

Andra Ursuța: *Void Fill* (2021) and the Grotesque Fragment

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This paper offers a new interpretative framework for the corpus of Andra Ursuța and for the art historical lineages of the grotesque and the bodily fragment to which her concatenations of body and object belong. The hollow, crystalline skins of the artist's 2021 exhibition, Void Fill, cannily emblemize a world scenario in which objects become increasingly subjectivized and subjects self-objectify. Resurrecting Bakhtinian terms of the grotesque alongside Linda Nochlin's conception of the "fragment," I offer the "grotesque fragment" as a term of art for both a formal strategy in artistic figuration and a state of contemporary quasi-human embodiment in which worldly forces and perceptual revolutions press the body into forms which are both in excess of itself (grotesque) and diminished (fragmented). In their pithy titles, their canny choice of materials, and their formal experiments in figure-object synthesis, Andra Ursuța's sculptures leverage traditions of fragmentation and grotesquerie in art to offer a melancholic yet humorous take on powers which stress and reform the human epidermal boundary.

Introduction

How can visual art render the skin's power to invisibly extend past the visible dermis, and for the world to invisibly extend into the skin? How might one begin to express the complexity of skin – an agent which is both a biological reality and a historically contingent formation which encompasses thinking and is, yet, beyond thought (Salamon, 2010, p. 65)?

In the strange vessels of *Void Fill*, Romanian artist Andra Ursuța's 2021 exhibition at David Zwirner Paris, we may find a particularly compelling stratagem – darkly humorous cast glass sculptures where the artist has fused casts of her body parts with various flotsam of the contemporary



ILL. 1

Andra Ursuța, *Phantom Mass*, 2021. Lead crystal, 110.5 × 46.4 × 52.4 cm. Courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery.

market, from BDSM costumes and packaging materials to Halloween props and trash from around the artist's studio. Despite what is reportedly a methodical, multi-step production process including both lost wax casting and 3D scanning, Ursuța's compositions feel improvised: bodily remnants and objects seem to smash together with all the seeming forethought of a highway collision (Wiley, 2019). Yet a deeper meditation on death darkens the candied figures of the show – the titles of *Canopic Jerrycan* and *Canopic Demijohn* explicitly reference funeral rites, while a viewer unfamiliar with the artist's previous sculptural explorations of graveyards (*Would It Were Closing Time, and All Well*, 2013; *Hammer Projects: Andra Ursuța*, 2014) might still detect allusions to tombstones in the cinderblock plinths, which support the pieces in the all-grey main gallery.

Across ten glass sculptures of swirling, gaseous color, Ursuța ricochets between affective registers, wedding subtle carnival violence and

the dadaist absurdity of chance operations with the stately gravity of archaeological display and the existential dread of sci-fi thrillers. For a synecdoche of the forms and conceptual maneuvers of the show as a whole, take *Phantom Mass* (2021): a gelatinous, cleaved torso oozes out of a spiked corset the color of moonlight while, in a confounding miasma of mechanical arousal, two skeletal hands extend forward from the chest, a pair of perky breasts with bottle spouts for nipples held aloft between their bony digits as in offering. Balanced atop the torso, in place of a head, a diminutive, graceless knob: a milky glass cast of what might very well be a whoopie cushion or gimp mask. The 'skull' of this figure is unnerving in its uncanny evocation of a deformed, faceless head, but as a visual denouement of the piece, it is as though the artist fixed the humorous disappointment of unmet expectations into form. But for all of the piece's departures from normative human anatomy, it may conjure some bodily truths more realistically than most.

The glass sculptures of *Void Fill* offer viewers a cogent proposal for how art might render human skin with phenomenological sensitivity and poetic discipline. Ursuța's approach to figuration combines the traditional grotesque's fascination with troubled bodily boundaries and the corporeal crops, cuts, and effacements that art historian Linda Nochlin posited as uniquely evocative of modern human experience. Taking the two strands together, we might call this approach the *grotesque fragment*, a sensibility emblemized both in *Void Fill* and in related practices of sculptural collage, from artistic forbearers like Oskar Schlemmer and Isa Genzken to artistic contemporaries like Rachel Harrison, Ruben Ulises Rodriguez Montoya, and Berenice Olmedo.

But the combination of these visual tropes does more than chart a lineage in art history. I offer the grotesque fragment as a term of art for both a formal strategy in artistic figuration and as a descriptive term for a state of contemporary embodiment in which worldly forces and perceptual revolutions press the body into forms which are both in excess of itself (grotesque) and diminished (fragmented, cropped, disassembled, made partial). This article will examine the formal and theoretical power of the grotesque fragment as a sounding device for the strange case of contemporary embodiment under digital capitalism.

The Contemporary Grotesque

It might be fair to conclude that Ursuța was officially ‘onto something’ in 2019 when she debuted her first cast glass sculptures at the 58th Venice Biennale. Indeed, half of the sculptures in *Void Fill* (*Yoga Don’t Help*, *Succubustin’ Loose*, *Impersonal Growth*, *Predators ‘R Us*, and *Half-Drunk Mummy*) are chromatically enriched editions of pieces which first appeared in translucent white in the 58th Venice Biennale. In the following Venice Biennale in 2022, a year after *Void Fill*, the artist exhibited nine of *Void Fill*’s ten works – five in new colorways. Her commitment to this medium and technical process is now certainly without question – every solo exhibition the artist has staged since 2019 has featured cast glass sculptures, often presenting old works in new chromatic guises, with new compositions appearing alongside the old motley crew. The artist has never before iterated one particular technique or set of compositions so consistently and for so long.

While Ursuța’s work has always been quite bodily and often suggests commonly understood notions of the grotesque – busts and castrated body parts rendered in a variety of materials seem more often than not to appear in each of her solo exhibitions – her approach to figuration when working in glass – that is, as a synthesis of cast body parts and objects, of self and world, into a single crystal membrane – suggests a less commonly remarked upon fundament of the historical grotesque, which nonetheless anticipates much of what it is to be a contemporary subject amid an overabundance of disposable signifiers, consumer goods, and histories.

In his discipline-defining text *Rabelais and His World* (1965), scholar Mikhail Bakhtin charts a teleology of the grotesque in the European world – and, consequently, a history of a particular understanding, expression, and experience of embodiment. Defining the grotesque in cultural practice as expressions of “all that extrudes from the body and links it to other bodies or [the] world outside,” Bakhtin contends that for much of Western history, the body was believed to be inseparable from the world, and cultural and pseudo-scientific expressions of grotesque embodiment, which reified this belief, were very much the long-held representational norm, from Hippocrates’ assertion that the human body was home to the materials of the cosmos (and the cosmos, reflexively, conceptualized as a container of human flesh) to the crass, gross-out body humor of me-

dieval folk culture (Bakhtin, 1965, pp. 316-317, 341, 362). However, while grotesque expressions would continue on within popular and folk cultures for centuries, starting in the 16th century, the grotesque imagination of embodiment was largely excised from European thought in favor of the hermetically sealed Cartesian body: indeed, René Descartes' famous model of the *cogito* from his 1637 treatise *Discourse on Method* may mark the zenith of this model of the human as a figure sealed off impermeably from the material world. However, in the development of phenomenological thought in the work of 20th century thinkers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gaston Bachelard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Edmund Husserl, an increasingly relativistic conception of the relationship between self and world, of a body which is fundamentally interpenetrative and ambivalently surfaced, would gain wider acceptance. To name but four of many recent millennial theorizations of the mind-body-world connection, take the trans scholarship of Gayle Salamon (*Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, 2010) and Eric Plemons (*The Look of a Woman*, 2017), or the ethnographic phenomenologies of Saba Mahmood (*The Politics of Piety*, 2005) and Anne Anlin Cheng (*Ornamentalism*, 2020).

If the grotesque figure, as Bakhtin describes it, “flies in the face of the concept of the body as whole and limited (...) [and] exposes and explores connections between bodies and between the body and the world”, then perhaps the grotesque is the expressive underside of the phenomenological paradigm – and, in more recent years, of the ascendant disciplines of object-oriented-ontology and new materialism (Bakhtin, 1965, p. 315). As many cultural workers and thinkers today have arrived ‘back’ at a model of a porous human, we discover a model for expressing and theorizing human embodiment which is not without some echoes of the grotesque that predominated pre-Renaissance thought in the West, though without the same religious feeling and magical imagination.

Today, we seem increasingly vulnerable to invasive forces that dissolve any remaining semblance of Cartesian bodily hermeneutics: from the chemical exchange between bodies and pharmaceuticals, toxins, and microplastics in food and water, to the growing paradigm of technological control where, as scholar Shane Denson reminds us, “machines operating imperceptibly at microtemporal speeds (...) predictively anticipate future

behavior and thus mold future subjective states.” (Denson, 2025, p. 26). It would follow, then, that the grotesque should emerge as a vocabulary within contemporary figuration, not just due to the fertile environment produced in the spreading wake of phenomenology, but thanks to a number of larger transformations in recent material relations which have exaggerated the sense of our interpenetrability – and thus, our grotesque status.

The grotesque has most commonly been defined by a range of formal effects, but perhaps most frequently through the exaggeration of the scale and function of body parts and comically hyperbolic depictions of their injury or dismemberment. The figures in Ursuța’s work have often possessed a grotesque dimension, and their affective resonance, teetering between horror and humor, deeply resonates with the tone of the grotesque. In 2013’s *Magical Terrorism* (Ramekin Crucible, New York), there are the headless, armless female torsos of her *Conversion Tables* series, rendered in crude, pitted metallic surfaces with exaggeratedly pointed, conical breasts. And there is the artist’s 2014 solo show at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, where Ursuța polished off a collapsed, recumbent model of herself in a rubbery, deflated gray cast urethane with a splattering of fake semen (*Crush*, 2011). In *Alps* (2016) at the New Museum in New York, castrated penises, studded throughout mock climbing walls, double as fetish objects and hand holds for an imaginary rock climber, while the upturned rib cages of *Divorce Dump* (58th Venice Biennale, 2019) are transformed into garbage bins holding a material the wall text describes as “marriage trash”.

But her 2015 exhibition, *Whites* (Kunsthalle Bern), previews a minor, but ultimately consequential, change in Ursuța’s approach to grotesque figuration, a technical shift which would reappear in her cast glass sculptures four years later. It is a subtle ontological reorientation which, I argue, comes to characterize precisely why her glass sculptures emblemize a much more nuanced, and apt, reflection of both an under-recognized dimension of the historical grotesque and the key to the grotesque’s power to describe the trouble of contemporary human embodiment.

Before she debuted her cast glass sculptures in 2019, Ursuța often produced figures and body parts which ‘wore’ their cultural signifiers and the evidence of their social, historical, or economic implication in the world. Take the afore-mentioned coin vests of the breasted torsos of *Conversion*

Tables and the Soviet realist-style marble statues of gypsies (*Commerce Exterieur Mondial Sentimental*) in *Magical Terrorism* (2012), or the distinctly Eastern European peasant wear of the artist-mannequin splayed on the floor in *Vandal Lust* (2011). In other pieces where costuming is absent, body parts are still visually identifiable as materially and structurally separate from whatever substrates or objects they may find themselves attached to. In *Alps* (2016) the castrated penises lie like rainbow sprinkles atop the flat, geometric planes of the wooden 'rock faces'. In *Solitary Fitness* (Venus Over Manhattan, 2013), a show reportedly inspired by the story of a woman stoned to death, long, black, human hair grows like a weed out of an L-shaped wall clad in multihued cast urethane tiles – as if the executioner's repressed regret returned to him through the grout between his bathroom tiles. In these latter two exhibitions, we may find the beginnings of the fragmentary approach to the body which would come to characterize her work of the last six years.

But it is in *Whites*, a series based on what seems to be a one-off experiment from 2013 (*Broken Obelisk*), that we first see the artist completely efface the line between body and object. For the first time, Ursuța's bodily motifs and the world of objects coagulate into a single, materially unified surface – we might call it a skin. White obelisks in aqua resin and wood sit slumped, without a shred of monumentality, in a range of chairs scattered around the gallery. But beyond their allusion (both in their forms and in the exhibition title) to the hooded white suprematist figures of the Ku Klux Klan, they are anthropomorphic in another way – their surfaces each bear the small openings of anatomically-accurate human nostrils and eye sockets. It is a delicate turn, but here a strange confusion between costume and architecture, skeleton and skin, is afoot. Rather than figuring the body, or its fragments, in materials distinct from the objects with which they are in contact, realizing them in a single material significantly diminishes our notion of either component's autonomy from the other. They are, in effect, 'one', unified in a single membrane. Though a small formal transformation, this is the first time in Ursuța's practice – already so full of bodily effects of troubled autonomy – that skin emerges as the conceptual and physical substrate for the thematics the artist has long explored. In the form of skin, the horrors and absurdities of history and of the contemporary world are enacted, registered, and toyed with.

We live in an age of porous membranes, unstable boundaries, and bodily extensions. In *Void Fill*, we find the matter of the body's new over-extended spatiality is powerfully evoked by skins that hold both body and world in an unbreakable, crystalline bond. Consisting of life-sized, anatomically faithful casts of body parts, the sculptures forgo a more traditional grotesque visuality – there are no comically exaggerated breasts, noses, or eyes here. Instead, the body's breakage with its normative visible territory is expressed through the *situation* of body parts and objects as equally constitutive of one another.

In *Predators 'R Us* (2020), the most legibly 'human' figure of this cast of misfit toys (it is the sculpture with the largest uninterrupted expanse of human form), a cast arm abruptly tapers into a plastic bottle. Legs slip into two tentacular, membranous masses that are, in fact, models of the decapitated head of sci-fi alien murder-machine, Predator. A stubby, marbled finial sits in the anatomical space where a neck and head should be. In suturing flesh with the cheap refuse of capitalism, a 'poetic image' emerges of the commodification of flesh and spirit in capitalism's more insidiously penetrative later stages (Bachelard, 1957, p. 236). Such devices call to mind the human-to-non-human syntheses of many older grotesque expressions, such as an early anatomical diagram in *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543) by Andreas Vesalius that snatches the exposed viscera of the dissected female form and 'superimposes' her contents onto a classical stone statue, or the range of mythical part human, part animal beings in the magical travelogues of the *Indian Wonders* (Laoutaris, 2023, pp. 53-54; Bakhtin, 1965, p. 345). And it is this shared visual rhetoric of bodily modification – of the imposition of objects into and onto the body as a shared surface – that makes Ursuța's sculptures a descendent not just of medieval and Renaissance grotesquerie but a surprising companion to modernist experiments, which attempted to grapple with the changing status of the body in an increasingly mechanized world.

Indeed, Ursuța's glass sculptures find a surprising ancestor in one of modernism's most famous and dream-like creations: Oskar Schlemmer's costumes for his 1922 *Das Triadische Ballett* (Triadic Ballet). In many of the ballet's toy-like, confectionary costumes, every anatomical surface of the dancers' bodies but their faces, hands, and necks has been sleeved



ILL. 2
 Installation view of Andra Ursuța: *Void Fill*, David Zwirner, Paris, 2021. *Predators R' Us* at center.
 Courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery.

into the exuberant yet placid platonic shapes of vaguely mechanical skin. The result is three uncanny, quasi-human figures sheathed in what artist and scholar Aura Satz calls “an almost orthopedic, brace-like epidermis” (Satz, 2002, p. 166). From one angle, the dancers may suggest a comically exaggerated take on the Cartesian body: armored, impenetrable, sealed. But the opposite is equally true – the costumes do not only incorporate the rhetoric of machines as a structuring support for the body. Through their confinement, the costumes press the body of the performer into narrower ranges of motions, motions which are both mechanical in visuality but also mechanical as a kind of framework, such that the body of the performer and their possible range of motions have been ‘programmed’ and predetermined (Satz, 2002, p. 166). In this way, the shell of the mechanical costume in fact penetrates the body of the performer, as the performer’s very mode of movement is reformed into a specific choreographic language. Put another way, human agency is reformed by a mechanical imagination, while the machine as made manifest by the costume is lent something of a human animation (Satz, 2002, 166-168).

Crafted in the heady early days of modernism and its technophilic imagination in Europe, Schlemmer’s ballet costumes suggest the changed

status of the body under modern industry as an increasingly thing-like commodity object (Satz, 2002, 148). While Schlemmer's mechanical costumes spoke to something simultaneously comic, spectacular, and uncanny about the place of man in an increasingly industrialized world, Ursuța's figures seem to pick up Schlemmer's torch and carry it into the present. Incorporating plastic refuse, cheap entertainment props, and constrictive fetish wear, Ursuța's figures image the penetration of the fleshy membrane not by the mechanical forces at the tail end of the industrial age but by those forces which animate our own age – an age which, like the Halloween themed stores which pop up across America every Fall, reek of synthetic disposability and an overabundance of cheap goods, cheap narratives, and an increasingly tenuous autonomy.

The disappearing body of *Void Fill* is a loose collection of severed limbs, hollow and translucent, ready to be filled, and ambiguously present as solid matter and translucent interface. This body is, simply, its skin – an envelope which both marks its outer boundary and provides its structure. It exemplifies a body grotesquerie for the late digital capitalist era: an age of mirage, surface, disappearance, and dispersion. We inhabit a time when power's operations are better obscured through advanced electronics or increasingly impenetrable algorithms and operational complexities, where interpersonal relations and person-world relations are increasingly immaterial and without specific temporality, and where we are (in some instances quite literally) drowning in the products and refuse, chemical and otherwise, of the world which the industrial age produced. Our humanity is not so much under threat of objectifying revision by industrial machines (outside of the replacement of human labor by machines), but by artificial intelligence and algorithmic controls, predictive technologies, and the willing and unwilling transformations of our inner selves into corporate data.

In his essay "The Dialectics of Outside and Inside," from *The Poetics of Space* (1957), Gaston Bachelard posited that "the phenomenology of the poetic imagination allows us to explore the being of man considered as the being of a *surface*, of the surface that separates the region of the same from the region of the other" (Bachelard, 1957, p. 237). In *Void Fill*, and in *Das Triadische Ballett*, "the being of man" is made inseparable from "the region of the other." The pieces in each instance use an effaced form of

figuration and techniques of re-surfacing/re-skinning – whether through wearable but restrictive costumes or through glass casts of the body – to suggest an inter-corporeal enfleshment between animate and inanimate entities, a collision that transfers the liveliness of one onto the other and the insentience of the object to the subject.

In the gaps between its prosthetic appendages and contortions and the normative human physiognomies they replace, remix, or efface, the figures of *Void Fill* speak, with wordless immediacy, of the tragicomic state of being a grotesque fragment today. The rhetoric of object-subject synthesis in *Void Fill* encodes the anxieties and humor that humans feel when bearing witness to or being subjected to forces that ‘abstract’ or distance them from a sense of their sealed bodily autonomy and integrity.

Throughout the exhibition, Ursuța scatters symbols of horror and traces of violence to express the uneasy, violating, and absurd relationship of the contemporary capitalist subject to the digital, informational, ecological, and cultural flows that penetrate the human body and psyche in ever more forceful ways. *Succubustin’ Loose* depicts a straight-jacketed figure, whose crossed arms are bound to its chest beneath a heavy, constricting swath of cloudy jade glass fabric. The head, likely cast from another whoopie cushion or gimp mask, is wrinkled and bulbous with a bottle opening for a mouth. Its deeply uncanny, eyeless visage can neither meet our gaze nor seemingly sense at all. The coding of this head is highly ambiguous: is this cloudy sack this figure’s head, or is this figure a captive with its ‘real’ face concealed under a hood? Subtle violence also plays out in the articulation of the ambiguous, somewhat classical posture of *Predators*, as well. The slightest contortion of the figure’s back, the nearly imperceptible way that the left shoulder droops downward and inward toward the body’s core, in tandem with its lifted left arm, suggests a defensive posture anticipating a blow from the side. Other references to violence throughout the show are much more subtle: the selection of hues in many of the sculptures closely echoes the psychedelic palette of bruises.

But, in typical grotesque fashion, humor deflates horror: the incorporation of mass cultural symbols of horror into some of the figures brings a comedic touch to the show (Bakhtin, 1965, p. 335). We find Halloween prop skeleton arms in *Phantom Mass*, and in *Predators’ R Us*, we observe

the transposition of Predator's dread-like tentacles into what could plausibly pass as Yeezy footwear. A second quotation from sci-fi horror films is found in *Impersonal Growth*, which depicts a cast of the artist wearing the back end of a xenomorph costume from Ridley Scott's *Alien* franchise atop her head.

In the amputations of these figures, and in her curation of new appendages from cheap props and objects that lend themselves to silly morphological confluences, the artist sutures an affective resonance to the show that is contradictory yet intuitively correct – absurd and terrifying, heavenly and demonic, sacred and deeply banal. But we must also consider why the artist only ever renders the body *in fragmentis* in her cast glass sculptures. What does rendering the “body in pieces” do for the artist, and how does such a technique cooperate with the thematics of the grotesque?

The Contemporary Fragment

Art historian Linda Nochlin, in her canonical 1995 essay, “The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity,” examines how the birth of Western modernity – which Nochlin dates to the French Revolution of 1789 – was inaugurated with a number of specific sensibilities within art and culture. As Nochlin notes, institutional and civilizational destruction in the French Revolution, epitomized by the mutilations of the guillotine, the decapitation of the monarchs, and the effacement of royal symbols in art and architecture, coincided with the construction of new institutions and philosophies of governing and citizenship (Nochlin, 1994, p. 10). Among other historical episodes, Nochlin examines the fragment as a formal maneuver to which various artists would make recourse over the following centuries in order to process subsequent epistemological ruptures that have punctuated the development of the modern world. Among other artist episodes, Nochlin makes special consideration of Géricault's paintings of wounded soldiers returning from Napoléon's failed wars of conquest but also of compositions by early modernist painters such as Manet, though she does continue this loose (and, in her mind, incomplete and speculative) history of the fragment in modern art into the 1990s. In Manet, Nochlin notes an ambivalent play between artistic intent

and improvisation in the painter's compositional framings, whose outer frames often unceremoniously bisect figures with the painting's frame, suggesting scenes quickly captured by a handheld camera (Nochlin, 1994, p. 37). For Nochlin, these compositional strategies also suggest thematics that, I would argue, deeply emblemize Ursuța's own work in *Void Fill*: "a play with habitual boundaries of all sorts, an oscillation between contingency and determination," and a strategy which reflects a mix of artistic agency and agential renunciation within "the meaningless flow of modern reality itself, a casual reality which has no narrative beginning, middle or end." (Nochlin, 1994, pp. 37-38). Indeed, the complex process that guides the making of these sculptures suggests a similar play between intention and randomness. The artist 3D scans objects and props in her studio, and, once they are inside the computer, Ursuța can combine each element into a million possible compositions with ease. She then prints the model in plastic. These 3D-prints serve as the basis of wax molds that can subsequently be brought to the glass studio where the final sculptures are cast (Lescaze, 2020). But despite the deliberateness of most of these stages, the strangeness of the compositions and the irregular colorations of the final forms suggest chance, play, and discovery.

While Ursuța has both courted and resisted biographical readings of her work, she grew up, we might speculate, accustomed to scenes of dismemberment: her home was down the street from a slaughterhouse in a Transylvanian town renowned for its salami production, while her younger self, by her own telling, used to glean great enjoyment watching her father slaughter nutrias for fur and food in the family's home (Bollen, 2013; Estefan, 2012). But there are also multiple sites of intersection between the artist's life, and the vocabularies of cropping, mutilation, and fragmentation to which she frequently turns to examine her life and fixations, and the various transformations to which Nochlin attributes the artistic recourse to the same technique from the late 18th to the late 20th century. For one, there are the emotional, epistemological, and physical breakages that accompany Ursuța's own experience of regime change (her childhood was bisected by the fall of the dictatorial regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu). But there is also the breakage of migrating from a former satellite state of the Soviet Union to the postmodern, hyper-capitalist urban *mélange* of New York (the artist

moved to Florida for her senior year of high school in 1997, before enrolling in Columbia University and settling in New York in 1999). Of course, there is also the fact that, while Ursuța's mature practice reflects a very different contemporary than the 1995 of Nochlin's writing, the artist's work deeply emblemizes what Nochlin contends is perhaps the foremost quality of modernity: "a loss of wholeness, a shattering of connection, a destruction or disintegration of permanent value that is so universally felt in 19th century as to be often identified with modernity itself." (Nochlin, 1994, pp. 23-24).

To put it simply: while Nochlin offers a slew of meanings for the recourse to the fragment in modern European art, Ursuța's own life experience, fascinations, and artwork manage to reflect many of the ruptures that augured the various resurrections of the fragment as a formal strategy (revolution and its aftermath, mutilations of war and violence, a play with randomness and intention which Nochlin contends is a central quality of what is modern in art). Indeed, if the fragment expressed the notion that modernity is "characterized by irrevocable loss, poignant regret for lost totality, [and] a vanished wholeness," then techniques of cutting and cropping offer artists a form of play that allows them to cope with or toy with these conditions to a number of ends (Nochlin, 1994, p. 7). Here we can think of the pastiche body of Dada and Surrealism or the combines of Robert Rauschenberg and, of course, the collage-like sculptures of *Void Fill*, as examples of this formal tendency in art. So much art of the present and in decades past seems to fit this mode of operation, art which not only presents the act of salvage and the collapse of boundaries between high and low as an act of cultural renewal, but whose fusions of subject and object also reifies the post-modern sensibility of the body as a "body-in-pieces," a disunified collection of parts, mutable meanings, and entanglements with the market (Nochlin, 1994, p. 55).

Our contemporary condition under digital global capitalism as a more emphatically extroverted, fragmented, and grotesque subject is a condition that marks the passing of one kind of bodily experience in history for another but which, as Nochlin's history of the fragment in modern art and Bakhtin's theorization of the grotesque suggest, is also an advanced and twisted acceleration of forces which have long characterized not only the modern but the pre-modern, too. To be a body today is to possess a

divided and multitudinous self that exists in partial partnerships with a range of outside phenomena. It is to live at a reformed boundary between body, object, and world. If we take Ursuța's sculptures to image a particularly contemporary understanding of the epidermal membrane, then the artist's compositional strategies of absurd concatenations and her curation of props appear to suggest that bodily experience today is both an ecstatic and depressing condition (Nochlin, 1994, p. 55).

Returning to a theory of the fragment, we might note that while processes of fragmentation may empty subjects of certain human rights and capacities (see the dehumanizing equivalences forged between humans and vermin, as just one example, or, of course, the losing proposition of decapitation and dismemberment), in other cases, the fragmented subject or the severed body part becomes endowed with certain powers through this enhanced proximity to or equivalence with non-human phenomena. Contemporary capitalism, in fact, rewards subjects for their openness to fragmentation. In the digital attention economy, we willingly divide the self into objectifiable fragments when we transform the self into a character through speech acts or represent the self through photographs of an aspirational lifestyle, even when we are not explicitly within the frame. The most straightforward example lies in the commodification of our likeness, which sees our personhood become a digital image which transacts for us outside the scope of our conscious awareness or temporal position. Subjects who are most adept at reducing and refining their personhoods into coherent, streamlined visual and thematic brand narratives in the social media marketplace are most likely to be rewarded with financial and social bounty. Indeed, the online body, and the transposition (and commodification) of self which the digital marketplace so seamlessly allows, is perhaps the most pervasive force of fragmentation under late digital capitalism. The self that spans IRL and URL is a self whose existence is only possible as a composite of fragments, whether photographs, texts, social media interactions, or digital breadcrumbs that track our movements in cyberspace. In other words, the subject who deputizes images and data to act in their stead is always, at his essence, a collection of semi-autonomous fragments.

In *Void Fill*, appendages go missing and appear elsewhere throughout the show, a shredded, cropped, and cut body whose limbs have flown off

as if lost in the inhuman vitesse of electronic image transfers and digital communication. In the delicate translucence of the lead crystal and its gaseous swirls of saccharine, candied hues, Ursuța's sculptures also evoke the felt sensation of digital extraversion, the erotic pull of self-dissolution as we immerse ourselves in flows of information, of dazzled and blinkered attention. The gaseous quality of these works' colors lends a sense of blooming, exhilarating motion to each form, and the impression that perhaps, when left alone from prying human eyes, the dyes within the glasses may spiral and migrate, settling into new shapes, transgressing temporalities as they appear in other guises in other spaces.

In this way, color and time form a strange and productive partnership in *Void Fill*. By employing two registers of color, wherein one (diffuse, milky, unmixed color) appears to symbolize a 'before' to a solid color's 'after' (or vice versa), we witness bodies divided into various temporalities. Such a maneuver powerfully evokes the confused, fractious temporality of the present. Our era is characterized by a number of temporal fragmentations and conditions of simultaneity and disjunction, and it is one where we are subject to a number of ills. Serious stresses upon our attention lay waste to our ability to occupy the present. Global capitalism abstracts and alienates production and distribution into complex networks of site and time often difficult for the human mind to grasp without the prosthetics of communication technology, and certainly impossible for one body to occupy simultaneously. Daily life, beset by portable digital feeds, is subjected to the most cruel and banal collapses of time-space: a violent act such as a beheading in Asia may be experienced via live stream while receiving a gel manicure in Seattle.

Aside from the most obvious manifestation of the fragment in the show – the proliferation of pieces of the body – it is ultimately in the transformation of body into vessel that the theme of fragmentation is most forcibly felt, and, indeed, it is perhaps the most important expression of the grotesque fragment in the show. Ursuța conflates her 'self-portraits' (as the artist has called them) with vessels by repeatedly quoting the forms of bottles and canisters in the sculptures; by rendering the figures in the materials of bottles; and by using various terms for an assortment of containers in her titles (Dafoe, 2019). The question is – why? In the grotesque fragment

figure, the subject is brought into extreme intimacy and near equivalency with an outside phenomenon, creating a paradoxical subject – one that has at once been both evacuated and filled, like a taxidermic animal. In order to reach into the world, or to endow ourselves with the matter and meaning of the world, we must, in our self-conception, preserve an open space to hold the world we find. To become a translucent vessel is to fragment the body into pure skin. It is to become a membrane enclosing a fillable container for worldly influence and penetration. Such are the functional dynamics of the increasingly porous flesh of the advanced capitalist subject. *Void Fill* captures this powerful paradox at the heart of embodied experience during late-stage digital capitalism: our dilations of presence are enacted at the moment of a forced absence, leaving a new genre of skin in its wake. In her incorporation of the disposable materials with which we confront death, Ursuța memorializes our current condition, presenting us with skins and bodies that, in their daily existence, are bound up in a world that both fragments and extends them toward objecthood. *Void Fill* is a kind of funerary rite for a pre-digital skin, one whose absurdity still allows us to mourn and laugh into its yawning voids.

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