer Familienreise nach Japan entdeckte Simmons Liebespuppen und bestellte eine dieser lebensgroßen, maßgefertigten japanischen High-End-Sex-Puppen. Sie dokumentierte ihre sich entwickelnde Beziehung zu dieser Latex-Puppe in der Hybridform von Tagebuch und Fotojournal. Simmons nimmt die Verwandlung der Puppe vom Objekt zum Subjekt auf, aber auch ihre Transformation von Mädchenhaftigkeit zu Weiblichkeit. Der Schluss des Ausstellungskatalogs mit Bildern von einer als traditionelle Geisha verkleideten Puppe deckt die doppelte Maskerade der Weiblichkeit auf – als unnatürlich und künstlich. Indem sich Simmons' Fotografien mit der Unheimlichkeit der Puppe auseinandersetzen, zeigen sie die Unfähigkeit, zwischen belebt und unbelebt zu unterscheiden, und die daraus resultierende Verwirrung zwischen Frau und Puppe. Da Simmons einen mütterlichen, platonischen und de-erotisierenden Blick auf ihre Liebespuppen wirft, schafft sie es eindrücklich, eine Sex-Puppe „neu“ zu betrachten.

Schlüsselwörter: Puppenfotos, Japanische Sexpuppen, Geisha, Helmut Newton, Liebespuppen vs. reale Puppen, unheimlich, Ambivalenz, Häuslichkeit, Intimität.

In her 2009-11 photo series *The Love Doll*, featuring two female life-sized latex sex dolls, American photographer Laurie Simmons departs from her usual body of work: up to this point, her photographs had featured small scale surrogates – miniature dolls, cutouts, and ventriloquist dummies. The catalogue, *The Love Doll*, published in 2012 in conjunction with exhibits in New York, London, and Tokyo, takes the hybrid form of a diary and photo journal, documenting Simmons’ evolving relationship with two latex dolls over the course of 36 days (Greenberg 2012). The images manage to illustrate the photographer’s distance and ambivalence towards her subjects, while capturing the uncanny erotic allure of these latex creatures of desire. The singular appeal of Simmons’ work lies in this tension between erotic magnetism and a more complex, uncanny ambivalence.



Figure 1: Laurie Simmons: *The Love Doll*. Day 30/Day 2 (Meeting, 2011)
 © 2019 Laurie Simmons. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York.

Simmons discovered Love Dolls on a family trip to Japan in 2009. The experience felt “like looking at a beautiful sculpture,” and Simmons ended up ordering two of these life-sized, high-end customized sex creatures – one Eurasian and one Caucasian (Cripps 2014; see figure 1).

“For me,” she says, “finding a life-size doll after working with small figurines was like a dream come true because it meant that I could work in human scale for the first time” (Cripps 2014). Working with a human-sized sex doll opened up the world around her as a set and a stage, but the doll’s weight (60 lbs.), limited mobility, and the lack of flexibility presented a real challenge (Yablonsky 2011). The great similarity between the 2009–11 *Love Doll* and the 1978 *Interiors* series shows that the sex doll, despite its large scale, fits perfectly into Simmons’ aesthetic, which generally focused on domesticity, womanliness, and loneliness. The color scheme and composition of the photograph “Kitchen,” (see Figure 2) (red, green, yellow and blue, and crowded with dishes and baked goods), recalls the kitchen photographs from *Interiors* (see Figure 3) with the Eurasian-looking doll clad in red loungewear and kneeling behind a play kitchen.

Restaging scenes and repeating ideas from previous shots with human-scale dolls seems to have given the photographer an opportunity to revisit her body of work. Although Simmons has been taking pictures of dolls since 1976, she does not consider herself a doll photographer. She did not play with dolls as a child, and she does not collect them today. She describes feeling uncomfortable at the display of dolls in people’s homes. In her eyes, dolls are mere surrogates; she regards them as props, and stores them under sheets in boxes until she needs them for a shoot¹. The two love dolls from Japan were no exception: each was handled and dressed by assistants. She did not anthropomorphize them or refer to them with a gendered pronoun (Fonts 2013).

The clinical distance Simmons maintains towards her love dolls is, in my opinion, what sets her apart from other sex doll photographers, such as Helmut Newton. She does not have any empathetic relationship to a doll as a subject; the doll is “a surrogate for a mood and an architecture for tableaux.” Simmons’ distance is reflected in the genre of photographs she takes. Shot mostly in natural light, the images show the Eurasian-looking doll dressed in contemporary fashion,

¹ I wish to express my gratitude to Laurie Simmons for accepting to answer some of my questions about *The Love Doll* series and to Alissa Friedman, Partner at the NYC art gallery Salon 94, for facilitating that conversation (see Simmons, n. s., <https://salon94.com/artists/laurie-simmons>).



Figure 2: Laurie Simmons: *The Love Doll. Day 23 (Kitchen, 2010)*
 © 2019 Laurie Simmons. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York.

set in everyday situations: working, eating sweets, sleeping and daydreaming, jumping and swimming. She looks like a typical high school girl in the prime of her youth and innocence. Surprisingly, among the forty-three doll photographs featured in the exhibit catalogue, only two depict the doll naked: “Bathtub Day 12” and “Nude with Dog Day 29,” each of which is followed by a journal entry in which Simmons conveys her discomfort with nudity. Confronting her own ambivalence towards her new human-scale object, Simmons quickly realized that the process of familiarizing herself with the love dolls was in fact the central story she wanted to tell. Playing dress up with the dolls, putting them in different poses, and placing them in various indoor and outdoor settings fulfilled two purposes for her: while these activities are integral part of the narrative about the two surrogates Simmons is crafting, they further the familiarization process. Though



Figure 3: Laurie Simmons: *Interiors, 1978.*
 © 2019 Laurie Simmons. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York.

the love dolls are the focal point of the series, Simmons is actually at the center: the photographer narrates in images and diary entries her developing relationship with two latex dolls. The documentary purpose of her images sets Simmons apart from Newton, who focuses on lewdness and titillation. *The Love Doll* follows the transformation of two sex dolls from alien thing to familiar subject in front of a photographer’s eyes, a metamorphosis that culminates in dressing up one doll as a geisha (see figure 4).

While most of the images from *The Love Doll* record the increasing familiarity (“Day 8 – Lying on Bed,” “Day 12 – Bathtub,” 2010) and even intimacy (“Day 28 – Nude with Dog,” 2011), the last nine present the Eurasian-looking doll wearing rice powder make-up and a silk kimono. Closing the series with the traditional image of a geisha, sitting elegantly on her knees with her hands folded on



Figure 4: Laurie Simmons, *The Love Doll. Day 31 (Geisha, 2011)*
© 2019 Laurie Simmons. Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York.

her lap, brings Simmons full circle, back to Japan where she stumbled upon a sex doll for the first time. And yet, by dressing up one of her Love Dolls as a geisha (often misconstrued in the west as a high class prostitute) she sends an ambiguous message: on the one hand, she underscores its objecthood, returning the doll to its decorative function, as part of an oriental doll collection; on the other, she reminds us that the doll is a sex toy, meant to satisfy male desire. Her photo series does succeed in destabilizing the gaze one normally casts on real dolls.

Simmons also exploits the difficulty of distinguishing between the doll and the woman. That struggle to differentiate between real and unreal is what German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch (1867-1919) identifies, in his 1906 essay “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” as the uncanny. Elaborating on the concept, Jentsch singles out wax dolls and automatons as uncanny figures with an unsettling resemblance to humans. Sigmund Freud refutes this thesis in his 1919 essay “The Uncanny,” and draws instead from German etymology to formulate his theory of the castration complex, based on a reading of *The Sandman* by German Romantic E.T.A. Hoffmann. Simmons’ doll photographs demonstrate a familiarity with both theories of the uncanny: her real dolls, kept indoors and in the midst of domestic activities, channel the Freudian uncanny by conveying homeliness, secrecy, and unsettlement, all at once, while the geisha photographs deliberately confuse the doll with a real woman, recalling Jentsch’s definition.

Simmons illustrates her break with past representations of love dolls explicitly by telling the story of an encounter she had while exhibiting the series at the *Tomio Koyama Gallery* in Tokyo in 2013. A Japanese male artist who also photographs Love Dolls came to the gallery and brought his doll with him. He had dressed it up, and wanted to take pictures of the three of them posing together. His request made Simmons uncomfortable, and she refused. “You and I are doing very different things,” she told him.²

In her *Love Doll* series, Simmons showcases her own ambivalence toward her subject: she documents the progress of her acquaintance with two sex dolls and examines her complex relationship with them. Removing the element of voyeurism from her photographs and imbuing her relationship to life-sized surrogates with a new intimacy, she allows the viewer to see these uncanny sex dolls anew.

2 Story and quote from my conversation with Laurie Simmons.

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