

**AUTUMN KNIGHT
JULIA PHILLIPS
ANDY ROBERT**



**WE
GO
AS
THEY**

**ARTISTS IN RESIDENCE
2016-17**

JULIA



PHILLIPS

by Daniella Rose King

Julia Phillips notes that her sculpture-based practice has undergone a transformation—from “tools” to “apparatuses” to “scenes.” The narrative thrust of these “scenes,” her latest group of sculptures produced while in residence at The Studio Museum in Harlem, moves the audience through distinct theaters of reflection, pleasure, submission, pain, and domination, and back again. The work is a complex negotiation of space (domestic, public, and intimate), boundaries (psychological, material, and bodily), and transgression of both of these categories. It is a site where language and meaning are manipulated, informed by black feminist thought and theory, as well as feminist art history and artistic practices, and indebted to critiques of the intersection of race, gender, colonialism, and psychoanalysis.

Driven by an autobiographical register, her ceramic, steel, and concrete sculptures portray imagined bodies in moments of exchange, loosely characterized by a passive recipient and an active agent. This binary of giver and receiver, active and passive, is particularly informed by her reading of “penetration” as an abstract concept, marked by biological determinism and tied to feminist discourse.¹ Penetration is interpreted by the artist as a psychological and biological position that has shaped, and continues to permeate, our understanding of heteronormative gender positions and identities (penetrator=male, penetrated=female). The persistent logic of the binary reveals itself and is reaffirmed even in the

material and technical aspects of the work; it is not rare to find fixings and parts technically described as male/female.²

The penetrator/penetrated dichotomy further leans on an understanding of power relations that underlaid the antebellum era. How have certain legacies of slavery, subjugation, and sexual violence informed ideology, society, our understanding of the psyche, the economy, and histories of art and ideas? Ariane Cruz coins the term “racial sexual alterity” to describe a “perceived entangled racial and sexual otherness that characterizes the lived experience of Blackwomanhood . . . [that] expresses the importance of both race and sexuality as complex social constructions that are imposed on the Black female body.”³ This call for an intersectional approach to (black female) sexuality was made by artist Lorraine O’Grady in her seminal essay “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity.” In her opening paragraphs, she writes, “A kaleidoscope of not-white females, Asian, Native American, Latina, and African, have played distinct parts in the West’s theater of sexual hierarchy. But it is the African female who, by virtue of color and feature and extreme metaphors of enslavement, is at the outermost reaches of ‘otherness.’”⁴ Phillips’s object-based study of seemingly contained and intimate power dynamics acts as a viewfinder for locating the multivalent roots of this pervasive phenomenon.

It is through four works that act as “scenes” or microcosms—in concert with a

Operator (with Blinder, Muter, Penetrator, Aborter), 2017

number of wall-hanging “tools” and works on paper—that Phillips makes manifest these preoccupations, titled *Operator*, *Fixator*, *Exoticizer*, and *Extruder*. As with many of Phillips’s sculptures, these titles guide the viewer and hint at the intended use of the apparatuses, as well as the exchange or extraction of power they involve. Verbs become nouns, as her subjects become objects—transformations that can, and do, oscillate in the work.

Operator (with *Blinder*, *Muter*, *Penetrator*, *Aborter*) (2017) is a mise-en-scène that unfolds on what appears to be a clinician’s trolley. Constructed of brushed steel, with two pairs of glossy white ceramic handles on each side molded by the artist’s hands, the trolley displays a disconcerting array of objects. Are these a doctor’s tools (one, titled *Aborter*, suggests this)? Or weapons of torture (*Muter*, *Penetrator*, and *Blinder* seem to allude to this purpose)? Or perhaps they belong not to a single person, but to a number of agents with conflicting intentions. The objects form a narrative of seemingly contradictory readings: sexual violence, medical procedures, objectification and subjection, pain and pleasure, sensory deprivation, domination and submission—all means of exerting control and power over a body. Whether these objects were born of personal experience is of less significance than the structural and systemic realities of exploitation and objectification from which they take their cues. They are hybridized forms that amalgamate histories of medieval, antebellum, and very modern devices for control and submission, while borrowing from a surrealist repertoire. *Aborter*, a rudimentary

egg-shaped tool in two halves, one with a saw-toothed edge, seems destined to inflict pain through an almost unspeakable extraction; *Blinder* is a ceramic eye mask with its two holes blown through, with torn edges evocative of a forced entry; *Muter* is a ceramic lower-face mask that appears to fit over the end of the nose while covering the mouth area to prevent speech; *Penetrator* consists of a foot-long poker, again made in ceramic, that has pierced through a cast of the artist’s closed lips. The powerful, visceral nature of these four objects ties them intimately to the body, and therein lies much of their representational and symbolic power. It is hard not to look at these pieces and imagine their effects on one’s own body, and the resulting discomfort, pain, or obliteration.

Fixator #2 (2017) suggests a discomfiting, contorted meeting of two bodies. Four key elements of the sculpture allude to this, from the bottom to the top of the human-scaled structure: two pairs of glossy footprints on the tiled floor, one pair of hand grips, a cast of the front of a crotch, and a chin rest. This combination of components calls to mind a convoluted exercise machine, or slightly ridiculous sex toy, in which the persons using it are both reduced to their sexual organs and positioned front to back, with no means of eye contact, recognition, or contact besides a direct, forceful imposition of the penetrator onto the penetrated. Not to mention the acrobatic proclivities assumed in at least one of the users. This fixation on particular organs works with the title, and could be extended to readings of the hypersexualization of our culture in general, as well as the primacy of

not only the male gaze, but also the phallus itself in contemporary pornography.

A banana-yellow glazed ceramic belt-cum-holster is laid upon a hip-height metal pedestal bearing the name *Exoticizer, Worn Out* (*Josephine Baker’s Belt*) (2017), in reference to the complex and pioneering transatlantic entertainer, activist, and French resistance agent, and one of her most famous performances and enduring images—dancing in a skirt fringed with bananas. The belt is made up of holster-like receptors that look to be able to hold the stem of a banana, itself a powerful symbol of the phallus, or perhaps a more protective object—a bullet. Baker stands as not just a symbol of colonial desire and racist stereotyping, but as a slippery figure: entertainment icon and international superstar, intellectual, government agent, exuberant exhibitionist, and civil rights activist. Phillips’s presentation of a fictional girdle for Baker, placed almost clinically on a plinth evocative of industrial surfaces is at odds with the folly and ecstatic character of Baker’s performances and self-presentation. Yet the artist seems to

foreground those complexities of her subject, at once exoticized and self-exoticizing, while conjuring a fantastical apparatus that Baker could utilize for a performance and a military operation in turn. (Legend has it that she smuggled photos for Allied forces in her underwear during World War II.) As the title suggests, the belt is “worn out,” and displays signs of physical overuse and subsequent fragility. This is a sentiment that the prolific performer Baker may have appreciated, and that resonates with the historicized, overdetermined tropes, symbols, and images of the (desired) black female body. The title is further ambiguous about the nature of the belt. Without a wearer, how does it function, and whom does it exoticize? Could it be repurposed? It also complicates the aspect of agency, a key factor in understanding Baker’s work as an exercise in self-exoticization.

The final work in Phillips’s presentation, *Extruder* (2017), could be described as an architecture of exploitation, a closed loop that contains traces of violence, sexual desire, and humiliation. Working with concrete for the first time, in combination with premade metal piping, the artist has given the work a distinctly industrial feeling. Yet handmade ceramic fixtures and tools—including a mask with a gaping, gagging mouth, a rustic auger with an almost decorative handle and traces of an indiscernible liquid, and an ambiguous orifice—introduce a human scale and tactility, and further heighten the tension of the installation. As with Phillips’s “scenes,” the viewer is invited to encounter the work like the scene of a crime, and piece together events from recognizable tropes such as



Exoticizer, (Josephine Baker’s Belt), 2017
Courtesy the artist and Campoli Presti (London/New York)

JULIA



body parts, via casts of mouths, hands, and abdomens, and any other visual information we can grasp. *Extruder*, like *Fixator #2* is suggestive of a compromised body, made vulnerable by the contorted position it is forced into.

Phillips's sculpture embraces the messy, fleshy, contradictory realities of intimate relations and the social, imaginary, and physical institutions that they impact and conspire with. There is an urgency to the work that seeks to identify, reveal, and undermine the power dynamics that she observes, and to suggest new means of locating agency and pleasure. The haptic tendencies of the work—from their human scale, to the utilization of glazes to invoke bodily textures, surfaces, and interiors—coalesce as an “abstract convergence of touch, feeling, and relation . . . attempting to translate a thought about feeling in advance of and in the midst of feeling.”⁵ In many ways her work is a critical excavation of histories of power dynamics through the lens of specific acts of physical exchange. By narrowing her field of investigation to the unequal transactions between certain bodies, and creating a visual vocabulary

to communicate this, Phillips engenders a new ground from which to imagine alterity in relation to power. Complicating the immutability at the core of the male/female, penetrator/penetrated binary, with imagined bodies that corrupt or exist outside of that dichotomy, the artist performs a “retrieval of the mutilated female [and othered] bodies.”⁶

NOTES

- 1 Julia Phillips, “NLS In: Autumn Knight, Jessica Bell brown, Joiri Minaya, Julia Phillips, Oneika Russell,” streamed lived on December 11, 2016, accessed July 28, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDdzHTulVVg&feature=youtu.be&t=346
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ariane Cruz, “Beyond Black and Blue: BDSM, Internet Pornography, and Black Female Sexuality,” *Feminist Studies*, 41 (2015): 411.
- 4 Lorraine O’Grady, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” in *New Feminist Criticism: Art/Identity/Action*, eds. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven (New York: HarperCollins Icon Editions, 1994), 153.
- 5 Rizvana Bradley, “Introduction: other sensualities,” *Women & Performance. a journal of feminist theory*, 24 (2014): 130.
- 6 Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17 (1987): 68.

PHILLIPS

Born 1985 in Hamburg, Germany

EDUCATION

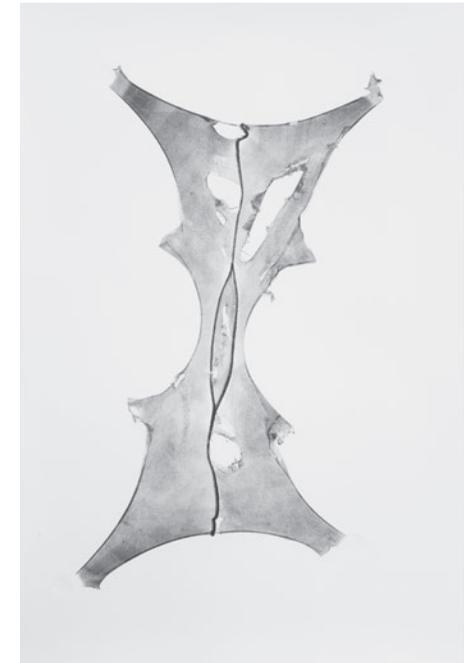
- 2016 Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, New York
- 2015 MFA, Columbia University, School of the Arts, New York
- 2012 Hochschule für bildende Künste Hamburg (University of Fine Arts of Hamburg)

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2016 *Impenetrable Entry*, Campoli Presti, London
- 2013 *Several Reasons to Migrate*, Hinterconti, Hamburg

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2017 *Dreamers Awake*, White Cube Bermondsey, London
That I am reading backwards and into for a purpose, to go on., The Kitchen, New York
Whitney Independent Study Program Studio Exhibition, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, New York
In Place Of, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York
- 2016 *A Constellation*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York
Floating Point, Judith Charles Gallery, New York
MFA Thesis Exhibition, Fisher Landau Center for Art, New York
New Work New York, biennial survey of work by New York City MFA students and recent graduates, 695 Grand Street, Brooklyn
The Feminist Sex Shoppe, On The Ground Floor, Los Angeles
- 2014 *Temporary Autonomous Zone 3*, with ff, Teatr Studio, Warsaw
MFA First Year Show, Wallach Gallery, Columbia University, New York
Read Your Call, Galerie Diane Kruse, Hamburg



Expanded V, 2016

- Networking Tips for Shy People*, 200 Livingston Street, Brooklyn
- Erogenous Zone*, Galerie im Körnerpark, Berlin
- 2012 *Index 12*, Kunsthaus, Hamburg
Summer Intensive Show, LeRoy Neiman Gallery, Columbia University, New York
Benefit Auction, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg
Thesis Show One.Equal, University of Fine Arts, Hamburg
- 2011 *Index 11*, Kunsthaus, Hamburg
DASO PK, Westwerk, Hamburg
What the Fox, Goldsmiths, University of London, London
February 4th, Forum Factory, Berlin
- 2010 *Zu den Dingen und zurück*, Collection Lenikus, Vienna

RESIDENCIES AND AWARDS

- 2016 Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME
- 2015 Arts @ Renaissance Residency, Brooklyn