

Julia Phillips

Mediation and Malleability

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In Julia Phillips's video *Becoming (The Hunter, The Twerker, The Submitter)* (2015) the opening subtitle reads, "she tells me, if the female body is a vessel, she is a vessel with agency. As opposed to this object transgressing the boundaries of that object, *this* object places herself around that object." This extended title serves as a didactic to the video, in which Phillips repeatedly and emphatically fits a cupped piece of clay over a phallic-shaped form. This gesture is followed by a short clip of an older woman thrusting her hips, and another of a young woman twerking stiffly as if to make visible the technique that generates this dance movement.

Becoming (...) sets up a number of propositions that weave through Phillips's artistic practice, including the psychoanalytic subversion of power relations rooted in the body that places the transgressor as dominant, and the malleability of boundaries through free dance and counterintuitive movement. Phillips's sculpture—the format in which she predominantly works—mobilizes these concepts viscerally as opposed to visually, acting as a sensory and spatial counterpoint to the video. The artist's inversion and disorientation of the power structures to which the body is subject, in both her film and sculptures, works to disrupt the areas of the subconscious where such structures originate.

In her sculptural work, Phillips's process begins with language that problematizes power relations mediated through the body: *Intruder*

(2017); *Regulator* (2014); *Exoticizer* (2017); *Fixator* (2017); *Extruder* (2017). She meticulously designs apparatuses that grapple with each titular concept. Using her own body to shape the clay works, she builds them through a process of molding, puncturing, firing, and fixing, resulting in structures that invite unfamiliar engagement. Entangled dialogues of interiority, exteriority, visibility, and objecthood persist in Phillips's glaze on the clay body casts. The exterior body is represented in a deep black—an exaggerated visibility and intentional nod to Kerry James Marshall—and the interior in exquisite gradations of blue that signify drama, melancholy, depression, and the potential of the psyche.¹ The artist creates loose, painterly areas to meditate on skin, flesh, color, and the subconscious. The act of painting itself gestures to the medium's ongoing preoccupation with visibility and representing the exterior world, but its footnoted position in Phillips's sculptures suggests her reprioritization from this to probing the interior psyche that shapes it.

Conceptualism flirts with didacticism in Phillips's work, the latter a disconcerting word in the practice of the former, and one that the artist believes should not be entirely dismissed in urgent times. In encountering Phillips's sculptures, the viewer sees where to grip their hands, where to place their feet, and where to position their face. In the service of these subtle directives, Phillips is exceptionally intentional and spare with the details: every screw, adjustor, strap, and cast counts. However, these same details also work to confound the viewer. *Fixator* (#1) (2017), with handgrips located near the ankles, a pelvic rest to scale, and footprints on the tiles indicating two people engaged in the use of the apparatus,

¹ Based on conversations between the author and Julia Phillips, 2017.

asks, who is “fixated”? What is the physical exchange? The two individuals in the sculpture’s negative space are in close contact—one body upright and one folded—but the contorted exchange is ambiguous and cannot actually occur due to the physical fragility of the ceramic casts. Instead, the work indexes imagined interactions that disrupt socio-physical boundaries. There is no dominator, and elements of didacticism only go so far. The impossibility of using the apparatus impels the viewer to consider the scenario psychologically and emotionally, implying that these works are not about the body itself, but the body as a mediator of agency. Throughout their lifespan, the sculptures will come apart and be reassembled as they travel, challenging installers to piece together the counterintuitive structures and viewers with reconsidering the potentials of their own bodies.

As Phillips squeezes and reshapes a piece of clay in *Becoming (...)*, the young woman abandons her rigid twerk, instead engaging in a free dance, spinning with disjointed gestures. A subsequent subtitle in the video reads, “She believes that if matter is particularly flexible in her nature, the matter is asking to find her full potential within self-determined limitations.” Phillips’s interest in how dance functions as a means of liberating of the body both physically and politically is evident in the video, which considers the potentials of free movement of the racialized female body within colonial structures. As in her sculptures, the reconfiguration of matter in space is catalytic and implies to the transgression of boundaries and a revisceralization of intuition.² The oscillation

² The term “revisceralization” is borrowed from Lauren Berlant’s essay “Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness” in which she argues “[...]learning to be awkward, to be graceful, to leap, and to fall is a training in attention and also in revisceralizing one’s intuition. There can be no change in life without revisceralization. This involves all kinds of loss and transitional suspension.” Lauren Berlant, *Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness*. November 2011. Pp. 5.

between inviting and repelling interaction that occurs in sculptures like *Fixator (#1)* can only be resolved through questioning sociopolitical, physical, and psychological power dynamics. Phillips's sculptures penetrate the infrastructures of these learned laws, making power relations malleable and unstable; the walls of the "vessel" reveal their porous, mutable nature.³ Further, the repetition of this process can be read as a praxis of destabilizing and reconfiguring hierarchies of power where the psychological and political intersect with physical mobility.

³ For more on the construct of the female as penetrable, porous and mutable, see Anne Carson, *Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity* from "Men in the Off Hours." Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2000. Pp.143.