

HUM

Feeling, pressed

Alexis Hunter and Lou Hubbard in An
Emergency Exit Sealed Shut,
Kunstverein, Amsterdam

by Ash Kilmartin

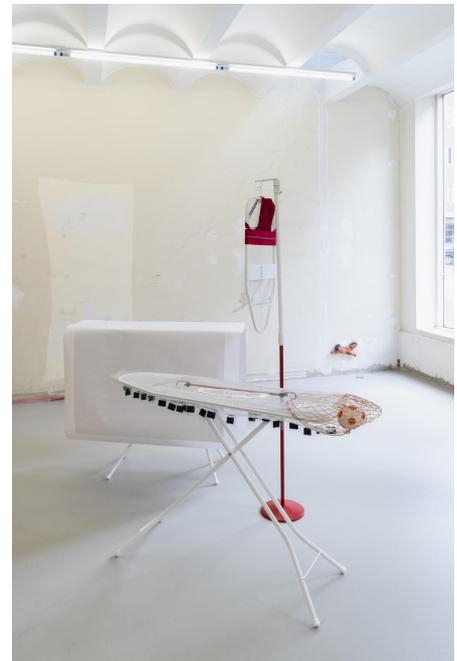
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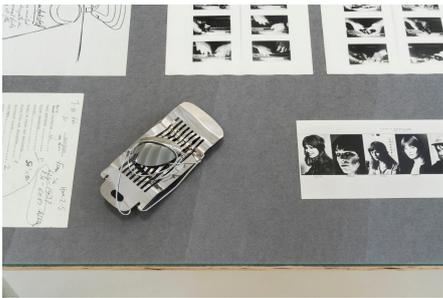
Lou Hubbard, *Undercover* (detail), 2020. Courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne. Photo: Gunner Meier.



Work by Alexis Hunter and Lou Hubbard (L–R) in *An Emergency Exit Sealed Shut*, curated by Isabelle Sully, Kunstverein, Amsterdam, 22 April - 3 June 2023. Courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne; The Alexis Hunter Trust; and Richard Saltoun Gallery, London. Photo: Gunner Meier.



Lou Hubbard, *Undercover* (detail), 2020. Courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne. Photo: Gunner Meier.



Alexis Hunter, various archival materials, courtesy of the Women's Art Library, Goldsmiths University, London. Photo: Gunner Meier.



Alexis Hunter, *The Marxist's Wife (still does the housework)*, 1978/2005. Courtesy of The Alexis Hunter Trust and Richard Saltoun Gallery, London. Photo: Gunner Meier.

Artist Ash Kilmartin reflects on an encounter with the work of Alexis Hunter (1948–2014) and Lou Hubbard (b.1957) at Kunstverein, Amsterdam, and where this combination of practices from “home” takes her now. She thinks through what’s changed—socially and personally—between Hunter’s early work, her own encounters with that work as a young person, and today.

I’m at Kunstverein, a non-profit exhibition space in Amsterdam’s De Pijp, to see *An Emergency Exit Sealed Shut*, a duo show of Aotearoa New Zealand-born Alexis Hunter (1948–2014) and Australian artist Lou Hubbard (b.1957), curated by Isabelle Sully.

In the company of Hubbard's sculptures and videos, a selection of Hunter's mid-70s work occupies Kunstverein's two floors. *The Marxist's Wife (still does the housework)* (1978/2005) is one of Hunter's four photo-sequence works in the show, along with a single photo titled *The Objects Series* (1974), and a table of archival materials on loan from the Women's Art Library (originally the Women Artists Slide Library), now housed at Goldsmiths, University of London. Hunter was a well-known figure in the London art scene of the 1970s for her work and feminist activism, in which she made use of her experience in advertising and animation, as well as her fine art training at the Elam School of Fine Arts in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa.

For Hunter, resistance is serial. *The Marxist's Wife* is four columns of five colour laser prints, each column framed and hung snug against each other in that way that's impossible to get perfectly straight. I read it over and over again in circles: the images are all close-cropped shots of a right hand in action. The hand holds a pale-green cloth that rubs, blurring, across a black-and-white print. The blown-up title page of a book? The photos themselves are blown up, too, so that the hand is larger than life-sized. The camera shifts between each one to reveal, partially, the words above and below an inky portrait. In the final frames, ink smears out of the cloth and across the text. The hand swipes again but the words only get dirtier.

Begin again. "KARL MARX (1818-1883)" the top-left shot reads. "Revolutionary." "Revol" "Thinker," "hinker," "Man," "Thin" "Man," "Man." In several of the twenty prints that make up the work, the artist's hand scrubs the cloth over Marx's stern mouth, her fingers occasionally obscuring an eye. Between "Revolutionary" and "Man," "Thing" almost emerges, but not quite. It's the elusive thingness that I get snagged on here: somewhere between the black-and-white face and the pink hand, the printed pictures and the picture of a print, between dried ink and wet, between the stern and the facetious—there's a thing, a human thing, a body. Almost. What's going on here?



An Emergency Exit Sealed Shut is a study in the application of physical and social force. Both Hunter and Hubbard return repeatedly to sources of irritation; scrubbing, squeezing, or slicing until something has been relieved or at least relived. Bodies are depicted taking action, comically and graphically, against objects that stand in for other bodies. They make me want to join in. The exhibition articulates Sully’s ongoing artistic-curatorial concern with the way systems support or frustrate human fulfillment, and especially with how generations of feminists have lived and worked through those systems. The tense busyness of this occupation never subsides. The work is never finished. It only gets grubbier. At Kunstverein, the pressure is tangible and the thingness of the frustrated body presses itself into all available nooks.

A left hand appears in *Approach to Fear III: Taboo — Demystify* (1976), in which there’s no attempt to clean but instead explore an unspecified mechanical mass. Pale human fingers probe dry metal crevices until grease emerges; the workings, having been felt, are no longer a threat. The workings might even be sexy. Resistance is also exposure: works in the “Approach to Fear” series, shot between 1976 and 80 according to the handwritten title list included in the show, each identify a specific fear and how the artist chooses to defuse it. Looking away is not an option: to get to grips with the oppression of capitalist patriarchy means grabbing

it by the greasy pistons. Hunter watches its moves so she can make them back, staring it down.

While *Approach to Fear V: Pain — Medication* (1976) applies a salve—the artist’s now-clean fingers rub in enough sting-relief cream to numb both hands—*Approach to Fear II: Change — Decisive Action* (1976) exposes her again to the sharp reality. Over fifteen frames, blood-red nail polish is removed, and the long, bare nails are pared with a razor blade. In one image the blade hangs, held in place by the ring-finger nail close to the fingertip. My own hands contract, sensing the weight of the little metal thing. Looking away is still not an option. Neither is holding on.

But scrub back to the beginning. At Kunstverein, it’s Hubbard’s own kind of maintenance that first addresses me in *Undercover* (2020), three denuded ironing boards with neither irons nor hands to speak of. The sculptures are assemblages of objects that refer to bits of the thingly human body. One white, folding, powder-coated steel body hosts a table-cloth-size inkjet print of lips (a 2004 photo by Rebecca Hobbs), draped image-side-down over a bunch of glistening purple glass grapes, stuffed between the board’s crossed legs. On another, a mini foam stress ball wedges itself into the net of a crushed copper-wire basket, attached to the latticed surface of the ironing board with a bungee cord. Tension! The only slack object here is an empty jockstrap, hanging upside down over a third, vertically suspended ironing board. Hubbard’s approaches are just as serial as Hunter’s but deploy the physical language of mass-produced commodities and the erratic swarming of language itself. Like jokes, the sculptures make complete sense until you attempt to describe how it is they do that.

Nonetheless, attempt we do, because there’s satisfaction in straining toward an open end. Hubbard, too, in her video works, is having a go at delimiting something. Skills are tested and objects probed. Stainless-steel scissor tongs and scalpels intrude into the close-up to extract some sense out of the gummy confectionery eyeballs being ‘operated’ upon in *EYE OPS 1-5* (2013). Stacked in a tight row on the floor, in mirrored symmetry across the room from *The Marxist’s Wife*, the five bulky monitors show looping simultaneous experiments of knife against candy, more fun than

Hunter's blade but no less squeamish-making. Look away? Nope.
Not yet.



Lou Hubbard, *Undercover* (detail), 2020.
Courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents,
Melbourne. Photo: Gunner Meier.



Lou Hubbard, *Undercover* (detail), 2020.
Courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents,
Melbourne. Photo: Gunner Meier.

Alexis Hunter *Approach to Fear II: Change – Decisive Action* (detail), 1976. Courtesy of The Alexis Hunter Trust and Richard Saltoun Gallery, London. Photo: Ash Kilmartin.



Work by Alexis Hunter and Lou Hubbard (L–R) in *An Emergency Exit Sealed Shut*, curated by Isabelle Sully, Kunstervein, Amsterdam, 22 April - 3 June 2023. Courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne; The Alexis Hunter Trust; and Richard Saltoun Gallery, London. Photo: Gunner Meier.

Alexis Hunter, *Approach to Fear V: Pain – Medication*, 1976; and *Approach to Fear II: Change – Decisive Action*, 1976 (L–R).
Courtesy of The Alexis Hunter Trust and Richard Saltoun Gallery, London. Photo: Gunner Meier.

Work by Alexis Hunter and Lou Hubbard (L–R) in *An Emergency Exit Sealed Shut*, curated by Isabelle Sully, Kunstervein, Amsterdam, 22 April - 3 June 2023. Courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne; The Alexis Hunter Trust; and Richard Saltoun Gallery, London. Photo: Gunner Meier.

In Hunter's photo-narratives, seriality performs toward solutions, while for Hubbard, words and reasons ricochet around in a slapstick shootout of "why?" in which we dare not hope to hear the answer, only to stick around long enough to see what happens, to experience the satisfaction of something getting done, even if we have no control over when and how that might occur. In the long game of enduring late-capitalism, perhaps we've become more

patient than Hunter. Or just more easily distracted. Is this what unalienated labour looks like, removing the juicy bits—cornea, iris, lens—from machine-fabricated balls of industrially processed corn starch and gelatin (reconstituted animal hands, if you will) with surgical tools? Anyway, watch, it's starting over again.

Seeing Alexis Hunter's name on Kunstverein promo material had conjured a hazy sort of recognition in me. Rifling through various contexts in my poor memory, I interrogate the pairing: Hubbard's work and world, Naarm Melbourne, where I lived and made art for six years; where I knew of her as artist and teacher, sculptor of hilarious things to do with horses. No Hunter there. I rifle further back to my time at Elam, no, to high school art history, no, forward a bit to undergraduate art history papers. To the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki somewhere in the mid-to-late 2000s. I settle briefly upon the vague black-and-white image of a hairy lower torso in profile. *That* Alexis Hunter? Yes, *that* Alexis Hunter. Alexis Hunter of the "Objects Series" (1974-5): six paintings, jammed together and taking up a history-painting amount of space. Now I encounter the photo from which that hairy lower torso was elaborated.

Hunter's "Objects Series" paintings were the only works of hers I ever saw in the flesh, serious oil paintings at a serious museum. Here, an ordinary photo is the last thing I get to in the exhibition, hung upstairs in a recessed corner that might as well have been made for this work. The photo looks out the window just as its cropped subject looks out over the New York cityscape. There's a casual cigarette in one hand, the other arm is out of the frame. Combing back his hair? Rubbing his eyes? Scratching his armpit? In the centre of the image, two particular towers stand erect. The elusive thingness of our bodies, dull and erotic, fully real and overwhelmingly mediated, sits quietly and heavily in this image for me now. The framed photo is bathed in early-afternoon sun in its private niche, suddenly so apart from the other works in the exhibition. I'm unexpectedly at the altar of a personal history of contemporary art.



I try to recall what that work meant to me at the time, an impressionable teenager timid about both art and life. Not yet questioning whether the two are really separate. The “Objects Series” set me at a distinct distance, it was aloof, staunch, it proffered no solutions. I didn’t know how to even begin asking it questions. I couldn’t identify. But I loved to see a boot so huge. Were there more boot paintings? No, but there were other, later

paintings: expressionistic, high-key renderings of demons and muses. How did these follow? In the Elam library, there seemed to be little of Hunter between these two poles—sparse, hard feminism or heavy, murky fantasy. I don't recall seeing anything in between.

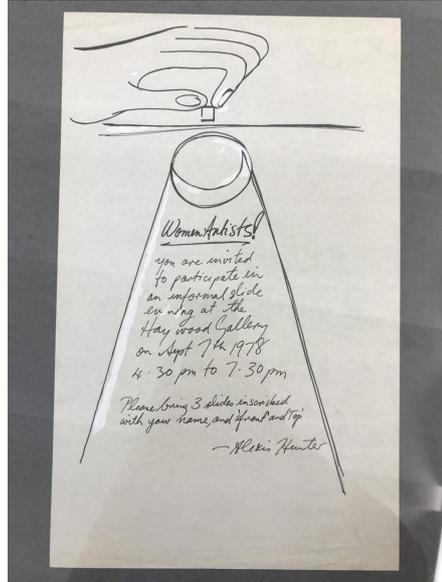
In the 1980s, visiting Aotearoa frequently from London, Hunter returned to painting, developing her own “personal politicised mythology” from the real-life gender-political myths she had to live with.^[01] Romanticism and surrealism took the place of the earlier conceptualism that had garnered her both acclaim and criticism. But I didn't see the connection when I first saw the work in Aotearoa. The “Objects Series” paintings became an anomaly in my canon, created by one of few women in my mental catalogue of a local lineage, still at an impossible remove. I could look and look, but this fragment of Hunter remained unparsable. A teen in the 2000s, growing up uncomfortably in a time when women's bodies were hyper-commercialised but without the self-determining potential of the social media available now, I struggled to see what had been so provocative about this depiction of the anonymous male body. Hunter's reverse objectification was hardly pornographic compared to how women's bodies were treated. It seemed tame. Hunter was in her mid-twenties when she made her “Objects Series” and the “Approach to Fear” works. She knew she was making history; I was growing up in the consequences. Sure, my young discomfort at not getting it could have been internalised misogyny, but it was also a marker of how much had changed since the work was made. Change that Hunter and her cohort had actively forced. Who gets to represent whom? Who gets uncomfortable?

Back in Kunstverein, my sensation of revelatory closeness is ushered along by the archival material in the exhibition. An ink drawing on an A4 sheet, of fingers adjusting the focus on a projector, invites women artists to join an informal slide-viewing session at the Haywood [sic] in 1978. A typed equipment list, perhaps for the same event, notes all the stuff that will be needed, phone numbers, questions about who will make coffee (it will be a rotary system). Corrections, crop marks and twinkled-over typos collapse the blank-faced tradition of conceptual art that otherwise drives the cool aesthetic of Hunter's 70s work. In handwritten notes we see the handiwork behind the hand photos. Hunter was

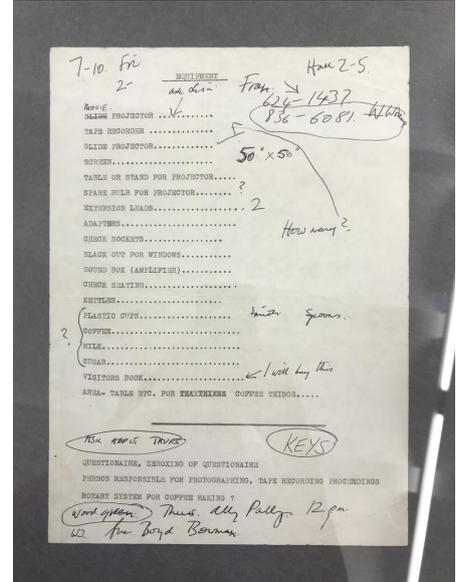
out for social change, which is a very social business: these contingent documents point to the community that was necessary for women artists to build for themselves when existing art-world structures refused to admit them. If the photo-narratives only show us Hunter's hand against the system, the documents of her organising demonstrate how many women were standing behind her, and now behind us as viewers.



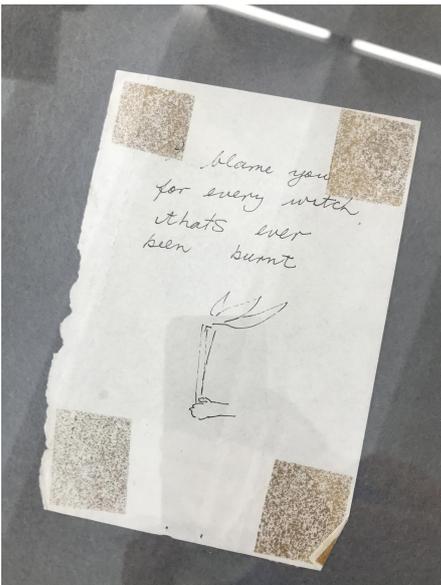
Alexis Hunter, various archival materials. Courtesy of the Women's Art Library, Goldsmiths University, London. Lou Hubbard, *EYE OPS 1-5*, 2013. Courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne. Photo: Gunner Meier.



Alexis Hunter, draft of poster design, date unknown. Courtesy of the Women's Art Library, Goldsmiths University, London. Photo: Ash Kilmartin.



Alexis Hunter, equipment list, date unknown. Courtesy of the Women's Art Library, Goldsmiths University, London. Photo: Ash Kilmartin.



Alexis Hunter, note and drawing, date unknown. Courtesy of the Women's Art Library, Goldsmiths University, London. Photo: Ash Kilmartin.

The archival materials are borrowed from the Women's Art Library, a still-growing archive that Hunter was an active contributor to, advocating for other women artists to claim that space along with her. Flipping the gaze was funny, but not enough. Together an alternative could be built, but alone—as she wrote in blood with razor-sharpened nails in *To Silent Women* (1980)—we fail.

In interviews, Hunter was as staunch as the work itself: she meant for the work to offend, she relished that it made men uncomfortable; their criticism was never about the work but about her feminism. So I'm surprised to read Hunter's notes, on the table display in Kunstverein, about a "Breakfast Series" (1975-6) that she abandoned: "As that series ["Approaches to Fear"] had an immediate rep[re]sor [sic] with people and this series only got negative comments I did not continue with it and destroyed all the paintings in 1979." I read a distinct sense of interdependence in Hunter's world, though the figures that surrounded her remain uncannily absent from her work. Smaller prints on the table sketch out other photo-narrative works, including what look like details or outtakes from *For Every Witch* (1979). A small ink drawing of a fist clutching a lit torch reads: "I blame you for every witch [that's] ever been burnt." Who were her witches? At some point Hunter became frustrated at the limited audience that she could address by mounting shows in galleries. She had ambitions for the work to be more widely socially effective. I wonder what she would make of TikTok.

Sully's proposition of Hubbard's work as a companion for Hunter's allows for a kind of sly glee to bounce around. They're funny. Funnier than my early, received reverence allowed for. If Hunter makes jokes about specific bodies being forced into specific roles, Hubbard displaces the force onto bodies she can fool around with, letting us in on the joke, the gaze, the last laugh. Her systematic application of a dremel to a ceramic teddy in the video *Drill* (2008) could be a nod to Hunter's soft hands on hard machinery. Some drills make holes, this drill is a practice that makes perfect destruction, and I am compelled to see it through to its completion. The spinning blade goes at the glazed knick-knack, limb by limb, a hand descending into the shot to squish the increasingly disfigured figurine back into place on its wad of Blu Tack so that the saw can

drop again. The same mesmeric tension pulls me through *Hack* (2006), in which a rubber horse is dragged—juddering—over, around and through household items. I can't stop watching. A hack may be a played-out strategy, but to hack is also to go out riding for pleasure.

In close-up: the hand, the torso, the boot. The horse, the teddy, the eyeball. The bodily and the not-quite. What's going on here? We examine the details to get to the systemic. Looking with Hubbard's gummy eyes, defamiliarisation delivers me to the absurdity, as well as the pleasure, of the impulse to control. Against control, Hunter's reversal of the patriarchal gaze makes visible the social shift that has taken place over a single brief generation of feminist art (and life) practice. Her photo-narratives consciously adopt a visual strategy that encourages identification, putting her hands in the picture so that her viewers could imagine themselves taking a swipe at systems of value that repressed their desire and ignored their labour. You too can burn your silver high-heeled platforms. Are there more burning shoe photos? No, but I'd like to make some. I'd invite Hubbard to film it, too. Not because the shoes stand in for outdated norms of femininity, but because it looks like wicked fun. We work with a different set of social crises to the ones Hunter skewered, but to see her work today, deftly set alongside Hubbard's, is to be reminded of the tools we already have at our disposal. The body under pressure still has a capacity for erotic agency, and for laughing its way through structure: laughter and the erotic being, themselves, the application of physical and social force.

Footnotes

01. Elizabeth Eastmond, "Alexis Hunter: Fears/Dreams/Desires," in *Alexis Hunter: Fears/Dreams/Desires. A Survey Exhibition 1976-1988*, ed. Alexa Johnston and Elizabeth Eastmond, 17–34 (Auckland Art Gallery, 1989).

Biographies



Alexis Hunter (4 November 1948 – 24 February 2014) was a New Zealand painter and photographer, who used feminist theory in her work. She obtained an honours degree in painting and History of Art and Architecture at the Elam School of Fine Art in 1969. During the eighties she became Visiting Lecturer at the School of Visual Arts, New York and Byam Shaw in London, then Assistant Professor of Art at the University of Houston, Texas. Hunter's work *The Narrative Sequences* were devised as an intervention in the women's art movement of the seventies and have been shown at the Hayward; the ICA; the Sydney Biennale; in *Live in Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain* at the Whitechapel Gallery, London; *Work at Taxi Palais*, Innsbruck; in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and in *Alexis Hunter: Radical Feminism in the 1970s* at the Norwich Gallery and Bunkier Sztuki, Krakow, Poland. Hunter lived and worked in London UK, and Beaurainville France, and was also a member of the Stuckism collective. Her archive and artistic legacy is now administered by the Alexis Hunter Trust.



Ash Kilmartin (b.1986) is an artist and radio maker from Aotearoa who lives in Rotterdam. She is interested in the uses and meanings of the speaking voice and in finding ways to document the small moments of private and collective experience that shape the way we think our own lives. She likes to play with the gaps. From 2020 to 2022, she opened the doors at a shop called LIFE. Since then, she has been part of the team behind Radio WORM, and the editorial collective of Short Pieces That Move!

