

THAT I AM
READING
BACKWARDS
AND INTO FOR
A PURPOSE,
TO GO ON:

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CONSTRUCTING
AMBIGUITY: THE
SCULPTURAL
WORK OF
JULIA PHILLIPS
AND KEVIN
BEASLEY

MAGDALYN
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*To be sure, if I am affected by what does not yet appear to me as a thing, it is because laws, connections, and even structures of meaning govern and condition me. That order, that glance, that voice, that gesture, which enact the law for my frightened body, constitute and bring about an effect and not yet a sign.*¹

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 10.

Composed of a waist-level bar with handgrips on either side, *Positioner* (2016) is a ceramic apparatus with an indeterminate, imaginary function. Julia Phillips, the artist, uses her own body to shape and puncture the materials before they are fired. Though one may understand the ways the individual technical parts of the apparatus are utilized, it is unclear how, and to what end, one's entire body may function within in this larger structure, causing one's cognitive recognition of the apparatus to oscillate between invitation and disorientation.

Phillips invents apparatuses that work on an imaginary level rather than a physical one. She describes her sculptures as existing in a physically passive state, which is further emphasized by their material fragility.² Her sculptures aim to take the mind to unconscious spaces where desire and power exist and to disrupt those relations. Despite the familiar shapes of the tools that make up the works and the references to bodily interaction, the functions of the sculptures do not align with the structures that govern our bodies. When encountering her finished works, one may be viscerally repelled as quickly as physically invited to interact with the imprints of Phillips's body. This phenomenological destabilization is generative for Phillips, who notes "the negative space in my objects is what I intend to be the site for the unsaid and unshaped," prompting those who encounter the sculptures to question the relationship between the physical body and the unconscious.³ Because the negative space she creates intimates physically ambiguous interactions between body and structure, the mind is necessarily turned to question the structures, how they may or may not support the body, and in turn where the limits and potentials of power in this relationship are located.

² Julia Phillips, "Introducing the 2016–2017 Artists in Residence," *Studio: The Studio Museum in Harlem Magazine*, Winter/Spring 2017, 9.

³ Julia Phillips, "Julia Phillips," Columbia University School of the Arts, Visual Arts Program, 2015 MFA Thesis Exhibition, <http://arts.columbia.edu/visual-arts/2015/thesis/julia-phillips>.

The fluid on the floor tiles, for which there is no visible source, refers to the bodily interior. The remnants of fluid that recur in Phillips's works, as well as the use of the artist's body to mark and impress the sculptures, explore and question the power dynamics between the dominant penetrator and the penetrated, as outlined in psychoanalytic theory.⁴ By referring to both the interior and exterior of the body and the unresolved relation between the two, Phillips explores the agency in being the penetrator or penetrated and, more broadly, tensions between inside and outside, interiority and exteriority, and the politics of the body. While psychoanalysis considers the body more directly, Phillips indexes the body in her sculpture in order to think broadly and abstractly about identity, social structures, and post-coloniality as constructs to be penetrated or disrupted. Phillips cites Angela Davis, who describes social realities such as white supremacy as seemingly

⁴ See Diane Elise, "Unlawful Entry: Male Fears of Psychic Penetration," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 11, no. 4 (2001): 499–531.



Julia Phillips, *Positioner*, 2016. Glazed ceramics, metal screws, metal structure, partly glazed ceramic tiles, 44.1 x 24.4 x 30.7 in. (112 x 62 x 78 cm). Private collection; courtesy the artist and Campoli Presti, London/Paris

impenetrable, but which become malleable when they are penetrated.⁵ Phillips mobilizes the concept of penetration in her work through direct references to the body—her own footprints and mouth holes, for example—and extends this idea into post-colonial thinking by dismantling the structures that govern the body via sculpture. Her artistic strategies work on both a physical and conceptual level to disrupt the ideological constructs around identity and the body. For example, the idea of “regulation,” explored in the work *Regulator* (2014), can be understood as governing the space between bodies both in a physical sense and in a broader social and psychic sense. Ideology codes gender, race, sexuality, and class identities in ways that regulate the movement, behavior, production, and freedom of bodies. By drawing on constructed physical and unconscious orientations of the body, Phillips points to the spaces where structures of power and control are formed, as well as to their limits and their potential for disruption.

As historically constructed subjects, we are conditioned to adhere to identity categories by ideological systems of coding defined over time by dominant ideals.⁶ The structures that govern the body are multiple and entrenched. In the history and context of these structures, the marked body has been defined by its variance from the unmarked body.⁷ It is from this difference that colonial concepts such as the “other” were developed. This distinction between marked and unmarked bodies is rooted in a vocabulary of signification that defines the “other” as a fixed, unchanging being that is at once foreign yet completely visible and knowable.⁸ At moments such as the present, when state control of marked bodies, based on essentialist identification, intensifies, the arbitrary nature of these classifications and assumptions of fixed identities becomes increasingly legible. The gaping holes created by this distorted categorization of people provide spaces for the abject body—which exists in “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” spaces outside of established identity categories—to disrupt the fixity of those categories through active ambiguity.⁹

In Kevin Beasley’s *Untitled* (2015), the artist reconfigures a pair of gray Levi’s jeans by reorienting them upside down, unstitching the inseams of both legs, and filling them with polyurethane foam to create a single, cylindrical column. Resin stains drip down from the top of the sculpture and debris from the artist’s studio is visible throughout. The established function of the jeans causes the viewer’s body to respond viscerally to the foam that fills them, expands, and seeps out at the base of the sculpture by imagining it as their own body. However, one cannot understand the foam as a surrogate body because Beasley’s narrow molding of the sculpture prevents movement of the legs—and they are oriented upside down. As the eye moves up to where the ankles would be, the perception of physical space for accommodating the human body diminishes; these are no longer jeans as we understand

5 Julia Phillips, interview with Deborah Anzinger et al., “IN: Black Female Subjectivity,” *New Local Space* (NLS), livestream, December 11, 2016, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDdzHTuIVVg>.

6 Stuart Hall, “The Rediscovery of Ideology,” in *Culture, Society, and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1983), 71.

7 See Brooke Holmes, “Marked Bodies: Gender, Race, Class, Age, Disability and Disease,” in *The Cultural History of the Human Body in Antiquity*, ed. Daniel H. Garrison (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 159–83.

8 Homi Bhabha, “The Other Question,” in *The Politics of Theory*, ed. Frances Barker (University of Essex: Department of Government, 1983), 23.

9 Kristeva, 4.



Julia Phillips, *Regulator*, 2014. Partially glazed ceramics, metal stand, screws. 44 x 25.6 x 19.7 in. (112 x 65 x 50 cm). Courtesy the artist and Campoli Presti, London/Paris

them. The oscillation between visual recognition of the filled garment and consciousness that a familiar embodied relationship has been blocked, as well as the incompleteness of the figurative sculpture, all destabilize viewers' mastery over bodily orientation. This process divorces the jeans from their ascribed function and suggests that objects and beings may exceed dominant understandings of fixity.

Beasley's sculptures are made of mass-produced objects indexical to the body. His work manipulates the contact between the physical, live body and culturally specific material products such as housedresses, hoodies, and Air Jordan sneakers. The artist carefully considers the spaces in which these garments are and were active: *Untitled (meeting)* (2016) is made of housedresses that Beasley purchased from a storefront in Harlem where the women in his family would shop. The garments in this context are



Kevin Beasley, *Untitled*, 2015. Polyurethane foam, resin, gray jeans, underwear, studio debris, 47 x 17 x 20 in. (119.4 x 43.2 x 50.8 cm). Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

tied to the body's visibility as well as its habitation and negotiation of community and domestic spaces, which are complicated by the redeployment of the clothes as sculpture. Beasley also uses his own body and various adhesives like resin, tar, and polyurethane foam to shape the clothing. This process reactivates the objects and proposes alternative embodied relationships between structure (in this case, clothing) and individuals (artist and viewer). The duration of Beasley's sculpting process is dependent on the length of time required before the adhesive hardens. During this time, the relationship between body and materials alters: from the materials habitating the body to the artist intervening and reshaping the garments' function. These instabilities and transitions work together to trouble the bodily constructions of visibility we orient ourselves around and to speak to larger potentialities of the body.

By engaging with the abject, Phillips and Beasley interrogate constructions of visibility and they gesture to possibilities outside the codification of fixed identity categories, pointing toward hypothetical, indeterminate, embodied relationships.¹⁰ Both Beasley and Phillips defamiliarize and repurpose objects, creating new apparatuses with ambiguous functions. Their work complicates the concept of fixity on which the colonial othering and categorizing of marked bodies depends.¹¹ Beasley does so by retooling and reanimating bodily objects and Phillips by exploring psychic power dynamics that manifest through the body. The doubling back and questioning that occurs in both practices can be understood as something larger than troubling physical relationships in space. Questioning the limits and potential of an object by imagining alternative functions for its physical form mirrors structures of identity formation. What is essential and what is imposed? The artists point to the impossibility that physical appearances equate to fixed subjective identity formations. By exploring the ambiguity of the abject and using the indexicality of their own bodies in their processes, Beasley and Phillips establish a parallel between the forms in their work and the politics of the body. These works convey that the modes of categorizing physical bodies are not absolute but a result of history.

In advance of their assembly, the parts that make up both Phillips's and Beasley's works inhabit spaces of neutralization for varied periods of time. In Beasley's studio, one encounters mass-produced objects fabricated to protect the body—clothing, car seats, and shoes, often dipped in resin, which renders their original function null. These objects are placed carefully yet tentatively around the studio where they idle in the space, their function neutralized until the artist reactivates them in alternative ways. Though Phillips plans her sculptures in advance of their physical materialization, the component parts, often tools, that will comprise future works remain functionally indeterminate both prior to and after their assembly. Her studio is a meticulous, operating-room-like display of molds of her mouth, hands, and feet alongside spikes, metal rods, and hinges that have yet to

¹⁰ On the social sense of the outside, Stuart Hall writes, "To be outside the consensus was to be, not in an alternative value-system, but simply outside norms as such: normless—therefore, anomic." Hall, 62.

¹¹ Bhabha, 18.



Kevin Beasley, *Untitled (meeting)*, 2016. Resin, housedresses, 70 x 21 x 17 in. (177.8 x 53.3 x 43.2 cm). Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York. Photo: Jean Vong

be assembled, their functions individually and collectively uncertain. There is an evident tension between the potentials of these tools and their powerlessness in these decontextualized positions. In a later interview, Jacques Derrida described deconstruction not as a technical device for mastery but as a reminder of the limits of power and the memory of powerlessness.¹² This can be a generative framework for understanding Phillips's and Beasley's practices, not only in the way they question agencies and structures, but also in the way they imagine potential alternatives as a result. These artists' works do not defamiliarize mundane objects exclusively in order to disorient those who encounter their sculptures. By repurposing objects, as in the case of Beasley, or appropriating their form, as in the case of Phillips, the artists consider the arbitrariness of these objects' assigned functions. By stripping down the object, freeing its form from imposed structures, their work reveals the powerlessness of the identifying categories that make sense of these objects.

In moments of political urgency it is counterintuitive to resist direct reactions and choose instead to reflect on history and the constructs that preceded the present. This pause contrasts with the social acts of resistance that are necessary for progress, particularly in moments when bodies are endangered by aggressive state control. Beasley and Phillips acknowledge pausing and rerouting as ways of accessing and activating unconscious spaces to question the structures around which we orient ourselves. They defamiliarize the component parts that make up their works, destabilizing the traditional distinction between figural and phenomenological sculpture. It is in this space that they explore the limits of power and question structures that govern the body. In considering the futility of the identities, systems, and orders imposed on objects and bodies, Beasley's and Phillips's works question structures of visibility and essentialist identification. Their works inhabit a space both physically and conceptually ambiguous that troubles the power of the works' component parts and collectively proposes alternative positions that counter fixity. The works do not languish as composite constructions of powerless parts: indexed to both the artist's and viewers' bodies, the sculptures implicate those with whom they share space, disorienting assumptions. In so doing, they disrupt the fixity of bodily identification and locate the ambiguous body as a site of the present.

¹² "Deconstruction, from that point of view, is not a technical device for mastering texts or mastering a situation or mastering anything; it's, on the contrary, the memory of some powerlessness . . . a way of reminding the other and a way of reminding me, myself, of the limits of the power, of the mastery—there is some power in that." Jacques Derrida, quoted in Elisabeth Weber, "Passages—From Traumatism to Promise," in Jacques Derrida, *Points . . . : Interviews 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 385.