I have been thinking a lot about ugliness lately. It all started with a visit to an exhibition by the Finnish artist Iiu Susiraja (born 1975). Iiu Susiraja is famous for her self-portraits set in domestic surroundings. In an exhibition by Iiu Susiraja you will encounter large photographs and videos of a woman at home, doing almost ordinary things: carrying a broom under her breasts, trying to put on her pantyhose, carrying her belly on a tray, sitting in front of the camera with sausages, like a crown of thorns, on her head—and so on. Her poses might be a bit off, but the most significant thing is this: Susiraja is not your average kind of model; Susiraja is an obese woman exhibiting her own fatness. In a culture that worships slimness, Susiraja’s portraits are like a slap in the face.

Iiu Susiraja has described her art as an “ode to the village idiot,” “to those who do not allow the rules of society to confine their existence.” It follows that she, using her own body as the subject in her portraits, recognizes herself as an outcast, that she understands herself as belonging to a minority. But she is not modeling as a victim. By

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1 [IIU SUSIRAJA . COM](https://iiususiraja.com), accessed January 2016. N.B.: This site also offers glimpses of Susiraja's other work, in addition to her self-portraits.

naming her art an *ode*, by comparing her art to lyrical poetry expressing noble feelings with dignity and grace, Susiraja is making it clear that she understands her own photographs as a celebration of the outsider. She is not willing to adjust to common understandings of what a beautiful body should look like. Or maybe more to the point, she is not accepting the idea that public portraits are reserved for what are commonly understood as beautiful bodies.

**Beyond common sense**

Many artists, and especially female artists, have been recomposing their bodies in the service of art. American photographer Cindy Sherman has been working as her own model for more than 30 years, capturing herself in a wide range of guises and personas, from typical film-noir heroine, to the obedient housewife, to historical characters. In some of her work, as for example in the history portraits (1989–90), Sherman has been using props like breast prosthetics, rubber bellies, and masks to deform her own body.³

French artist ORLAN has been taking the aspect of reconstruction even further. From 1990 to 1995, she underwent nine plastic surgery operations, intending to rewrite Western art history on her own body.⁴ One operation altered her mouth to imitate that of Boucher’s *Europa*; another changed her forehead to mimic the protruding brow of Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa*; while yet another operation altered her chin to look like that of Botticelli’s *Venus*.

Compared to ORLAN and Sherman, Susiraja’s project might look simple, but it is not. By becoming obese, Susiraja has assumed the role of the outcast on a permanent basis. True, ORLAN has also made irreversible changes to her body by operations on her face, but she still looks good, at least in an artistic sort of way. (These days ORLAN is suing superstar Lady Gaga for plagiarism.)⁵ Susiraja is not suing anyone—because Susiraja is not being copied. She is not looking cool. Seen from within a culture that views fatness as foul, she is ugly.

Susiraja’s body might be understood as a work of art when presented in art galleries, but certainly not on the street, not in everyday life. She does not, like Sherman, go in and out of roles; Susiraja has become ugly on a permanent basis. Her art, it seems, is a kind of radical self-stigmatization.

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⁴ ORLAN’s website, accessed January 2016.

⁵ In her video *Born This Way* (2011), Lady Gaga is seen performing with a lot of lumps in her face. Some might say that these resemble ORLAN’s implants. Whereas ORLAN’s implants are “real” (semi-permanent), however, Gaga’s are make-up (quite temporary). Claire Voon, *Artist Orlan Tries Again to Sue Lady Gaga for Plagiarism*, *Hyperallergic*, January 8, 2016.
The curse of obesity

Obesity is a global issue. According to the World Health Organization, 1.9 billion adults, 18 years and older, are overweight. Of these more than 600 million are obese. Overall, about 13 percent of the world’s adult population (11 percent of men and 15 percent of women) was obese in 2014. Worldwide, the prevalence of obesity more than doubled between 1980 and 2014.

Myself, I am from Norway. In “Norwegians fear fatness more than anything else,” a research paper on how obesity is treated in public media, Kirsti Malterud and Kjersti Ulriksen singled out two views as dominating the discourse on obesity in Norway. First, there are the well-meaning texts—texts warning about obesity from an aesthetic point of view, notifying the reader that beauty suffers as weight increases. Then there are the blaming texts—articles displaying obese people as undisciplined and greedy individuals who should be ashamed. The overarching message, independent of the medium’s tone of voice, is this: Being obese is ugly and shameful.

The Norwegian findings are supported by a series of international studies on excessive weight, all showing that obesity is strongly connected to humiliation, degradation, and disgrace. We are living in cultures where the pressure to be lean operates as a moralizing command.

Beauty and ugliness

Just like beauty, which for centuries has been the aesthetic trope par excellence in the visual arts, ugliness is a shared percept, a cultural concept. Our assessments of ugliness, and her sweet sister beauty, are never objective evaluations but always related to our time and place in the world. And it is also important to remember that attributions of beauty and ugliness often have just as much to do with socio-economic circumstances as with aesthetic evaluations.

In *Storia della bruttezza* (*On Ugliness*), Umberto Eco quotes from one of Marx’s early manuscripts. The quotation, as rendered by Eco’s English translator, Alastair McEwen:

> Money has the property of being able to buy anything, to take possession of all objects . . . What I am and what I can do is therefore not determined by my individuality in the slightest. I am ugly, but I can buy myself the most beautiful of women. Hence I am not ugly, since the effect of ugliness, its discouraging power, is annulled by money.

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7 Kirsti Malterud and Kjersti Ulriksen, *Norwegians fear fatness more than anything else—a qualitative study of normative newspaper messages on obesity and health*, Patient Education and Counseling 81 (1), October 2010: 47–52. (N.B.: Link is to abstract. Then Elsevier wants $31.50 for the article.)

8 *Weight discrimination has major impact on quality of life*, UCL News, 24 March 2015 [UCL: University College London].

In studying the synonyms of the two words—“beautiful” and “ugly”—Eco finds that synonyms commonly used for “beautiful” (pretty, cute, lovely, delightful, ...) can be thought of as expressing disinterested appreciation; but almost all the synonyms for “ugly” (odious, foul, repulsive, horrendous, ...) contain disgust, if not violent repulsion, horror, or fear.

Seen in a Nordic context, from within a culture that, according to research, dreads fatness more than anything else, it is tempting to call Susiraja’s art frightening.

**Ugliness and fear**

In spite of being self-portraits, in spite of her personal sacrifices, the art of Iiu Susiraja is not confessional. The art of Iiu Susiraja is not about Iiu Susiraja. It is about you and me and the cultures we live in. What actually makes this art explosive, and thus also critically important, is that it awakens a deep, dark fear within its audience. For those living in cultures that shame fatness, in cultures in which the industry of corporate wellness programs is growing rapidly, Iiu Susiraja’s art taps into a collective cesspool of fear. By exposing her own obesity in large works of art, she is forcing us, her public, to confront our own bodies’ insatiability, our shameful gluttony, our constant fear of losing control—of gaining weight.

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* Edmund Burke noted that there are certain experiences which supply a kind of thrill or shudder of perverse pleasure, mixing fear and delight.

No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear, being an apprehension of pain and death, operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too . . .

Exactly at this point, in her strange and powerful ability to trigger fear, Susiraja exceeds most of her contemporaries. More often than not, we, the audience, respond with indifference to contemporary art. This is not the case with Susiraja. Susiraja’s art does something to us. I believe it threatens us. It makes us start speculating about our own vulnerability, what will happen to me if I don’t manage to keep my own desires in check, my own hunger under control, my own body in shape? Suddenly we understand what Burke once tried to tell us: *Sublime art resembles actual pain.*


Now what?!

If it is true, as Stendhal once famously remarked, that beauty is the promise of happiness; then how can ugliness be anything but an announcement of something horrific—of annihilation, and total destruction?\footnote{Stendhal (Marie-Henri Beyle), “La beauté n’est que la promesse du bonheur,” \textit{De l’Amour} (1822, Ch. 17).}