

Untitled (Phantom Phallus)

I believe that sex is always political and language is largely aspirational. Sex is also aspirational, and language is political. They are imaginary, but they stem from the body which is very real. *Untitled (Phantom Phallus)* asks the question: How does the imaginary body come into play with sex and language? Where does this imaginary body exist? What is it?

As a queer, gender-nonconforming human, as well as a person of displaced origin, the act of marking the manufactured and the pre-determined mimics the sense of personal identity shaped by the Self. As a teenager, I began collecting and creating tattoos as an act of immigrant rebellion, marking myself as an outsider even further for the salient sake of claiming my own body. Yet, in experiencing the world, the queer body is one that engages the “queer art of failure” in the quest for joy, understanding, and love (Halberstam). Failure became the avenue that brought me to art making and pursuing a queer relationship to life.

In order to cope with phallocentrism, misogyny, capitalism, and culture shock, as well as navigating joy in the sexual realm--having come out later in life, having undergone sexual traumas, having been inundated by pornography--I wish to replace the displaced, and redefine sentiments of the dildo.

Dildo comes from the Latin noun *dilectio*, noun of action from *diligere* “to esteem highly, to love”, or English *diligence*, which evolved in meaning from “love” through “attentiveness” to “carefulness” to “steady effort.” This evolution of language resonates with a modern heteronormative approach to love, especially one tied to ideas of the masculine: tough love, ownership, subordination, un-head of household. “The dildo performance is ‘queer’ not because it is part of gay or lesbian sex but because it doesn’t respect the distinctions of a hetero/homo sexual dichotomy” (Halberstam, 123). The dildo ensures difference without essentializing gender.

The queer body places the imagined in the real world, testing boundaries historically denoted by narrow semiotic and linguistic hierarchies. It does so by becoming ontologically generative. Just because formal language does not exist to describe objects, performances, and rituals, does not mean that they refrain from developing. *Untitled (Phantom Phallus)* is this process in play.

The dildos I am using come from the company RodeoH. They are a woman and artist run company that creates with a single dream: “[...] to inspire you to live life on your own terms.”¹ I chose their They/Them dildo because of its simple phallic form,

¹ <https://rodeoh.com/pages/our-story>

which lends to the elevation of form and apparatus over what is biological and anatomical through its minimalist design.

I am inspired by bell hooks' oppositional gaze to collage language via tattooing and sex toy. The oppositional gaze looks at space and who takes up that space and who does not, recognizing a gap in representations of culture. The use of hybridization and assemblage--tactics of the oppositional gaze--attempts to minimize representational liminality by manipulating the semiotics of sex toy and tattoo. By using familiar, ordinary, sex(y) objects (the dildo) and mixing them with poetics and permanence, I shift the point of referentiality. The goal of the work is to disrupt notions of phallogocentrism, specifically phallogocentrism: this is the linguistic focus on a masculine point of view in assigning meaning to the world, especially with the use of spoken language: "Thus, language is an activity with practical, material consequences" (Marecek, Crawford, Popp, 197). Language inadvertently means engaging with culture, and the implementation of subverting language engages with an intercultural understanding of the Self. Language claims identity in relation to one another in this way.

My work attempts to remove the body from the "bodily" object in the hopes to create a visceral response for the viewer that questions form, while exhibiting an erotic power of sorts. This impetus is inspired by Audre Lorde:

"The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic" (Lorde, 278).

(Untitled) Phantom Phallus denounces the pornographic, which, as Lorde tells us, has been used for so long as a tool to oppress the erotic. Its form becomes the vehicle of language rather than the medium to fill an orifice; a process that frames the phallogocentric, but also one that creates an opening for ideas. The dildo in this context interrupts the linguistic and symbolic referentiality of the phallus, resulting in a sort of *genderfuck*. Genderfuck is the subversion of gender cues used to confuse onlookers' notions of gender stereotypes.

"[...] through a theory of genderfuck, which 'deconstructs' the psychoanalytic concept of difference without subscribing to any heterosexist or anatomical truths about the relations of sex to gender (you remember the binarisms, male=male, female=female, masculine=aggressive, feminine=passive, etc.) Instead, genderfuck structures meaning in a symbol-performance matrix that crosses through sex and gender and destabilizes the boundaries of our recognition of sex, gender, and sexual practice" (Reich, 113).

The “symbol-performance matrix” parallels the hybridization of tattoo and dildo, resulting in a closing-in of the gap between gender, language, symbol, and sex. Tattooing, as the method for sharing language, becomes a form of code-switching: “What if I’m curved?”² is a found statement/FAQ, aimed at the born-with-phallus who wish to create a perfect silicone copy of their penis. However, in this context, it is reminiscent of a straight/curve dichotomy, the language becomes: what if I’m not straight? Compositionally, it also comes into direct conversation with the form and shape.

Tattooing has always been a hobby and a fun activity as opposed to a craft; I developed some knowledge of the trade so that I could tattoo myself and my friends. Most of what I know, I learned from being tattooed by professionals. Tattooing is a craft typically passed down from one tattooer to another, and it is not based on biological genealogy. It is a craft situated in space, one that is reliant on people who choose to be there. It is informed by the people in the room. Involvement in these communities often parallels the amount of ink in their bodies: an obvious, personalized, and permanent indicator.

Untitled (Phantom Phallus) is the individualized and reinvented material object existing as archival specimen of play within the boundaries of real and imagined. It takes the idea of gender and gives it a form that questions the ownership of the phallus through the medium of tattooing. The language of the series aspires to question the politicized sex: be it sex toy, sex act, or sex/gender. The joy brought on by humor joins these components together, further removing the “bodily” from the body and bringing it back to where imagination originates. Destabilizing meaning and material, shifting the referentiality of the phallus, and filling in the representational gap are key components in exercising intercultural understanding, an integral aspect of this piece. *Untitled (Phantom Phallus)* takes on a playful and empathetic perspective that subverts ideas of the assumable.

² <https://cloneawilly.com/pages/how-it-works>

Works Cited

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