

## **"Jonny Star on the Slogans of Art, Feminism and Funny Penises"**

Jonny Star in conversation with art critic and artist Julia Bardolim, Berlin November 2016

**Bardolim: Do you consider yourself a feminist artist?**

Star: I am perceived as such!

**Bardolim: Let us start briefly with the slogans. The feminist "slogan" is the vagina. The word appears in the title of a famous play "The Vagina Monologue" by Eve Elsner, with a drawn vagina, the Polish women have gone to protest, etc. Your works are generally displaying penises. Don't you personally see a dissonance there?**

Star: My art can be interpreted as autobiographical. I'm dealing with entirely normal everyday topics. I started dealing with the topic of the penis out of empowerment situations because I do not experience it in my everyday life. I don't see male nudity in public, the penis is still tabooed. We can see naked women wherever we go, but even in the arts male genitals are off-limits, which I find very shocking. The photographs I've been using lately, have not been taken for me. These photos display men posing for men, but this nudity appears very honest and uncontrived to me so that I experience a lot of joy looking at them. We can find photos that have been taken for women by men and with which men want to tell me, a heterosexual woman, what should turn me on or what should supposedly turn me on. Still, this is not what I consider as hot. However, I find the photographs I am working with, amusing and sexy. And human. They are taken from gay porn from the 70s and 80s. They are neither smooth nor perfectly shaved, they don't look so cool. When I am embroidering them with Swarovski pearls, it is a pure celebration. A celebration of these bodies. Only later I realized what problems this act causes. No matter if man, woman, gay, lesbian, a new problem arises: the problem of authorship. It is about me personally: who am I using those pictures? People do not understand who this is for. For everyone. I am embroidering the cloth in a home-made-style, because this simply belongs to our world.

**Bardolim: So it is a matter of your enjoyment: as a viewer initially and as an artist afterwards?**

Star: I am a sculptress. The photograph itself does not necessarily interest me. I am interested in the meaning and stories I load them with.

**Bardolim: What are those stories?**

Star: They are movements, parts of the body, which I reinterpret in a new way. That can be the posture of a figure that I transform into another movement and thereby I am telling another story than the initial photograph did.

**Bardolim: Then we could look back on antiquity.**

Star: It has the taste of something baroque. But for me it is always a matter of art in our day-to-day life.

**Bardolim: Let us come back to my first question. Is perhaps the vagina not that amusing? That it does not have the same situative humor: posture, manner?**

Star: I am thinking of doing a project, which might have something to do with the vagina, but the first step for me was working with the penis. Since I am a feminist, it is an enormous liberation to do that.

**Bardolim: It seems as if you are playing on a foreign field. For a different team. Your artist name, your appearance, this series of works; everything gives the viewer an idea of your similarities to Jeanne d'Arc. Could it be that you are - perhaps intuitively- trying to conquer a position in the men's world by using all those methods?**

Star: It is a big field. I've been working on the topic for a very long time: "my gender is artist". I suffer from the fact that I am living in a patriarchal world. I think, art has an unbelievable power. I'd rather thematise our society and for that we need a lot of new images. I want to create a new field, where all those categories disintegrate. All those questions: Is this a man or a woman, a lesbian or straight person – its all in there. This calls the whole system we live in into question. The question is: What kind of relationship do we have to this work?

**Bardolim: And how? What kind of reflections have you experienced so far? What kind of relationship do we have to your work?**

Star: It differs. Most of the women found it completely awful at the beginning. They did not fancy seeing penises. But then they started acquiring a taste for it, considering it as normal. Straight men took offense to it at first. But then they also began to understand the humor behind it. These guys in the photographs are so amazing. And we can find so many stories behind them. The gay men told me: "yes, yes, that is my world, these images belong to me, but why are they suddenly public here?" But that also changes.

**Bardolim: Was it first a big problem for you to show your works?**

Star: It surely was! When I was showing my work at the Osthaus Museum in Hagen for the first time, there was the question: "Are these images even allowed to be displayed?" Nowadays, in 2015: „Can this be displayed“? Yes, it can be displayed, but only with a sign which says: "Attention". "Attention!" was written everywhere. Tits and cunts can be hung up, but a penis - no. And then you can tell if that is pornographic or not. When I am sculpting it is easier, I am in a different, rather mystical world. As a sculptor, I've been sculpting for more than 20 years, and I have not had those problems: in my sculptures, my beings have both female and male proportions at the same time. Or the body becomes one with the clothes and so on. Both are always there. It is simply that we are both. In various states of being. But that is a problem for very many people. Germany still is a very conservative country.

**Bardolim: I do agree there are a lot of images that aren't shown to children. But what do you do with grown-up people from other cultures, grown-up women who do not want to see those images?**

Star: But they live here, don't they? Why would I decide for them? They should decide themselves what they can see or, what they want to see. If they feel uncomfortable at the museum, they will leave. It is as simple as that.

**Bardolim: What do you have to say about the popularisation of art? Should our audience be educated by art?**

Star: Who should educate anyone? I don't want to do that. I just want art works to be taken seriously. I expect the art world to deal with the topic of "men and women". And sex belongs to our lives, to our everyday-life. I want to do art on this topic, and not educate anyone. Suffice to say that I am counting. I have been counting for 30 years now: how many men are represented in this exhibition, how many women elsewhere. The counting has become ingrained since I am a feminist. And every group exhibition that does not aim for creating a balance, passes up the opportunity to change our society. This is how I see it and on this level I do want to educate people. On this level I want to raise awareness.

**Bardolim: In doing so, which role does your artist name play?**

Star: I simply play with it. It was and still is an experiment: Have doors opened for me that were previously closed before and is that really true or only imaginary? I knew the artist name would change me and my art and now Jonny Star belongs to me and my work.

**Bardolim: Does your name make you stronger?**

Star: Yes, the outside is different. People often think I am a man. When people look at my work, they imagine me to be a gay man. There are very strong projections upon me. I think that's great. And the artist name also liberates me. I am like a court jester, some I serve, some I don't, but in any case, I definitely create irritation. And the idea people have of me is so strong, even when I indicate my actual sex in applications, people still address me as a man.

**Bardolim: That sounds like a long-term performance. Have you thought about documenting that to present this part of your life as an artistic project?**

Star: I have not thought about that yet, but who knows.

Translated from the German by Anne Diestelkamp

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