An Obeast Walks into a Museum: The Politics of Fat Oppression, Performing the Other, and Museum Display in Rachel Herrick’s *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies*

The *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies* is quite the spectacle. Filled with dioramas featuring life-size representations of obeasts, monitors displaying videos of obeast researchers “on the hunt,” painted walls portraying the morphological evolution of the obeast, obeast heads “stuffed” and mounted on the walls, posters portraying “traditional” uses of obeast products, and printed pamphlets detailing the history of the scarcity of the obeast and their comeback from the “brink of extinction,”1 the exhibition space uses several narrative tactics to engage with the viewer. As a visual art project staged in art museums and galleries this might seem rather obvious for the *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies* or MOCS, but in actuality it is anything but natural. Rachel Herrick’s *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies* is a carefully constructed exhibition meant to furtively slip into the conventions of museum display precisely to question their conventional narratives as well as the portrayal of “the Other” through the spectacle of the obeast.

The history of displaying the Other within an exhibition setting is a long and sordid one, based in the problematic racist and imperialist politics of eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe and the United States. The history of artists using the self to perform the Other within a museum context is shorter. Dating from the 1980s this contemporary art tactic was launched by artists of color and asserts a radical political challenge to institutional oppression and to the subject of the museum itself as a site of good taste and colonialist narratives. The *Museum for
Obeast Conservation Studies confronts the conventional structures of art and natural history museum displays while embracing strategies of contemporary art that seek to interrogate the distinction between subject and object, or she who sees and she who is seen. In other words, MOCS mocks the museum to expose both its colonialist discourse and its perpetration of the dominant gaze. At the same time, MOCS mocks the stereotype of the animalistic, lazy, dumb, and uncritical fat person. Actually performed by and modeled on her own fat female body, Herrick’s obeast is part cultural satire and part conceptual artwork; its attendant Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies is a museological parody that pokes fun of the many ways in which fat people have been ridiculed in contemporary social and scientific arenas. Herrick created the obeast to stand in for the representation of fat people in the mass media, the medical industrial complex, and American culture at large. As such, the obeast becomes both a physical representation of a “culturally endorsed version of fat personhood” as well as a prism through which to view one’s investment in that cultural concept. Thus, one’s interpretation of the obeast and MOCS more generally might attest to one’s understanding of the social formation of fat identity in contemporary culture.

The figure at the center of the Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies is that of the obeast. Obeasts are found primarily within the North American continent, and had been plentiful during the eighteenth century before coming close to extinction during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Obeast populations are once again increasing, and it is the primary goal of the Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies to try to study and preserve the obeast for future generations. The obeast is a bipedal animal about the height of the average American woman – approximately five and half feet tall and weighing about 250 and 400 pounds. SLIDE 4 While there are three distinct species of obeast, they share many of the same physical qualities; like the
various breeds of domesticated cats and dogs, the multiple species of obeasts, Northern Obeasts, Southern Obeasts, and Western Obeasts, are primarily differentiated according to the color and patterning of their pelts.\(^3\)

If the general physical appearance of the obeast looks familiar, that is because in reality each obeast species is modeled on Rachel Herrick, the artist behind the concept of the obeast and the *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies*. A clever portmanteau bringing together the words obesity and beast, Herrick’s obeast speaks to the current moral panic over the alleged “obesity epidemic.” Scientists, politicians, journalists, activists, writers, performers, and many others in the United States are waging a war against “obesity”\(^4\) that often takes the form of working toward make fat people extinct. In recent years “obesity” has been described by the First Lady of the United States and the Surgeon General of the U.S. as “one of the biggest threats to the American economy”\(^5\) as well as “the terror within” that “will dwarf 9-11 or any other terrorist attempt,”\(^6\) respectively.\(^7\) In actuality, however, fatness is a neutral state of embodiment and existence, like all states of embodiment, and interpretations to the contrary reflect the tensions and anxieties present in our cultural belief systems and power structures, rather than any actual “terror” experienced by most fat\(^8\) people. Indeed, the primary terror felt by fat people can be seen as triggered by the rhetoric of the “obesity epidemic” itself and its need to pathologize fat, fatness, and fat people. If there is an actual war on “obesity,” the casualties are fat people around the U.S. and the world who are made to feel less than adequate as human beings simply because they are fat. In the service of confronting fatphobia and the oppressive tactics used by media outlets, science, and politics fighting against “obesity,” Herrick’s obeast stands as a tool, perhaps even a weapon, for seeing beyond the hateful images and words circulated about fatness and fat people.
The obeast is symbolic of the cultural need to objectify, study, and ridicule fat people in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The obeast and the Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies use satire, humor, and science’s own language to unmask and break down the rampant fat oppression currently embedded within Western culture. As Herrick writes of her impetus for creating the obeast,

My recent work stems from exasperation with the identity I felt was being culturally ascribed to me as a fat woman. The wearing dissonance caused by my self-perceptions existing at odds with the cultural treatment and portrayal of fat people frustrated me to the point where I could no longer simply navigate within the system of fat discrimination; I needed to examine it with the tools available to me as an artist. At a genesis moment for the project, I remember thinking, “Ok, fine. I’ll be fat just the way the world thinks I am. I’ll live the stereotype.”

The obeast is the fat stereotype writ large, pardon the pun: a fat, animalistic woman clothed in a tent-like garment, unable to think on a human level or talk back to her researchers and hunters. But like all stereotypes, it is rooted in a sense of ridiculousness aimed at those who believe such a creature could ever be real. The obeast is so over the top, so layered in its meanings and forms, that the only way to clearly interpret it is as a scathing attack on the self-same stereotype it embodies.

The Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies consists of both a physical and virtual museum exhibition made to replicate the dioramas we expect to see at natural history and science museums. At the museum site in which the exhibit is held, a large scale faux-environment of grasses and trees are displayed with sculptural representations of the North American Obeast. On the walls of the space is painted a large-scale visual timeline of the physical evolution of the obeast, which originates from a manatee-like sea animal. A printed brochure and video kiosk provides information for the museum visitor on the history of the obeast and its sitings over the past several centuries, its physical structure, habitats, eating habits, and keys to its visual
recognition in the wild. The literature produced for the Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies notes that the organization “was founded in 2010 with the mission to open dialogs about the endangered obeast and educate the public about its past, present, and future.” The ultra-scientific and allegedly objective language that Herrick uses to describe the obeasts in both the physical and virtual museum spaces comes directly from the world of scientific classification and categorization central to the construction of an “objective truth” for both the museum and the science that underlies “obesity” research.

Herrick’s MOCS highlights the development of the museum as a site for dominant cultural narratives about both art and science. Historically, the institution of the museum, its attendant disciplines, and their rhetorics relied upon racial, economic, and sexual difference in order to assert and perpetuate hierarchies of power, thus embedding racism, classism, and sexism within their very structures of looking. Museums, and more broadly, all institutions of exhibitionary display, have had a very specific and arguably problematic history with regard to the display and narration of the “Other.” What I mean by the Other here is the object of exotic study, typically represented as the “native” or “primitive” figure who is considered “barbaric” and “uncivilized” after having been “discovered” by white Euro-Americans. The Other is traditionally a representative of “foreign” cultures not under the sanction of white Euro-American culture; he/she is considered uneducated, unknowledgeable, untrained, and as such, an “authentic” or “pure” symbol of the natural world. The Other is inferior to the white Euro-American self, yet that “Self” would not be possible without the Other. Performance scholar Diana Taylor elaborates on this function of the Other as object of the exhibitionary spectacle:

The “primitive” body as object reaffirms the cultural supremacy and authority of the viewing subject – the one who sees, interprets, and records, from the divine Columbus to the ethnographer […] who poses as neutral observer, an authorized, disinterested professional dedicated to the discovery and analysis of societies which the ethnographer
forms no part. The native is the show; the civilized observer is the privileged spectator. “We,” those viewers who look through the eyes of the explorer, are [...] positioned safely outside the frame, free to define, theorize, and debate their [...] societies. The “encounters” with the native create “us” as audience just as much as the violence of definition creates “them” – the primitives. The drama depends on maintaining a unidirectional gaze, and stages the lack of reciprocity and mutual understanding inherent in “discovery.”

While primarily centered upon bodies of color as objects of the classifying gaze, the Other has historically been categorized as female and/or feminine, intellectually and/or physically disabled, poor and working-class, queer, and fat as well. Entrenched in the very structure of our society, the Other has come to be symbolized by nearly anyone not fitting the norms of hegemonic culture. This strategy of creating the Other to solidify a sense of self dates back hundreds, if not thousands, of years in Western history. The placement of the Other at the center of the museological spectacle dates back to the creation of collections of objects, artworks, and people by wealthy elites during the age of so-called Enlightenment. The creation of public art, science, and natural history museums stems from these collections and dates as far back as the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

Rachel Herrick’s construction of the obeasts and the *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies* precisely mimics the language and storylines circulated by these kinds of cultural spaces and disciplines in order to appear as naturalistic as possible. Yet by creating the stuffed and posed obeasts as duplicates of her own self for display in the art gallery, and by playing the role of the obeast in the photographs and videos on the website and in the gallery space, Herrick inserts a clue into the cipher that is MOCS. The photographs, diorama figures, and the mounted obeast heads are obviously modeled on a white fat human female, not on any other bi- or quadripedal animal. The pelts of the Obeast are obviously fabric muumuus, not actual furry skins; the gendered facial features are obviously human glasses for the females and human
cosmetics for the male, not actual facial growths or skin colors; the shoes worn by the obeast are obviously made from plastic and not part of the animal’s actual feet. By performing the obeast as a human being, and more to the point, as herself, Herrick critiques the notion of the veracity of objectivity and culturally-mandated narratives of fatness from the inside out.

Herrick’s body is at the center of the concept of the obeast and MOCS. Herrick appeared in each of the photographs taken of the obeasts in the wild featured in the virtual museum and the paper literature on MOCS, as well as in the faux vintage images of obeasts. In the diorama that is the center of the museum exhibit, Herrick created a life-size sculptural replica of herself in silicone, clad in the ubiquitous muumuu “pelt.” Herrick’s repetitive use of her own white fat female body to construct the form of the obeast as well as the visual information about the creature produces an abundance of fatness and fat fanciful creatures, which despite their purported state of endangerment, seem to overload the visual field with obeasts. In so doing, the fat body becomes excessive and overdetermined; it can no longer mean only one thing - for example, that it is bad - or be seen as an individual phenomenon. Instead, the multiplicity of the obeast puts pressure on the viewers to recognize their own prejudices about fatness while making fun of their willingness to believe anything – even the existence of an impossible creature such as the obeast. As Herrick demonstrates here, “things don’t get interesting until you get into analyzing the dynamics around fat and stigma.”

The obeast is a manifestation of fat oppression based on Herrick’s observations of the “dehumanizing and darkly hilarious” treatment of fat people in contemporary U.S. society. Modeled on fat people living under these pressurized conditions, the obeast becomes “a kind of wild animal — a creature that lived outside human culture but was of concern to humans.” Herrick’s attention to intricate detail juxtaposed with the obviously performative nature of being
the obeast in multiple visual aspects of this artwork is what creates the sense of “a preposterous pretense” in *The Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies*. And it is this point, where science and absurdity meet, that is particularly important to Herrick in the creation of this work. She notes, “Frankly, the obeast is a badly created animal. It wears glasses, and shoes, etc. I'm not really making any attempt to hide my appearance so that hopefully right off the bat the humor comes through.” By playing the Other, and doing it badly, Herrick lets the audiences in on the joke; she gives viewers ample material to “figure out” that MOCS is a mock museum by presenting herself as the Other in a rather obvious way. By performing the self as Other here, Herrick gives the audience access to tools needed to deconstruct the dominant cultural narrative of MOCS, of the art and natural history museum, and of fatphobia all at the same time.

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3 Herrick, *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies* website
4 I place the word “obesity” in scare quotes because it is a medicalized word used to pathologize fat people and because it is a cultural term often used as a fear tactic in Western societies.
7 A 2010 report from Mission: Readiness Military Leaders for Kids, a group of “retired military leaders,” entitled *Too Fat to Fight* also takes a militaristic tone and subject with regard to the “obesity epidemic.” It reports that “Obesity rates among children and young adults have increased so dramatically that they threaten not only the overall health of America but also the future strength of our military.” Furthermore, they argue, “If we don’t take steps now to build a strong, healthy foundation for our young people, then it won’t just be our military that pays the price – our nation as a whole will suffer also.” Mission: Readiness Military Leaders for Kids, *Too Fat to Fight: Retired Military Leaders Wan Junk Food Out of America’s Schools*. (Mission: Readiness Military Leaders for Kids: Washington, DC, 2010) Preface and 1
8 I use the term fat as a neutral descriptive word with no pejorative connotations such as those wielded by the term “obesity.” I also presume that fat is a self-chosen term of identification; in other words, I will not generate guidelines about who is or isn’t fat. In my view, a state of fatness is determined by an individual’s perception of their own bodies and the perception of their treatment in Western culture with regard to body size and shape.
10 See the virtual component of Herrick’s *Museum of Obeast Conservation Studies* work at the website [www.obeast.org](http://www.obeast.org).


14 Herrick, Rachel. “Obeast in Progress,” Rachel Herrick (is an artist).

15 Herrick, Email with author.
