



ANDREA BÜTTNER, CURTAIN, 2013, woodcut, 55 1/8 x 78 1/4" / VORHANG, Holzschnitt, 140 x 200 cm.
(ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, HOLLYBUSH GARDENS, LONDON,
AND DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY, LOS ANGELES © ANDREA BÜTTNER /
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Bryan-Wilson, Julia, "Andrea Büttner's Little Queer Things," *Parkett 97*, Collaboration, 2015, pp. 18-31



JULIA BRYAN-WILSON

"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. Littleness 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

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Andrea Büttner's *Little, Queer Things*

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, *LITTLE SISTERS: LUNAPARK OSTIA*, 2012, HD video, 42 min. / *KLEINE SCHWESTERN: LUNAPARK OSTIA*, HD-Video.

Below / unten: ANDREA BÜTTNER, LITTLE SISTERS: LUNAPARK OSTIA, 2012, production photograph / *KLEINE SCHWESTERN: LUNAPARK OSTIA*, Produktions-Photographie.



Andrea Büttner



ANDREA BÜTTNER, *ATM*, 2011, digital pigment print, 15 ³/₄ x 23 ³/₈" / Digitaler Pigmentdruck, 40 x 60 cm.

of, the desiring, identifying, paralleling, and warping that is common to both Sedgwick's "beside" and the nun's "littleness." In one of her best-known pieces, *LITTLE WORKS* (2009), Büttner practiced an aloneness, beside, or dehierarchization of artist and subject when she handed her video camera to an order of Carmelite nuns living in London and asked them to document their craft projects, such as lavender sachets and sugar-stiffened baskets. The resulting eleven-minute video shows intimate encounters between the nuns, unmediated by the artist's presence, as they display their drawings, crochet, and candles made from recycled bits of wax.

Büttner's video briefly chronicles the sisters as they prepare for a feast day display of their "little works"—littleness refers not to smallness of size but to the fact that such objects are created in the nun's spare time, as an auxiliary activity—and implicitly asks questions about how such unlike things as the nuns' sachets and her own artwork exist within just barely intersecting spaces, tracing connections between the cloistered world of the hobbyist maker and

the commercial art market of high-value exchange. Although there is some overlap in their shared discourses of a creative "gift," the sisters' pointed acceptance of their unassuming littleness counters the rhetoric of self-aggrandizing artistic "greatness"—a term that still has traction in the contemporary art world, perpetually awash in pronouncements about great works and great artists (not to mention greatness of scale and auction-house results).

The commodity itself, Karl Marx wrote, "is a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."³ 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.⁴ 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

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a 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.

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.⁵ The analogy also appeared in Büttner’s 2011 exhibition “Our Colours Are the

ANDREA BÜTTNER, *ANCESTOR DUMPLINGS*, 2009, unfired clay, water, plastic, dimensions variable, detail /
AHNENKNÖDEL, ungebrannter Ton, Wasser, Kunststoff, Masse variabel, Detail. (PHOTO: DAWN BLACKMAN)



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ANDREA BÜTTNER, *MINERVA*, 2011,
video loop, 5 min, 39 sec. / Videoloop.



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.

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- 1) Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.
- 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).
- 3) Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1954), 78.
- 4) Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik der Politischen Oekonomie* (Hamburg: Verlag von Otto Meissner, 1872), 47.
- 5) Lars Bang Larsen, "Theodicies: Andre Büttner's Sense of Letting Go," in Susanne Gaensheimer and Anthony Spira, eds., *Andrea Büttner* (London: König Books, 2013), 130.
- 6) The exhibition title is borrowed from a line in a 1964 print by Sister Corita Kent.
- 7) Andrea Büttner, *Perspectives on Shame and Art: Warhol, Sedgwick, Freud and Roth*, unpublished PhD dissertation, Royal College of Art, London, 2008.
- 8) Conversation between Andrea Büttner and Daniel Pies, in Anja Casser, ed., *I Believe Every Word You Say* (Berlin: Argobooks, 2009), 41.
- 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 Dackerman, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
- 10) Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, no. 1, vol. 1 (November 1993): 4.
- 11) See Judith Halberstam, "Shame and White Gay Masculinity," *Social Text* 84–85, vol. 23, nos. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2005): 219–33; and Sally R. Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (London: Ashgate, 2007).
- 12) Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 7.



ANDREA BÜTTNER, STEREO-SCOPIC SLIDE SHOW FROM THE WHITEHOUSE COLLECTION (MOSES AND FIELD TRIPS), 2014, detail, stereoscopic slides by Harold and Patricia Whitehouse transferred to digital / STEREOSKOPISCHE DIASHOW AUS DER WHITEHOUSE-SAMMLUNG (MOOSE UND EXKURSIONEN), Detail, digitalisierte stereoskopische Dias.

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