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**ANDREA BÜTTNER, CURTAIN, 2013, woodcut, 55 1/2 x 78 3/4” / VORHANG, Holzschnitt, 140 x 200 cm.**

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Andrea Büttner, Curtain, 2013, woodcut, 55 1/8 x 78 3/4” / Vorhang, Holzschnitt, 140 x 200 cm.

(All images courtesy of the artist, Hollybush Gardens, London, and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles © Andrea Büttner / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015 / Photo: Fredrik Nisen)
“What does it mean to be little?,” asks Andrea Büttner, directing her question to a pair of nuns in her video LITTLE SISTERS: LUNAPARK OSTIA (2012). Commissioned by Documenta 13, the forty-two-minute piece captures Büttner’s conversations with two members of the Little Sisterhood of Jesus who run a game booth at an amusement park near Rome. They discuss their views on beauty, spirituality, and spectacle, articulating a far-ranging and expansive theorization of littleness, which they describe as a relational condition that emphasizes humility in the face of the other, in particular, a humbleness before God. Little-ness is, in other words, a kind of modesty, not only in its embrace of simplicity but also as an affective orientation of harmony and equanimity.

Yet while modesty has gendered connotations, suggesting a womanly sense of decency and proper female comportment, littleness proposes a radical leveling of the self, a recognition of equivalent valuation. In Büttner’s work, this littleness, I think, also manifests itself as a queer quality, not necessarily in the literal sense of expressing same-sex desire but as a model of interacting in which one exists, as one sister puts it in the video interview, “alongside the other … alongside another person on equal terms.” With this evocative formulation of proximity and balance, the nun articulates a theorization similar to Eve Sedgwick’s understanding of the “beside,” which moves away from binary argumentation (in the vein of this versus that) in favor of embracing how “a number of elements may lie alongside each other.”1) For Sedgwick, “beside comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attacking, aggressing, warping, and other relations.”

In Sedgwick’s account, “beside” is a distinctly queer, rather than religious, methodology, but Büttner’s work brings the two together by probing the queer implications of Catholicism. Nuns and their single-gender havens figure prominently in queer histories and fantasies, and religious communities, especially in their secluded formations that reject the heterosexual family as a core organizing unit, might arguably be viewed as culturally, if not sexually, queer.2) The convents and sisterhoods that intrigue Büttner are sanctuaries for, and embodiments

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Andrea Büttner’s work brings together the queer implications of Catholicism and religious communities, especially those that reject the heterosexual family as a core organizing unit. Nuns and their single-gender havens figure prominently in queer histories and fantasies, and religious communities, such as convents and sisterhoods, might arguably be viewed as culturally, if not sexually, queer. Büttner’s work, as seen in her video LITTLE SISTERS: LUNAPARK OSTIA (2012), explores the concept of littleness, which Büttner describes as a relational condition that emphasizes humility in the face of the other, particularly a humbleness before God. In Büttner’s work, littleness manifests itself as a queer quality, not necessarily in the literal sense of expressing same-sex desire but as a model of interacting in which one exists, as one sister puts it in the video interview, “alongside the other … alongside another person on equal terms.”

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Throughout her practice, the artist probes "tricky" thresholds not often explicitly explored in contemporary art—the blurry line between amateur making and fine art production, for instance, or the unexpected relationship between marginal religious experiences and philosophies of modernist contemplation. Her interest in inverting or dissolving boundaries—that is, queering them—is felt most palpably when she drags the abject into the art space, as when she displayed her work against a messy backdrop of brown paint (whose brushstrokes did not quite reach the top of the walls because she painted only as far as she could reach) to create a "shit space" that besmirches the pristine expectations of the white cube.

In her photograph ATM (2011), the keypad of a cash machine is smeared with what looks like fecal matter—a reference perhaps, as Lars Bang Larsen has noted, to Freud's analysis of dreams, where excrement symbolizes money. The analogy also appeared in Büttner's 2011 exhibition "Our Colours Are the Quasi-Spiritual Significance. For Marx, of course, the "leveling" wreaked by capitalism is anything but positive, and the only "equivalent valuation" is in the exchange of commodities for money—the "universal equivalent." Büttner's art, on the other hand, often seeks to disrupt the coherence of the commodity. Indeed, as she moves across and between many media—including paintings on glass, ceramics, fabric "paintings" (stretched pieces of colored material from work uniforms), installations composed of found objects, videos, appropriated images, photographs, moss, instruction-based events, sound pieces in which she reads the writings of other artists (including Dieter Roth and Sister Corita Kent), and woodcuts—not all of her work is easily understood within the logic of the concrete thing or discrete art object. Her exhibitions sometimes take the shape not of the presentation of individual works but as whole-gallery gestures, often incorporating pieces made by family and friends.

The commodity itself, Karl Marx wrote, "is a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties." This much-quoted English translation dates from 1957 and was rephrased, in later editions, as "a very strange thing"; the original German reads "ein sehr vertracktes Ding"—the commodity as baffling, messy, complicated, confounding, tricky. The original German adjective has no straightforward associations with sexuality, but the early English wording (or mistranslation) might hit on something by conjoining queerness and religion in the charged nature of the capitalist commodity object as it becomes fetishized and freighted with...
Throughout her practice, the artist probes “tricky” thresholds not often explicitly explored in contemporary art—the blurry line between amateur making and fine art production, for instance, or the unexpected relationship between marginal religious experiences and philosophies of modernist contemplation. Her interest in inverting or dissolving boundaries—that is, queering them—is felt most palpably when she drags the abject into the art space, as when she displayed her work against a messy backdrop of brown paint (whose brushstrokes did not quite reach the top of the walls because she painted only as far as she could reach) to create a “shit space” that be- smirches the pristine expectations of the white cube. In her photograph ATM (2011), the keypad of a cash machine is smeared with what looks like fecal matter—a reference perhaps, as Lars Bang Larsen has noted, to Freud’s analysis of dreams, where excrement symbolizes money. The analogy also appeared in Büttner’s 2011 exhibition “Our Colours Are the Quasi-Spiritual Significance.” For Marx, of course, the “leveling” wreaked by capitalism is anything but positive, and the only “equivalent valuation” is in the exchange of commodities for money—the “universal equivalent.” Büttner’s art, on the other hand, often seeks to disrupt the coherence of the commodity. Indeed, as she moves across and between many media—including paintings on glass, ceramics, fabric “paintings” (stretched pieces of colored material from work uniforms), installations composed of found objects, videos, appropriated images, photographs, moss, instruction-based events, sound pieces in which she reads the writings of other artists (including Dieter Roth and Sister Corita Kent), and woodcuts—not all of her work is easily understood within the logic of the concrete thing or discrete art object. Her exhibitions sometimes take the shape not of the presentation of individual works but as whole-gallery gestures, often incorporating pieces made by family and friends.

ANDREA BÜTTNER, ANCESTOR DUMPLINGS, 2009, unfired clay, water, plastic, dimensions variable, detail / AHNENKNÖDEL, ungebrannter Ton, Wasser, Kunststoff, Masse variabel, Detail. (PHOTO: DAWN BLACKMAN)
Colours of the Market Place,” in which a floor-bound clay sculpture of lumpy balls (AHNENKNÖDEL [Ancestor Dumpling], 2009–11), looking like some exotic animal’s droppings, was placed alongside a video of hands ringing up purchases at a checkout counter (MINERVA, 2011).6)

As many writers have noted, Büttner is a connoisseur of the scatological, and of the bodily shame that such matter out of place can elicit; she even wrote a PhD dissertation on shame in art, including its queer aspects.7) But a queer sense of shame lets Büttner embrace the melancholic, the abject, and the outmoded together with—or beside—the ecstatic. In Büttner’s large woodcut print DANCING NUNS (2007), seven figures frolic in a field of tall grass. As the nuns fling their arms in the air and bend their bodies, the medium of the woodcut itself, with its crude and emphatic lines, contributes to the print’s sense of corporeal vitality and liveliness. As Daniel Pies comments in an interview with the artist, in such work, “the convent turns into something like a utopian community.”8) While the description is romantic, it recalls a counter-history of the church, of nuns who took on progressive causes as they attempted to extend the concept of littleness beyond the walls of the convent and into the world. Take Sister Corita Kent, for example, whose riotously colorful prints of the 1960s and ’70s employed advertising lingo to express both rapturous faith and fervent protest—for which she got in trouble with the church patriarchy.9)

More recently, shame has served as a catalyst for activism, as it has in queer politics; as Sedgwick wrote, “If queer is a politically potent term, which it is, that’s because, far from being capable of being detached from the childhood scene of shame, it cleaves to that scene as a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy.”10) Over the last decade, shame has become central to queer politics as a way to contest the corporatization of mainstream gay pride and to put pressure on the white male face of academic gay studies; “queer shame” is now a touchstone for critical queer theory and a rallying cry for progressive sexual cultures.11)

Littleness, queerness, religion, shame: These are some of the sites in which Büttner locates herself, positions alternative to the mainstream art world. Another term for her work, and for her formal strategies, might be “backward,” to draw on Heather Love’s notion of queer temporal outsiders who “embrace backwardness in many forms; in celebrations of perversion, in defiant refusals to grow up, in explorations of haunting and memory, and in stubborn attachments to lost objects.”12) But if Büttner’s work looks backward, in Love’s queer sense, it is far from a regression or a retreat: It is a powerful step forward.
2) On the queerness of Christianity in general and of Catholicism more specifically, see Carolyn Dinshaw, Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).
4) Karl Marx, Das Kapital: Kritik der Politischen Oekonomie (Hamburg: Verlag von Otto Meissner, 1872), 47.
6) The exhibition title is borrowed from a line in a 1964 print by Sister Corita Kent.
9) One of Kent’s most infamous prints hails Mother Mary as “the juiciest tomato of them all,” quoting the writer Samuel Eisenstein; it is a frankly sensual, and even somewhat queer, assertion. The Archbishop of Los Angeles decried Kent’s work as “weird and sinister,” and Kent left the order in 1968. See Susan Sackerman, Corita Kent and the Language of Pop (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).