GALERIE FONS WELTERS

Shadow Tonics
Magali Reus

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Disobedient Agents: Christina Lehnert in conversation with Magali Reus

Throughout the recent holiday period – as 2021 gave way to the promise of a new year – Christina Lehnert, curator at Portikus Frankfurt, corresponded with the London-based artist Magali Reus about her recent series of work, *Knaves*. Started when Reus' solo exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, was postponed in 2020, the *Knaves* series is a photographic portrait of mushrooms developed during the first wave of lockdowns in Holland and continued throughout subsequent lockdowns in Britain.

The series, which incorporates photography and sculptural elements in equal measure for the first time in Reus' work, also found a form as an artist book that appropriates a telephone directory. *Park Cities: Knaves* was published by König and friends of the Museum Kurhaus & Koekkoek-Haus Kleve e.V. in December 2021. The series provokes intriguing questions as to the agency of Reus' sculptures and the role of photography more generally in her oeuvre, as well as the mysticism and complexity of mushrooms and their underground mycelial webs.

Christina Lehnert: Magali, could you explain how the mushroom as a motive and motif developed into this series of works? I understand it came to you almost by chance.

Magali Reus: The *Knaves* series sprung out of the first lockdown in 2020. I was in Holland staying with my mother for a while. One day, following an afternoon walk, she excitedly reported that the local woodland soil was blooming with the fly agaric mushroom – that cartoonish, archetypal mushroom with its red cap and white spots. My mother convinced me to visit; together we admired this incredible spectacle.

The sight compelled me to revisit and document these blooms as it was dusking. I brought along a light pink t-shirt I'd purchased in a Dallas thrift store during a site visit to the Nasher Sculpture Center in 2019 – at that time I was meant to have an exhibition at the Nasher, postponed due to the pandemic – featuring graphics for a Texan corn harvest celebration. I took an extensive number of photographs of the fly agarics, utilizing the t-shirt as a backdrop while my mother illuminated the speckled surfaces with her iPhone torch.

Later, back in London, as winter approached, we found ourselves in yet another lockdown. I began reviewing the photographs I had taken earlier in the year and decided to develop a series of works based on them. Late autumn, when things decompose and become dank and fecund, is the perfect time for mushrooms, but given that we were in lockdown I could't get outside to go hunting. Instead, homebound, I purchased exotic fungi online alongside a plethora of vintage t-shirts.

Delivered directly to my doorstep, I used the fungi to set up small scenes inside plant pots around my house, documenting the species carefully while cropping out the immediate domestic surrounds. When weather permitted, I took the fungi outside into the garden, expanding its habitat slightly, allowing natural light to pour into the frame.

CL: Aside from being edible, mushrooms have a deep significance across cultures. They appear in fairytales (fly agaric is *the* fairytale mushroom), have medicinal and ritual uses and, of course, 'shrooms' are psychoactive. They expand the mind and, as increasing research shows, appear to treat depression. They are also the object of a popular outdoor activity – mushroom hunting. There are thousands of species of fungi in many forms with many purposes. What were you thinking about this breadth of significance?

MR: As an object of culture, fungi are extraordinarily complex. Eaten, mushrooms can be nourishing but also potentially deeply poisonous. While the hallucinogenic qualities of particular species are considered poisonous by some, to others they are not – as you say, compelling research shows that psilocybin mushrooms function as an antidepressant.

Mushrooms are the sex organs of the fungi, an index of the vast mycelium network of an organism that remains invisible beneath the ground. Skin surface tension of the mushroom catapults spores into the air; otherwise the wind carries them aloft. There are thousands of species of mushrooms, some of which have over twenty thousand sexes. That is extraordinary! A human relationship to fungi is in many ways related to the idea of *consumption*, thus a subjectification of sorts.

With the *Knaves* series I was trying to bypass this idea of the mushroom consumed and through photographic portraiture allow the fungi to become a protagonist: a stealthy, confident agent. I wanted these images to convey a sense of the fungi's secrecy too – of them having a hidden life otherwise ignored. Scrutinizing them as individuals or small groups through a macro lens I began to recognise their subtleties and grew aware of an inherent animacy. They became beautifully inventive, intelligent and disobedient (hence the title: a 'knave' is an archaic term for a disobedient man).

CL: Your recent artist book *Park Cities: Knaves* features the portraits of mushrooms on the pages of a telephone book. What appealed to you about the form of the telephone directory?

MR: At the start of the pandemic, just two weeks before the work was to be collected for shipment to the Nasher Center, I learnt that the show had to be postponed. Obviously I felt frustrated: I wouldn't be able to show all the new work in its intended physical space.

In this strange moment of isolation and frustration I was drawn to this printed object that is – or at least was – physically connected, a communications service manual dispersing thousands of things to many more individuals. The telephone directory service lays bare a mycelium-like web of interconnectivity in a neutral aesthetic – a sort of transparency – that facilitates communication. Ironically, I purchased it on eBay.

I thought of it as hijacking another Dallas space, one existing in printed form. I treated it as if it were a physical space in which I could install the work as I saw fit, manipulating it to service the photographs while retaining its basic structure, content and characteristics. Within this neatly structured space, the images are sequenced without apparent logic – at random, disobedient – as mushrooms appear and reproduce in the natural world.

CL: In the monograph that accompanied your exhibition *Magali Reus: Mustard* at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam in 2016 the critic Kirsty Bell quotes discussing the way you remake objects. Remaking objects, you say, 'is a way of understanding and misinterpretation… the objects tumble out of its category'. In the *Knaves* series you talk about 'portraiture' of the mushrooms, almost as if to give them a presence in their own right but then again, altered, arranged and staged. T-shirts provide a backdrop of the mushrooms. I was wondering whether there is an intentional misinterpretation here in the way of anthropomorphization?

MR: I wouldn't do the mushrooms' complexity any justice by anthropomorphizing them. I'm also not entirely sure it would be possible to do so without them appearing far too comical or cartoonish. Part of what intrigues me about fungi is its mysterious withholding complexity and allure as (photographic) subjects. I wouldn't want to rid them of that.

The introduction of the t-shirt backdrop extends the *landscape* it finds itself in – an extension into a destabilized space. Aside from this, the t-shirts connect the photographic scenes directly to our own private bodies and to the scale (torso sized) of the framing structure the photographs are mounted on.

In *Knaves* the stage is set for the mushrooms to be glamorized by an exuberant combination of photographic effects, settings and display structures. Sex and gender swirl around. As sex organs they are sometimes showy and seductive but this sex and gender is totally alien to our human conceptions. Despite how I frame and characterize them, the mushrooms remain opaque, disobedient, agential, yet seductive. I'm interested in this surface tension.

CL: I also think that the seductiveness of the mushrooms stems from a mysteriousness, although they appear in such conspicuous forms on the surface. This is something that frequently occurs in nature, but the mushroom, of course, as you have said, is only one 'node' of a network they're linked to. In *Knaves* you make use of macro-photography. More generally, what role does this micro-macro relation play across your oeuvre? I'm thinking specifically of your sculpture that includes profane elements altered in scale as a means of estrangement? I'm also interested in the role of photography in your work.

MR: Photography enables an instant, facile transformation of a subject – even simply by capturing something in an awkward flattering light or viewing the subject from an awry angle. We, of course, know that this is part of its trickery, yet it pulls us in. Beguiles us. The macro lens is a prosthesis that extends the physical limitations of the human eye. A sense of magic is implicit in its extension.

It was both fascinating and addictive working at this microscopic level, scrutinizing the fungi so intimately. It made me feel that the subtleties I was discovering, the shapes and angles they were posing, revealed them as sometimes shy, other times reactionary, or even intelligent agents, their blemished skins suggestive of a mysterious past life.

Curiously, no one has ever asked me about photographs that feature in my earlier sculptural works. They're often overlooked. Perhaps a reason for this is that they've always been incorporated in a very sparse manner: small in scale, often embedded or sunken into skins and surfaces of sculptures. Their inconspicuousness is probably to do with my initial reservations towards working with photography. Photography as I have used it in the earlier sculptures has never been to advance narrative as such, but it has always been part of the same 'conversation' as the sculpture they're anchored to, their 'function' to expand the sculpture's conversation, conceptually *and* formally.

A made object (whether by hand or machine) organically accrues wear and meaning through a history of use. The relatively short duration of the photographic instant, an instant bound to the real and the past, is poised against the duration implicit in this history of use. The physical scale of the images within the earlier works felt intimate, private, like family album photographs, or an image inside a purse or wallet. The images could be interpreted as having either sentimental or tokenistic value – their meaning being suggestively intrinsic to the object 'carrying' it.

Previously I worked with video to both 'activate' the physical space around the sculptures and to broaden out context in an exhibition. This was at a time when my sculptural work was a lot more formal and sometimes quite withdrawn. I've since developed the sculptures to be more outwardly and independently communicative, sometimes even verging on the flirtatious!

CL: Your sculptures have in the past repeatedly been described as not entirely tangible. They elude interpretation even if they initially seem very functional, almost as if one could operate them. Where is the blind spot for you that allows this lingering between object and object of use?

MR: I think it's located in, and stems from, the manner in which the object or sculpture is able to assert itself towards the viewer. When constructing a work I want to instill it with a sense of autonomy and agency which isn't singularly born out of abstraction. Denying its function is an important part of this process because ultimately when things have a purpose or a function they are often *in service*.

The objects or agents that I construct are selfishly stubborn; they have their own internal logic – some of which may, however, feel familiar. This sense of familiarity is important. Who is to say that things, beings or agents aren't somewhat similar to ourselves, and have a certain amount of overlapping (of what's considered human only) character traits or even sentience? Excluding these other agents, regarding them as passive or unintelligent, is an anthropocentric way of encountering the world. I'd like for the sculpture to exist on an equal plane and to be *captivating* but not *held captive* by our eyes or hands.

This is why I feel it's often helpful working with the physical processes of material transformation. It allows for relinquishing a certain amount of control to exterior forces when I'm manipulating or pushing against the capacity of a material or even disobeying the intended structure or chronology of fabrication processes.

CL: What does this working against – or a-chronology – look like? Is chance something that is accounted for within the production process?

MR: It differs between works but in the *Clay* series, for instance, an additive applied to produce the visuals on the panels' surfaces caused an unexpected chemical reaction. This occurred before it was sent off to bake in the coating oven. Instantly, the powder coater's response was one of annoyance – clearly this wouldn't have been a desirable outcome for his usual clients seeking a blemish-free, hermetically-sealed surface.

He would have disregarded it as faulty – be stripped and redone – had I not been there in person, wildly excited about this unexpected result. Consequently, I suggested we might find a way to utilize and even expand this 'fault' (he's since become very enthused about it himself and has even suggested he'd like to apply it to some of his own surfaces). I consider such faults – unpredictable – to be a *gift*, which is why I believe it's crucial to be either in very close dialogue with fabricators or physically present during the various fabrication processes.

The chemical reaction that occurred during the production of the *Clay* series left a trace of something organic behind which I couldn't anticipate. This residue revealed, to my astonishment, something foliage-like within the work – as though its skin were actually blooming. Eerily, this was something already looming *behind* the surface: the clean graphics on the *Clay* works are taken from over-sized soil or manure bags, which would ordinarily hold and carry exactly the material fuelling an explosion of plant life and other fertile blossoming.

CL: The display devices of the *Knaves* works are not usual frames, rather a (sculptural) construction the image is set into. Could you tell us something about these frames and maybe their connection to your sculptures?

MR: The photographic works and the sculptural *Clay* series are part of the same conceptual conversation. I feel a sense of unease with the sheer flatness of photographic images. Framing my photographs conventionally – mounted and set behind glass – would create a remoteness and a sense of entrapment. Entrapment in a literal physical manner but also entrapment within a historical, conventional lineage of photographic display.

I wanted to give the imagery more physicality, more *body*, so I mounted them on aluminium sheets which, in turn, are mounted on steel powder-coated panels set into a large welded tray. Each of the trays features a detail of welded initials set between brackets – abbreviations of the works' titles. This abbreviation suggests they belong to a larger system, while the welded form is an individuating authorial customisation. It relays a sense of authorship to the portrayed (the mushroom) and makes the framing integral to the reading of the image.

The scale of the panel relates to the size of the human torso and therefore connects to the viewer's physical body as well as to the graphic-clad t-shirts found in the backdrop of the fungi. The powder-coated panels present crops of graphics taken from soil and manure bags. I used these same graphics when building the *Clay* series, which I'll show alongside the *Knaves* series at Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam, in the upcoming exhibition. These will also be shown at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, where my exhibition opens in May this year.

Christina Lehnert is curator at Portikus, Frankfurt.

Magali Reus was born in Den Haag, The Netherlands in 1981, and currently lives and works in London.

Forthcoming solo exhibitions include Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, USA; Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Ghent, BE (both 2022); CAC Synagogue de Delme, FR; Museum Kurhaus Kleve, DE (both 2023). Recent solo shows include As mist, description, South London Gallery, London (2018); Hot Cottons, Bergen Kunsthall, Bergen (2017); Night Plants, Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, St. Gallen (2017); Mustard, The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2016); Quarters, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin (2016); Spring for a Ground, SculptureCenter, New York; Particle of Inch, The Hepworth Wakefield, Wakefield; Halted Paves, Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster (all 2015). Reus has been included in group exhibitions and screenings at Tate Britain, London; ICA, London; CCS Bard Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson; Kestnergesellschaft, Hanover; LUMA Westbau, Zürich; Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna; David Roberts Art Foundation, London; Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporanea, Lisbon, De Appel, Amsterdam and the British Art Show 8 (touring).

Reus has been shortlisted for the Hepworth Prize for Sculpture 2018 and was awarded the Prix de Rome 2015. Her work is included in international collections including Tate Collection, UK; Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; Centraal Museum, Utrecht; The Hepworth, Wakefield, UK; Collection CCS Bard Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson; Kunstmuseum Winterthur; Kunstmuseum St. Gallen; Lafayette Anticipation – Fonds de dotation Famille Moulin, Paris; Rubell Family Collection, Miami; Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin; Arts Council Collection, UK; The Government Art Collection, London; David Roberts Art Foundation, London; The Perimeter, London.