

Julia Phillips' sculptures beyond the binary

By Nana Adusei-Poku



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The artist Julia Phillips (b.1985, Germany; lives in New York) and I meet for a chat in her temporary studio in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, on a Sunday morning; to be precise, it is 10:30 a.m.¹ It's an outrageous time for a meeting, if I want to apply the average German work standards. Sunday mornings are a time to rest, recreate, and recharge for the demands of the week ahead. Not to mention coffee and cake in the afternoon. But that kind of day planning is as far away from us as Germany, the place where Julia and I were born. Phillips laughs, amused when I bring up German (whatever that may mean) leisure time, and she perfectly understands my sentiment. The pulse and restlessness of New York City have left their mark on the artist, whose warmth and charm made a vivid impression on me at our first meeting in 2015. Her diligence and thoughtful precision are already reflected in the way she has arranged the not-yet-assembled ceramics, tiles, and firing components on her studio table. Phillips and I share a strange double bind as mixed-raced women who grew up in Germany, existing in several places simultaneously, across geographies and cultures that come with different desires, notions of (dis) comfort, and habits – embodied binaries that multiply according to space and context. Places and cultures consistently create different modes of performativity and engagement; they leave imprints on us, our bodies, modes of being, thinking, and perceiving the world. That Phillips's body has been a source of inquiry is thus no surprise. It is an integral part of her artistic toolset, not in a figurative and representational way, but more in the sense of leaving traces, imprints – negative spaces. This notion is also reflected in the following statement by Phillips from a conversation with the artist Aaron Gilbert: "I think of the body as a symbol to make psychological, social, and emotional experiences and relations visually accessible. Sometimes the body can help us to identify with experiences that are not our own." She further stresses: "The body allows us to determine a common ground, a familiarity and mutuality. It somehow allows for communication about relational ideas beyond verbal language. We can better identify with the sensual ideas and experiences of others if we understand how they affect us, physically and psychologically. [...] Using the body as a metaphor is a way of drawing the viewer into an idea that also exists on other levels."² The imprints of her body not only point toward relationality but also conversations with the mechanical and clinical: an almost-sterile questioning and visualizing of what the French poststructuralist Michel Foucault called *dispositive* – in short, the ways in

which institutions "function" or "work." This can articulate itself in sculptures such as *Operator I (with Blinder, Muter, Penetrator, and Aborter)* (2017), in which white ceramic handles seem to push or pull a rolling steel cart carrying the "ceramic tools or instruments" listed in the title; or the similar *Operator II (with Opener, Destabilizer, Distancer, [R] Ejecter), Partially Dismantled* (2018), which is part of Phillips's first New York solo exhibition, "Failure Detection" at MoMA PS1. The titles of her sculptures, prints, and videos carry as much weight and space for connotation as their formal expressions vary. I mention poststructuralism because the artist has been invested in notions of understanding, dismantling, and narrating structures. She moved to New York in 2013 after graduating from the HFBK (University of Fine Arts in Hamburg). At the end of her time in Hamburg, Phillips was predominantly interested in questions of breaking regularities. How can "regular" form become destabilized and irregularated, she asked. In response she welded three-dimensional geometrical steel sculptures based on the five platonic solids – in geometry representative of particularly stable structures – then heated the pieces to a glowing state in a ceramic kiln in order to destroy/smash the very same into "two-dimensional" piles using a crane, thus proving their fragility (*Platonic Solids, 2 Dimensional*, 2010). To break boundaries and challenge institutionalized norms, paradigms, and knowledge has been an ongoing aesthetic investigation for Phillips. Her desire to jeopardize regularity led her to *Pattern of Denial* (2010), a grid of slightly non-orthogonal ceramic tiles, all adjusted to each other's irregularities. The title already points toward Phillips's interest in psychology, since the term is often used to describe people suffering from addiction or codependency who have developed patterns that allow them to disavow their condition. Phillips's fascination with and commitment to working with ceramics intensified in 2014. The structures that she investigated this time moved away from abstract forms toward "functional" performative objects. Her *Objectifier* (2014) series consists of white glazed ceramics and metal bracket sculptures that suggest medical instruments, however without disclosing any clear purpose. Although many of her works insinuate an idea of functionality due to their titles and mechanical construction, they are not usable due to their ephemeral fragility. The work betrays a delicateness that is not just physical, but also delves much deeper into a social psyche – into which the artist invites her audience. The piece *Fixator (#2)* (2017), for

instance, makes me feel uncomfortable. In the piece, a hypothetically human form is fixed in a seemingly distressed position, head bent backward through a stabilizing device that holds the chin up and pushes the head back. The pelvic area of this fixed, imaginary person is attached to a mold that suggests the shape of an erect penis. Maybe they are bleeding, as the tiles beneath reveal drops of dark blue glaze. Another ghostly figure, apparently engaging with the fixed body, leaves shiny footprints on the matte tiles. One figure must submit or obey while the other is in control: one plays sovereign, the other is forced into subordination. The remnants of glaze and other elements make me wonder whether I simply don't see the bodies or if I am witnessing the scene of a crime that has just happened or will be repeated soon. Phillips's work speaks to the simultaneous fragility and power of the ideologies that dominate our lives, interactions, and emotional landscapes, whether they are normative, gendered, or racialized. *Kopfkino* – "cinema in the head" – is a word that emphatically comes to mind whenever I look at her sculptures and prints. In the collagraph print series in which ripped pantyhose has been stretched across paper like animal skin (*Expanded IX, Quickly Fixed*, 2016), I see a poetic and long-standing history of feminist investments in effeminized materials such as stockings, ranging from Senga Nengudi's performance and installation series *R.S.V.P. (1975–77)* to Sarah Lucas's sculpture *Pauline Bunny* (1997). In Phillips's work I see the century-long hypersexualization of the female-sexed body and cultural techniques of fetishization through a loose concealing of the very same. I see an intersection of race and class and economic targeting of gendered ideas of beauty; I'm aware that not everyone was able to afford precious stockings, and that "nude" colors constituted a limited color range. Because of the way in which the tight gusset is isolated and spanned, I am reminded of animal carcasses hung to be dried or smoked; and due to the way in which ink stains are dropped all over the gusset, I see rape and I see female genital mutilation – especially in her latest prints incorporating thread, called *Expanded X, Treated Twice* (2018). Here, I see repeated attempts to fix what has been broken, whether it is the illusion of wholeness or centuries of exploitation and the idea of repair. I am an accomplice to the narratives that her work evokes; I am a spectator of my own internalized violence. Phillips's psychosocial panopticon makes the act of looking painful while at the same time holding the viewer accountable. As I walked around her sculptures at her artist-in-residence exhibition at the



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Studio Museum in Harlem, titled "We Go As They," or during the New Museum's Triennial, details made me continually aware of the dualisms of power. Despite their abstract nature, the works educate the relationship between historically oppressed and commodified human beings. I am caught in a desire to identify the oppressor and the oppressed, which reminds me of my first perception of Kara Walker's cut-outs, in which the artist engages with the highly complicated and delicate psychology of enslavement on a figurative level. Walker's compositions open up entangled narratives that speak to sexuality and relationality, as well as the consistent exploitation of the black body on a psychosocial level; they are disturbing sites for viewers, because their complexity addresses the intimacy and sometimes dependency that enslavement violently produced. Julia Phillips, however, moves between narratives, both those that remain binary and those that are ambiguous. When I look at the instruments on display in *Operator I* and *II*, and learn their names, it makes me think of the history of medicine in the United States and Europe — or, more precisely, gynecology and how black female-sexed bodies were used without consent as "objects for experimentation," being made to endure insurmountable pain and sometimes even being dissected

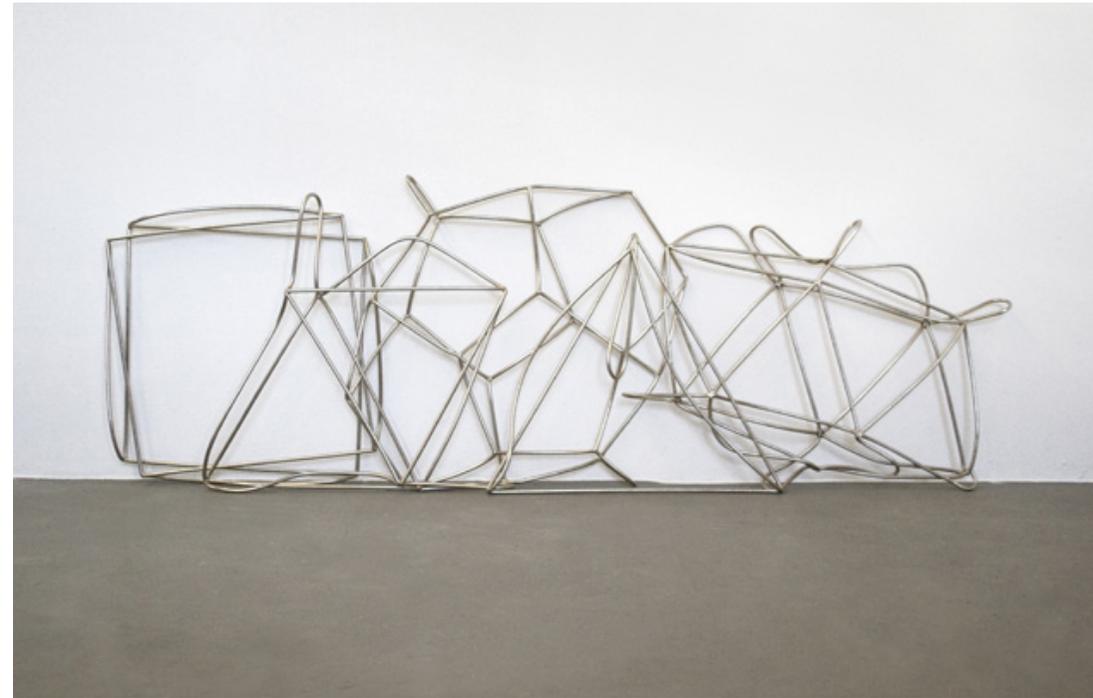
postmortem, as in the case of Saartjie Baartman.³ Phillips's works constantly emphasize that medical institutions and practices are built upon the pain of "othered bodies," which complicates the notion of the hegemonic state apparatus, ideology, and ideas of norms and culture. A very dark blue-to-black-colored glaze emphasizes my reading, as these imprints insinuate race. When I ask her about this dark color during my visit she explains that it is inspired by the painter Kerry James Marshall, who paints figures in what he calls a "rhetorical black." This aesthetic, signifying a relationship between language, the non-color black, and performativity, is echoed in Phillips's sculptures. Black bodies bleed, they are fixed or hang from the ceiling (as in *Drainer*, 2018), while the inside and outside is always clearly determinable. In the case of *Operator I* and *II*, the handles are covered in white glaze, whereas the brown matte tiles in *Scene I* (2018) show evidence of a body thrown against them, articulated through remnants of blue glaze. Clean but somehow messy, static yet dynamic, exposed and introverted: these are some of the words that repeatedly mark my impressions. These binaries — like the embodied binaries that come from being in the world as a mixed-raced person — are bound in ambiguity yet cannot be dissolved. I

realize after leaving Phillips's studio that these morning hours are indeed recreation time; her creative investigations, however painful the subject may be, are part of her path to healing, to making peace, and to processing through the imaginary of a collective past that remains in our shared presence.

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JULIA PHILLIPS'S solo exhibition "Failure Detection" is on view at MoMA PS1, New York, through September 3, 2018.

- 1 The author expresses gratitude to Julia Phillips for her support and insides while writing this text.
- 2 Julia Phillips and Aaron Gilbert in conversation, "Do You Believe In Evil?: Julia Phillips and Aaron Gilbert," *Mousse Magazine*, February 2018, p. 147.
- 3 Also see: Terri Kapsalis, *Public Privates: Performing Gynecology from Both Ends of the Speculum*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1997, pp. 31–60; Deirdre Benia Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology*, Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2017.



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- i *Intruder Study VI*, 2017. Partially salt-glazed ceramics. 24½ × 9½ × 1⅝ inches. Courtesy of the artist.
- ii *Objectifier I*, Slightly Used, 2015. Partly glazed ceramics, metal bracket. 71 × 19 × 9 cm. Courtesy of the artist.
- iii *Fixator (#1)*, detail, 2017. Partially glazed ceramics, screws, metal structure, partly glazed ceramic tiles. 177 × 64 × 79 cm. Courtesy of the artist.
- iv *Protector II*, 2016. Partially glazed ceramics, metal screws, metal brackets. 63 × 57 × 10 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

- v *Intruder Study V*, 2017. Partially salt-glazed ceramics. 23⅝ × 7⅞ × 1¼ inches. Courtesy of the artist.
- vi *Platonic Sold*, 2 Dimensional, 2010. Nicked mild steel. Courtesy of the artist.
- vii *Expanded V*, 2016. Relief in on paper (collagraph monoprint). Courtesy of the artist.



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