

When the Second Sex is Put First  
by Stina Högvist

In Åsa Jungnelius' art the cunt claims its due place, and if you don't watch out it will come and get you. A dear cunt has many names, as the saying goes, and what is known as cunt/muff/hole appears in her artistic work in a number of forms and constellations. It has been domesticated in a series of objects for everyday use. It can, as in "Snäckan" (The Shell, 2014) (image p. 10) appear as an appropriately shimmering shell, filled with candy on someone's coffee table. Or you can put a tea candle in a black "Snippa" (Vagina, 2004) (image p. 12) instead of in the usual snowball. In the rococo-inspired "Sconce" (image p. 14), it appears as a seducing fixture where the light-source and the little furry edge give clear clues to penetration.

Jungnelius works with stereotypes and she uses them as a tool to make the spectator aware of ingrained preconceptions and habitual patterns. She wants to puncture reigning conventions of thought. The female genitals become a natural part in a classic dialectical power struggle where the dick/penis/pole is the recurring sparring partner. While society is crammed with phallic symbols, the female forms have been hidden. The power of the cunt has been seen as something close to enigmatic and unconquerable. The myths tell us that it harbours a dangerous, uncontrollable power that it is safest to enclose, stash away or at times burn at the stake. Stories of women that have lured lovers towards them, to then castrate them with their toothed vagina have circulated throughout the world in literature, legends and films. Sigmund Freud could babble incessantly about male castration anxiety, but he never reflected over whether there was a female equivalent. All sexual problems of women were explained as frigidity. The impenetrable clam.

The cunt has, in the art of Jungnelius, risen with pride and power. It does not apologize. But exactly as in reality it appears in different shapes and forms. While the monumental "Snippa" is an anatomically correct self reflecting glass sculpture, the installation "Akta annars kommer jag och tar dig (Watch out! Or I'll have you!, 2008) (image p. 43) is a large monster cunt hanging from the roof. The glass objects that form the mobile hover menacingly over the spectator who has to accept the spatial domination of the work. Chains and hooks mesh with the sex and create a fetishist relationship between body and object. The cunt no longer lives in the shadow, but rather takes control of it. The form of the monstrous organ refers to the films where the terrifying beasts have vagina-like features.

Jungnelius investigates the relationships within the trinity of sex, power and identity. Her work is part of a long and proud tradition of feminist artists that have also sought to give the vagina its appropriate gravitas in time and space. Some early historical examples are the US artist Georgia O'Keefe (1887-1986) and her intimate

close-ups of flowers, which have clear sexual allusions. The surrealists in general had a very traditional and chauvinist approach to female sexuality, but Meret Oppenheim (1913-1985) was one of the exceptions. In the sculpture "My Nursemaid" (1936) she laced together a pair of white high-heeled shoes, and served them with decorations attached to the heels, like a chicken on a silver platter. The mix of objects for everyday use and sexual references reappears in Oppenheim's "Object" (1936) where she has dressed a cup, saucer and spoon with fur. Yet it was primarily the feminist artists of the 1960s and 70s, their diligent investigation of the body and their conviction that the private is political, what gave the cunt a new and central place in politically charged art. In Niki de Saint Phalle's (1930-2002) "She - A Cathedral" (1996), visitors were led to walk straight in to an enormous woman. They now had to return obediently to the same hole through which they were once delivered. One of the central works from this time is Judy Chicago's (b. 1939) "The Dinner Party" (1974-79). The massive installation consists of a large triangular table that is prepared for a formal banquet. The table is set for 39 important historic women. Each plate is designed individually and has vaginal references, like vulvas or butterflies. The names of other 999 women are written on the floor.

Jungnelius, however, also gives a thought to the dick and its role in art history. The phallus has its own place in her artistic practice and the traditional relationship between the hole and the pole is renegotiated. She gives the dick a new placing and position. Sometimes it is worn out and needs help. In the installation "A Study of the Relationship Between the Hole and the Pole" (2011) (image p. 16, 18-19, 51) the meaty phallus is supported by a crutch-like structure. It is too big for its own good and cannot manage to keep afoot. In another part of the room stands an equally meaty well in front of a temple-like sculpture. It seems almost as though the pole is turning away from the hole. As though it dares not or has no energy to do anything else. Or maybe he has just had enough and wants to try something new?

The exhausted penis also challenges the traditional portrayal of the phallus as a tireless weapon, baton, pole or proudly erect monument. The work "In Memory Of" (2010) (image p. 51) alludes to the classical obelisk. Historically the obelisk refers to the roman war-like ideals. As the dick in "A Study of the Relationship Between the Hole and the Pole", this one wants too much. It has not been able to adjust itself to the height of the ceiling and shoots straight through it. Obelisks are traditionally to be cut in stone to resist the wear and tear of weather and wind, as well as other events. The hard materials have, in Jungnelius' version, been replaced by plastic, wood and sequins. She has nonchalantly tied a silver ribbon around the obelisk. A shift in content follows the shift in material and the self-evident is fragmented. The traditional symbols for universal male strength have been invaded, causing a symbolic implosion.

One is not born a woman, as the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) pointed out already in the 1940s, one becomes one. It is nurture, not nature that

lays the ground for how we look and act. The physiology and genitals of women are surrounded by taboos, while men are raised to be proud over their masculinity. Like de Beauvoir, Jungnelius is convinced that the room for manoeuvre of gender is shaped by the unique expectations and ideals of time and place. In our time shopping has become an act that produces and maintains identity and Jungnelius is interested in the connection between gender and commercialism. For her, the surface is a reflection of the content. The surface is not superficial, but a significant part of the underlying self. One theme that she has repeatedly dealt with is make-up. She sees make-up as an important tool to show who one chooses to be. As in an upside-down archaeology, one brushes oneself into being. And as in the case of the cunt she wants to give make-up the recognition it deserves but has not previously received. The ur-mother of her make-up series is the work "Vad fin du är i håret" (How Nice Your Hair Looks, 2004) where she investigated the role of attributes and materials for creating identity and how the human being defines herself through objects and surfaces. Glass objects in the shape of vaginas, lipsticks, stiletto shoes and crystals are placed in succession on raised platforms. The staging is like a glimmering fake store whose streamlined, fat-free ideal is something unattainable, at the same time as it creates lust and desire. Jungnelius is also fascinated by how make-up can be used as a weapon and she describes her installation "In My Imagination" (2009) as a make-up army of lipstick and one of nail polish fighting each other on the battle field.

On a literal level Jungnelius can be described as a pure materialist. All material culture makes, according to her, a statement. With material, memory and power follow. Neutral materials do not exist. There is a natural and sliding scale between materiality and fetishism. "Fetish" originates in the Latin word *facticius* that means something artificial, an object created by humans. Material often has a prominent position in sexual fetishism. Maybe there are those who would like to lick a Birkenstock slipper, but most fetishists probably want to feel a cold taste of lacquer in their mounts. In Jungnelius' work several of the objects traditionally associated to sexual fetishes reoccur, like the colour black, stiletto shoes and chains. Fetishism is something prohibited and taboo in our society. But when Jungnelius takes the fetishes out from the dark holes where they are most often hidden and places chains on everyday objects like wine glasses, an important shift of values takes place. It is possible to say, again, that she takes the side of the victims. Just like when she, as with "Storstake" (the XL candlestick, 2006), (image p. 22), mass produces oversized candle sticks in the shape of erect penises, adorned by chains and dick rings, for minimal cake candles the taboo is turned into something folksy. When she produces a public work of art with references to sadomasochism as in "The Black Panther" (2010) the taboo is turned into public property. When something that was taboo becomes popular it has by definition ceased to be something dirty.

During the last years Jungnelius has resided in Småland, and she has over time begun to reflect on the place where she lives and works. In Småland there is a

tradition of working with the materials that nature gives: forest, wood and stone. Today's woodlands are divided into three categories: primary, ancient and planted. Whereas the primary forest is free from human involvement, planted forest is its antithesis. The woodlands of Småland surrounding Jungnelius are planted at the same time in prim rows. The uniform and static pines are in her mind the image of a resource. The forest has been transformed into a commercial room. In the project "Moder Jord" (Mother Earth, 2012) (image p. 24, 55), she looked at how the forest industry ravishes the ur-mother. Not even the forest is free from predation. At the same time as there is a right to roam (something implying that it should be nice to spend time in the forest) the forest industry leaves gigantic tire tracks and large deforested patches. As part of the project she used violence to make holes in nature. She blew craters and dressed a dead tree in a condom-like structure. Nature has to be protected from the desires of culture. In the project "Residence in Nature" (2014), Jungnelius and six other artists arrange an exhibition in the forest. This time a physical commitment from the audience is needed. One had to paddle down a creek to see art as it is represented in the true ur-mother. Lay down your weapons. You can no longer buy your freedom. The struggle ends here. Where everything begins.

Stina Högvist is art historian and curator at The National Gallery, Oslo.