In *Cock Series*, Sarah Maple sarcastically explores and debunks the phallic power of the penis. This on-going serial body of work currently includes seventeen color, vertically-oriented rectangular photographs made from 2012-present. In them, the artist poses in a three-quarter view and positions an object in one hand in the location where an erect penis would be projecting diagonally from her body—play-acting and en-acting that she has a “penis.” She minimizes the symbolism of masculine dominance, favoring instead an embrace of its comical, more pleasurable aspects. Maple presents a complicated feminist consideration of the penis in relation to the female body.

In these images, the artist is clothed and seen holding various objects. Her outfits typically match the setting or scenario in which she is located. The penis
surrogate she holds or the particular surroundings where she stands provides the title for each of the works. In
Garden Cock, as example, is set in a backyard garden where the artist holds a diagonally positioned electric hedge
trimmer, wearing a gardening frock. Her long black trademark shag haircut, the curves of her physique, and
her costumes, jewelry, make-up mark her outwardly as female. The facial expressions change in the images, ranging
from confrontational swagger, as in Maple Banana Cock, or bland gaze, as in Cup Cock. Her performance with
the objects in the place of male genitals emphasizes that the artist counterfeits the penis, making it farcical; that she is cis gender marks her use ironic. Repeatedly, Maple sarcastically subverts the conventions of fashion photography where the model stands temporarily still but ready to engage in some romanticized activity. Her performative photos are shot in routine environs, role playing in conventional female social roles. Her provocations transform the mundane into something erotically inventive and hilariously incendiary. She uses the fantasy about pleasure in looking at the beautiful girl and her life as a way to inflame her images and arouse the viewer’s passions about looking at her and her work.

This series grew out of a silly game the artist played. Bored while working at a shop, she started taking objects
and pretending they were cocks to amuse herself. She said about these gestures, “I wanted to almost mock it, or mock it’s [sic] importance. But at the same time it’s my way of proudly adorning myself with one!” She uses the penis as the index of ideal masculinity and showcases the thrill and silliness of a girl’s desire for it. She first explored such play in her art beginning in 2010 when she produced Ich Liebe Dick, a triptych of her face forward in the picture plane with a red background, variously holding, biting, or moulding a miniature plastic penis at different angles. Akin to what the Riot Grrls proclaimed in their 1991 manifesto, “…we must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings,” Maple coops the penis to use it for her own bemusement.

For her, the penis is a play thing. The woman artist holding a phallic object or positioning herself in proximity to penis play has a tradition in contemporary art. It is seen in portraits and self-portraits by Meret Oppenheim, Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, Sarah Lucas, Aurel Schmidt. The serial component of this on-going group of works takes the macho gesture of the erect penis and makes it comic. What distinguishes Maple’s Cock Series works from the earlier examples is the humor. We come away laughing at her joke.

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2) Ibid.
4) This image was a limited edition print made for an exhibition of the same name in 2010 at the npl-kunstprojekte, initiated and curated by Friedrich Gellert.