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JULIA  
PHILLIPS

Detail of JULIA PHILLIPS's  
*Nourisher*, 2022, ceramic,  
medical PVC tubes,  
stainless steel, and steel  
cable, 177 × 81 × 61 cm.  
Courtesy the artist and  
Matthew Marks Gallery,  
New York.

# Withdrawal Aesthetics

BY HARRY C.H. CHOI

Against all the odds, Julia Phillips remains invisible. Online searches yield documentation of her elegant sculptures and works on paper, yet the customary profile image of the artist (who, from all accounts, is charismatic, glamorous, but also somber) is simply nowhere to be seen. Among the rows of installation shots that bear Phillips's name, the sole "portrait" is a black-and-white photograph of a slender figure donning a monochrome outfit, taken by the artist Keisha Scarville. Presumably this is of Phillips, who made sure that her face was covered with what appears to be her own hair. So any attempt to put a face to a name is a futile one, at least in the virtual realm. As frustrating as this might be, the message is clear: Phillips prefers *not* to be seen, even in our age of hypervisibility.

This is noteworthy, given the sustained interest in Phillips's practice over the past decade, during which time she mounted a solo exhibition at MoMA PS1 in 2018 and participated in major group exhibitions at the 2022 Venice Biennale and the 2018 Berlin Biennale. Phillips's privacy is a curious choice. Not only does it defy the zeitgeist, but it runs counter to the logic of the art world. That said, it is perhaps not all that surprising. Researching her practice reveals that from her earliest works Phillips embraced the latent poetics of absence as a conceptual concern rather than as an astute public relations strategy. The artist started to gain traction with a suite of sculptures that alternate between surgical apparatuses and impressions of body parts, which invited spectators to envisage how imaginary human figures could be positioned in relation to them. A representative work is *Extruder* (2017), which features two ceramic casts of a human body—one of an anonymous face from the nose down, the other of the wavy contours of buttocks with a hole in the middle. Placed on an arrangement of chunky cement tiles, the casts are suspended mid-air with metal tubes connected underneath and positioned to recall a human figure kneeling on all fours. As if to reinforce the rather degrading, if not sexually provocative, undertones of the position assumed by this imaginary person, the mouth of the figure is stuffed with a thick metal pipe, which in turn connects with other pipe units in perpendicular twists and turns to form a three-dimensional structure. Menacingly enough, the open end of the structure looms over what reads as the anus, and a tiny puddle of thick, pitch-black liquid sits underneath; inches away rests an equally intimidating metal auger, its ceramic handles crafted so as to resemble a phallus. The varying elements of *Extruder* cohere

through the invisible body that hovers over the installation, whose form emerges in the mind of the viewer and recedes into total disappearance at other times. The almost comprehensible, but ultimately ungraspable, nature of this human form does not appear too divergent from the position that the artist herself adopts in the networked realm: Phillips's presence is only affirmed in fragmentary evidence and is never explicitly spelled out in concrete terms of the flesh.

For some, linking Phillips's self-imposed anonymity to the pregnant omission of the human figure may not come across as a shrewd move in terms of dissecting her practice, since her decision might well be a personal choice with no bearing on her identity as an artist. Plenty of people opt out of the wretched domain that is populated by our ethereal avatars for reasons of screen fatigue or inconvenience, or simply to keep things private in a world where personal boundaries are blurred more than ever. Nevertheless, the artist's deliberate gesture of retracting herself from public view could be interpreted as advancing a certain form of immanent critique that informs key tenets of her work, as various manifestations of the notion of invisibility have asserted particular significance in critical discourses in recent years. Hito Steyerl's video *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013), for instance, presciently forecast that "not being seen" is in fact a privilege in this hypermediated world. "Today, the most important things want to remain invisible," an artificially generated voice declares in the video—citing love, war, and capital as examples of such invisible yet important things and later wryly suggesting "living in a gated community" as a method of disappearance.

If Steyerl's work incisively predicted the sheer impossibility of concealment before Instagram took center stage, the 2023–24 group exhibition "Going Dark: The Contemporary Figure at the Edge of Visibility" at the Guggenheim Museum articulated the ways in which "obscured or hidden" figures in works of art attest to the development of racial politics in postwar United States. By visually concealing the body, the exhibition argued, artists such as Lorna Simpson and Sandra Mujinga were able to explore "a key tension in contemporary society" that stems from the conflict between "the desire to be seen and the desire to be hidden from sight." Central to these examples is the observation that behind the unseen, disappearing, and concealed figure lurk concrete sociopolitical concerns, which render it much more entangled than the quite



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literal, if not visual, state of absence that stands in contrast to presence. At a moment in time in which the most convoluted ideas can manifest in front of our eyes in mere seconds, the state of being out of sight is in fact one rife with layers of potentiality.

As an artist whose work has been informed by writings on postcolonialism, psychoanalytic theories, and Black feminist thought, Phillips employs the absence of the figure as a way of bringing into relief the intricate infrastructures of power that have produced such systems of thinking. Though they may be devoid of any tangible human presence, her sculptures seek to give form to relationships that unfold between people, which are inevitably and necessarily characterized through a certain set of imbalances. *Drainer* (2018), for example, consists of a fragmentary cast of a female pelvis suspended from the ceiling with steel cables, below which a concrete plinth with an industrial metal strainer in the center is placed. Precisely who is being drained, or for what reason, is not made explicit, but the dark tone of the sculpture's exterior unremittingly evokes the history of torture and abuse that countless colored bodies have undergone over centuries. What the sculpture activates, then, is the dormant dialectics between the subject and the object behind the action of drainage by offering minimal but potent material traces.

A similar nod toward racial politics can be seen in *Mediator* (2020), in which the casts of two upper torsos of human bodies are positioned on top of an enlarged, circular granite



(left) JULIA PHILLIPS, *Drainer*, 2018, ceramic, steel cable, and concrete, base: 9 x 152 x 91 cm, height of cast: 212 cm. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

(top) JULIA PHILLIPS, *Mediator*, 2020, ceramic, stainless steel, granite, and nylon hardware, 175 x 285 x 285 cm. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

(right) Detail of JULIA PHILLIPS's *Impregnator and Aborter*, 2022, ceramic, stainless steel, and medical PVC tubes, 97 x 269 x 50 cm. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.



base to face each other with a steel microphone in between. With one painted in pale pink on the outside and the other in dark brown, the varying skin tones of the figures speak to the inherent differences in perspectives presumed in the concept of mediation. The sculpture simultaneously serves as an apparatus and illustration of the act—two parties arriving at a midpoint to express their concerns through an amplification device that enables their voices to be heard better. Importantly, the work implies that in the process of mediation it is possible for both parties to reach a shared sensibility of humanity that unites them: the interior linings of the two body casts are painted in markedly similar coats of salmon with speckles of muted red, blue, and white—the color of human entrails and organs. Having departed from a specific locus tethered to racial politics, *Mediator* starts to resonate with the human condition in the broadest terms. In Phillips's world, a singular instance of a white body and a black body in conversation is transformed into a sculpture that manifests the unfolding of power dynamics that is inevitable in all lived realities.

A strategy of distillation in which specific historical references are transformed into sculptural forms that no longer bear such signifiers, and in turn obliterate much of the existing vestiges of the body, is a recurring thread in Phillips's practice that can be traced back to some of her earliest works. *Exoticizer*, *Worn Out (Josephine Baker's Belt)* (2017) is one example. The sculpture, which achieves the resemblance

to a belt by connecting petite, rectangular pieces of yellow ceramic with metal bolts, takes inspiration from the skirt made with fake bananas that the legendary black dancer Josephine Baker wore during performances in the 1920s. If Baker's belt is a spatiotemporally specific marker of the ways in which the performer's body was "othered" in sexualized ways during her time, the more austere version created by Phillips hints at the exoticization that all bodies placed in spatial contexts other than their original cultures, colored or otherwise, have experienced across human civilizations. Ultimately, what remains after Baker's body and the belt was reshaped by Phillips's own language is the material substrate through which the layers of human relationships unfold.

In her more recent projects, nevertheless, the artist's cogent sculptural reformulation of historical, political, and philosophical concerns has taken a personal turn, as indicated by the suite of works that engage with the notion of motherhood. "I have taken a closer look at relationships with the self and what I call 'imaginary organs,' like the soul or the spirit," Phillips remarked in an interview with Michelle Millar Fisher published in *Artforum*, adding that such a shift is a "part of the development in the wish to become a mother." *Impregnator and Aborter* (2022) can be read as an example of transitional works in which the allusions to tools and apparatuses in her previous sculptures are reconfigured through the growing interests in human conception. In both, a bare-bones stainless steel table displays a rather

eerie device, which combines small, peculiar objects made in steel and ceramic with transparent PVC tubes and a surgically white plastic handle. It is not immediately clear as to how these devices function, and such initial ambiguity is exacerbated further by displaying the two works side by side. The obfuscation of subject-object relations that informed much of her practice is thus articulated through the dynamics surrounding the intimate event of pregnancy, in which the agents of impregnation, conception, and, potentially, abortion is at an excruciatingly delicate emotional and physical interplay.

In that vein, *Nourisher* (2022) conveys a tonality that denotes quite a stark departure from her prior preoccupations, even though she relies on the same set of materials as *Impregnator* and *Aborter* in this work. Here, PVC tubes are draped from the mouth and bosom of a woman's upper body cast in ceramic, painted in a bright orange hue that sets itself apart from the rather muted or visceral colors characteristic of the artist's work. Given that the same tubes were used in the former sculptures to convey the transmission of bodily fluids—most likely semen and blood as implied in the titles—it is difficult not to read this marked vibrancy as an expression of ecstasy behind the act of nourishing a baby. This may be the case, though it reads much more literally than any other work by Phillips, particularly as the contours of the human figure are noticeably pronounced. *Nourisher* is an especially striking sculpture that resonates universally; it not only sublimates the sacred first days of motherhood experienced by the artist in her sculptural language, but celebrates the nourishing of all nascent universes that newborns have brought forth to this world.

To read into the invisibility of bodies within Phillips's practice, therefore, is to identify that the hollow interstices in her works could be occupied by any number of persons. The moment that the protagonists of the relations depicted by Phillips are erased and transfigured into their material bases is the point at which the sculptures begin to assert their quiescent energy beyond their singular contexts and connect with entities outside their immediate reach. That her works often use words denoting categories (even legalistic ones, such as "witness," "observer," and "operator") merely shows that by leaving her figures invisible, she simultaneously renders them unidentified and interchangeable. Anyone could, depending on the situation, find themselves in the roles Phillips evokes in her titles.

Carving out this aspect of anonymity in Phillips's work is an indispensable way of better understanding the conceptual framework of her practice. As a concept, anonymity provides a model of understanding the Other that is as generative as the oft-cited reference to the Martinican philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant's notion of "opacity," which was used as a theoretical perspective to orient the practices in the latest edition of the Whitney Biennial (where Phillips was included). For Glissant, opacity undoes a Western model of intelligibility based on "transparency," because it does not "reduce" the Other into a comprehensive totality through an "ideal scale." Instead, it allows for "subsistence within an irreducible singularity." If opacity finds its significance through accepting the Other as an incomprehensible existence, rather than squaring them with predetermined metrics, anonymity identifies the Other as a being with its own ontological concerns. Through the withdrawal of figures that render them both covert and anonymous, Phillips reaches for the potential of artistic praxis as being a deeply humanistic endeavor, one that identifies in humans the aims of "liberation" and "realization," to use Jean-Paul Sartre's words, irrespective of their visibility.

Detail of JULIA PHILLIPS's *Nourisher*, 2022, ceramic, medical PVC tubes, stainless steel, and steel cable, 177 x 81 x 61 cm. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

HARRY C.H. CHOI is an art historian, curator, and writer. He served on the curatorial team of the 14th Gwangju Biennale and has held curatorial fellowships at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. A regular contributor to *Artforum*, *ArtAsiaPacific*, and *Texte zur Kunst*, he is completing his PhD in art history and film and media studies at Stanford University.

JULIA PHILLIPS was born in Hamburg in 1985, and currently lives and works between Chicago and Berlin. She has held solo exhibitions at MoMA PS1 in New York and the Kunstverein Braunschweig in Germany, and was featured in the Berlin Biennial and the New Museum Triennial. Her work has been shown at various institutions, including the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, and the Studio Museum in Harlem. Phillips was also included in the 59th Venice Biennale's central exhibition, "The Milk of Dreams," curated by Cecilia Alemani.

