

## The Shape of Desire

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*Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender*

David Getsy

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David Getsy's magisterial book *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* begins with a seemingly straightforward argument: in the 1960s, American sculptors turned to a range of nontraditional materials, and abstract or nonrepresentational sculptural forms, to reimagine the human body outside binary constructions of gender. These artists took up materials such as scrap metal, aluminum sheeting, crushed car parts, worn leather, zippers, buckles, and fluorescent bulbs in large-scale sculptural works that often appeared as assemblages of seemingly incompatible or chaotic parts, thereby invoking the human body without ever directly representing it. In so doing, they imagined the body taking on numerous shapes that could never be accurately pinned down as distinctly male or female, or else imagining so-called male and female body parts as interchangeable or fitting in unexpected ways that upended any easy ascription of gender to a material form. For instance, in chapter 3, Getsy explores how, in her early assemblage work, feminist sculptor Nancy Grossman produced massive three-dimensional canvases on which she carefully glued rubber tubes weaving in and out of zippers, the openings of leather shoe parts and biker jackets. These visually suggestive pieces invoked genital parts and orifices but confounded any straightforward attribution of particular genders to the components, or clearly defined points of entry, thereby allowing for a playful unhinging of parts from gendered bodies. As Getsy explains:

The practice Grossman used to engage with abstraction—that of assemblage—increasingly brought her back to bodily imagery in the form of detached parts. . . .

Her works do not look backward to a past wholeness from which her parts came. They wryly recombine them into new futures. The items she used, from the horse harnesses to the boots to the clichéd leather jackets, all pointed to the bodies they once clothed and held but also celebrated the new constellations they had become. (177)

Such innovations in abstract sculpture, Getsy stresses, were not merely self-serving or aesthetically sealed formal experiments but extended attempts to materialize emerging conceptions of nonbinary genders that were flooding the American imagination in the 1960s. This attempt to expand the range of ways that gender could be conceived and represented preoccupied the conceptual thought of artists as diverse as David Smith, John Chamberlain, Nancy Grossman, and Dan Flavin (the four central figures explored in Getsy's study), despite the fact that none of these artists explicitly claim to be, or directly identify with, the historical label *transsexual* or the more contemporary term *transgender*. Rather, Getsy states,

The artists I discuss offered abstract bodies and, with them, open accounts of personhood's variability and possibility. . . . [T]hese works evoke the concept of the body without mimesis, producing a gap between that calling forth of the human and the presentation of artworks that resolutely refuse to provide an anchoring image of a body. In that gap, there grew new versions of genders, new bodily morphologies, and a new attention to the shifting and successive potentials of these categories. (41)

While seemingly simple on its face, Getsy's argument explodes two widely held assumptions in both art history and the study of gender, with monumental intellectual consequences. On the one hand, Getsy pushes back against the long-running assumption that the emergence of abstraction in contemporary sculpture and art was an attempt to escape the limits of bodily representation into a realm of nonrepresentational meaning. Rather, Getsy shows that the increasingly abstract sculptural forms repeatedly referenced the body in terms of size, scale, and allusion to abstracted human body parts; simultaneously, in interviews, journal entries, and personal notes, the artists themselves talked about their sculptures as fictional "people" or sexual objects, or else dedicated their work to actual persons, thereby linking an abstract work of art to a human being in the everyday world, even if only through reference to a proper name. Getsy's aim is to show the extraordinarily generative capacity of abstraction to call forth new ways of conceiving and inhabiting the gendered body, rather than its assumed tendency to alienate the viewer or refuse "reality" through reference to nonrepresentational forms. Writing about

the innovative sculptural work of the contemporary transgender artist Cassils in his conclusion, Getsy sums up his position this way: “As the artists discussed in this book suggest, abstraction has capacity. It is productive and proliferative. Rather than an avoidance of representation, it must be considered an embrace of potentiality and a positing of the unforeclosed. Abstraction makes room. Because of this capaciousness, abstraction has emerged as urgent for a growing number of transgender and queer artists in recent years. It offers a position from which to imagine, recognize, or realize new possibilities” (277).

On the other hand, Getsy’s claim boldly asserts that notions of gender transitivity and nonbinary genders can be perceived far outside immediate representations of human morphology or personal, lived experiences of embodiment. The radical implication of this latter argument is no less than this: gender transitivity is not only a lived or material experience attached to the bodies of those who claim transgender identity or embodiment (though it is certainly and urgently that); it *also* describes a set of logics, or ways of thinking and perceiving the world, outside binary conceptions of gender that can potentially be shared by everyone and identified in a vast range of cultural forms, aesthetic materials, and art practices that have implications for material bodies and subjectivities. Transgender as a mode of thinking is everywhere, then, but always apparent in particular and distinct ways, depending on how it is materialized or brought into being. As Getsy points out in his preface, “A transgender history attends not just to the evidence of gender non-conforming lives but also—as this study does—shows how accounts of transgender capacity are produced (sometimes inadvertently) through attempts to reconsider how bodies and personas can be imagined or evoked. It also asks its questions broadly with the understanding that all genders must be characterized differently once mutability and temporality are recognized among their defining traits” (xvi). Getsy understands sculpture to be an especially potent site for such materializations because it is arguably the single art form most preoccupied with registering the human body in its full three-dimensionality, whether in forms that replicate the body like Greek statuary or forms that index or reference an abstract notion of the body, or else the actual body of the viewer, without representing it directly.

Getsy’s canny conceptual move is a deliberate one intended to accomplish two tasks with one sweep: to make plainly visible to art historians how deeply questions of gender and sexuality, and gender mutability in particular, inhabit the conceptual thought and material production of abstract artists in the late twentieth century; and to encourage the fields of transgender studies, queer studies, and feminist theory to see how the history of art and its ongoing concerns over representing the human body provide some of the most innovative and sustained mediations on gender and sexual variability in existence. Moreover, Getsy seeks to

make transgender studies more attentive to the problem of materiality beyond the human body, that is, to account for the ways that actual aesthetic materials like clay, leather, metal, or canvas—the literal tools of an artist's practice—can also conjure new ways of understanding or conceiving the fleshy materiality of the body itself. As a result, Getsy's book is fundamentally interdisciplinary and nonidentitarian. It does not merely apply one set of tools from art history to study transgender logics, or simply transpose transgender theory onto artworks; rather, Getsy deftly shows how distinct works of art and the material histories that surround them pose questions that can only be fully explored and answered by taking up both fields in tandem, or else allegorize key ideas, concepts, and values of transgender thought in formal innovation.

This is captured most vividly in Getsy's signal conceptual term, *transgender capacity*. Getsy uses this concept to describe "the ability or the potential for making visible, bringing into experience, or knowing genders as mutable, successive, and multiple." He continues, "It can be located or discerned in texts, objects, [and] cultural forms . . . that support an interpretation or recognition of proliferative modes of gender nonconformity" (34). By conceiving gender transitivity not only as an identity or lived experience but also as a formal capacity of artistic production, Getsy opens up the possibility of seeing queer genders and sexualities as legible in everything from aesthetic mediums to the specificities of a given art practice. Transgender capacity, then, is a theoretical tool that allows us to register when nonbinary understandings of gender become visible, legible, or translatable through particular formal practices. When we pursue instances in which transgender capacity is at play, we are fundamentally tracing *logics of nonbinary gender*, rather than locating particular gendered identities; far from losing sight of the bodies and lives such logics shape, inform, and produce, this method provides a thicker attention to the sites where new ideas about inhabiting gender differently appear and potentially help bring into being the conditions that support the flourishing of transgender life.

Consequently, *Abstract Bodies* is organized around four such logics, which Getsy links to four key artists in the development of sculptural abstraction in the 1960s and after: first is *the logic of gender variability*, which Getsy sees in David Smith's range of abstract metal sculptures composed of unruly appendages, shapes, colors, and erratic lines that offer numerous variations on what the human body might look like beyond gendered ascriptions: "Smith's works willfully eschew mimesis of the body as means of creating new, previously unimagined, configurations, which nevertheless allude to or invoke the human figure. . . . The abstract body prompts different and divergent nominations depending on who is doing the assigning and for what reasons" (44, 93). Second is *the logic of fitting or coupling*, which Getsy finds in John Chamberlain's famous crushed car works,

massive multicolored, jagged-edged balls of composite metals that visually allegorized the unruly fitting or conjoining of gender-nonspecific bodies: “The parts are not securely identifiable as male or female, or even penetrative or receptive. . . . [Chamberlain] refers to the sexual fit as ‘squeezing and hugging,’ often leaving his description of erotic activity outside of ways that gender might be neatly assigned to parts or activities . . . the fit was generative, not prescriptive” (122). Third is *the logic of disembodied parts*, which Getsy sees on display across Nancy Grossman’s career in both her large-scale, found-material assemblage works and her notoriously misunderstood series of disembodied leather heads, composed of thickly layered leather masks tightly zippered or buckled over elaborately carved wooden sculptures: “Her work—both abstract and representational—prompts projective identifications of gender and sexuality only to complicate and confound them. Remarkably, she does this without representing the body at all. Her head sculptures abstract and suggest the body, and viewers rush to fill in what they think that body should be” (150). And finally is *the logic of interchangeability*, which Getsy identifies in Dan Flavin’s iconic fluorescent light sculptures, multicolored arrangements of large-scale light tubes that could be infinitely interchanged for one another, yet were given nominal particularity through their dedication to specific people and their coloring in distinct hues: “These names that [Flavin] kept attaching to his systematically interchangeable works produce—in excess of Flavin’s intentions—a logic of transformational personhood and mutable gender, that, like his lights, places value on sameness and interchangeability made particular through naming” (211). In each chapter, Getsy carefully unpacks how a distinct artist became invested in particular logics of gender transitivity or variability at the conjuncture of a wide range of sites, including their individual biographies, public accounts of transsexual or transgender life circulating at the time of their creative production, their engagement with distinct materials, and the art world’s reception of their work. Getsy shows how distinct expressions of transgender capacity have rich histories that can be traced through a careful reconstruction of their varied creative, intellectual, and political contexts and across multiple archives far beyond the limits of a single artistic work.

The great intellectual gift of *Abstract Bodies* is not only its conceptual innovation, captured in Getsy’s theorization of “transgender capacity,” his commitment to seeing abstraction as a space of openness and possibility, and his precise tracing of abstract logics of gender transitivity, but also in the book’s methodological dynamism and creativity. Simply put, *Abstract Bodies* is an extraordinarily imaginative book. It makes unexpected yet absolutely compelling links between artworks and transgender logics or ways of thinking that are easily overlooked or misperceived from traditional disciplinary approaches: the idea that Dan Flavin’s fluorescent light tubes, seemingly wholly nonrepresentational

light forms sentimentally dedicated to different people in the artist's life, might actually put forth a fully formed theory of interchangeable gendered nomination is, quite simply, astonishing yet utterly convincing. It can only be so, however, because Getsy shows the reader how Flavin's art practice (which Flavin wrote extensively about in his journals and spoke of in interviews throughout this career) reflects his investment in experimenting with generic, mass-produced light tubes that could produce surprisingly distinct visual effects while also simultaneously all being functionally the same. Through a meticulous analysis of Flavin's developmental thinking about his own work, as well as his curious practice of dedicating each piece to a different person, Getsy shows how the artist became increasingly inclined toward exploring this interplay between generality and particularity, which is a fundamental feature of gendered self-nomination: namely, that gender is a widely shared category of identification, but that naming oneself as a particular gender (through choice of pronouns or a new name) gives provisional, but meaningful, specificity to a given experience of gendered embodiment. Getsy underscores that,

combined with Flavin's insistent system of sameness, the dedications signal Flavin's proliferation of difference and variability among his standard materials that can be recombined, paired, relocated, and exchanged—and that one never forgets are all, fundamentally, the same. . . . From the perspective of transgender theory and its accounts of successive states of identity and mutable and multiple genders, Flavin's practice of naming interchangeable units can be extrapolated into an inadvertent account of personhood that shares such priorities with transgender politics and culture. Both teach us that a name can, after all, make all the difference. (258)

The arguments Getsy makes in each chapter garner their high level of persuasiveness and conceptual daring in part because he vastly expands the coordinates through which we can make sense of, interpret, and do something with a work of art or a particular art practice: by taking into account the actual history of transgender life in the late twentieth-century United States, Getsy can show how a pervasive public discourse of gender transitivity in the 1960s influenced both the personal and creative investments of particular artists (and altered the ways they talked about their art in gendered terms). By studying what artists had to say about their work, especially how figures like Chamberlain and Grossman repeatedly refused gendered nominations of their artworks by a range of cultural critics, Getsy can underscore the complex discourses these artists developed regarding their engagement with nonbinary conceptions of gender. By studying the physical materials these artists use and the distinct ways they experimented with shape, form, and texture—such as Flavin's use of multicolored fluorescent

light tubes and Smith's uneven aluminum cubes—Getsy illuminates how particular materials afforded unique possibilities for giving shape to gender-transitive ways of thinking. It is the exceptional range of variables that Getsy takes into account when assessing a single artwork that allows him to see something in it that speaks to broader cultural logics: history matters, discourse matters, materials matter, intellectual outlooks matter, embodied practices matter. All of these Getsy takes up, never isolating a given art object but considering how it produces meanings in relation to all of these factors as they take shape through, against, and in tandem with one another.

*Abstract Bodies*, then, is not for the intellectually lazy or for the singularly minded disciplinary thinker (though perhaps it is precisely suited to persuade such a thinker away from their rigid theoretical commitments); rather, it demands intellectual capaciousness and open-mindedness from its reader, which is perhaps unsurprisingly the affective stance Getsy claims (in common voice with transgender theory) that makes conceptions of nonbinary gender possible in the first place. Getsy's approach forces us to consider some of the larger ramifications of art and cultural production that actively makes particular identities more labile or mutable or else highlights what is already contingent in seemingly stable identity markers. We are left asking such key questions as does the kind of transformability of gendered nomination apparent in these artworks translate to categories like race and disability; is it possible to present these latter categories as mutable or contingent without falling into the trap of cultural appropriation; how can artwork that offers new ways of inhabiting particular identities and identifications provide the conceptual ground for equally innovative kinds of political activism, new ways of relating to others, and even new kinds of ethical practices; and what might be the positive consequences of incorporating the affective stance of irreverence, playfulness, and experimentation with the form and shape of particular identities that these artworks display?

One easy way to dismiss the magnitude of Getsy's intervention is to claim that the book fails on account of its refusal to centralize self-identified transgender artists. One might be tempted to inveigh: Why write a book that purports to develop a theory of transgender logics in modern sculpture but not develop case studies of trans artists? Setting aside the fact that Getsy does indeed provide a beautiful and in-depth discussion of contemporary trans artist Cassils at the book's conclusion, I believe such a criticism quite spectacularly misses the point: far from sidelining, making invisible, or denigrated trans artists, Getsy's approach elevates their investments, lives, and ways of seeing to the level of a philosophical imperative that has underwritten the production of Western art for numerous artists of many identity categories across time. Getsy is not blaspheming against transgender theory or politics (i.e., doing trans theorizing without actual trans

people) but fulfilling its most radical goal, namely, to underscore the variability, mutability, and transitivity of all genders, perhaps even especially those that appear on the surface to be self-evidently normative or fixed. Perhaps, most importantly, by reading the logics of gender transitivity in works commonly assumed to have nothing to do with transgender thought and life, Getsy offers a reading practice attuned to multiplicity, thereby conceiving of transgender as an almost philosophical or ontological viewpoint from which to develop interpretation. Getsy willfully risks decentering a commitment to trans identity to illuminate something broader about the role that transgender plays as an operating logic in creative or aesthetic thought that finds countless expressions, modes, and forms. Abstraction, understood as a dynamic approach to form that stresses “the unforeclosed,” is echoed in Getsy’s own approach to gender. When gender is even provisionally abstracted from particular bodies, we can potentially conceive of it more dynamically, which in turn has salubrious effects for the flourishing of actual embodied people, who may very well be the spectators, creators, or critics of the very abstract works of art before us, but also might not. As Getsy compellingly states, “One of the central questions of this book has been how to visualize transformation and its potential. In other words, when we question the limitations of dimorphism or of binaries and when we recognize that personhood is not static, how do we look?” (279) Put another way, *Abstract Bodies* tells a story about how abstract sculptors in the 1960s gave shape to the desire to live, be, and feel outside the logic of binary gender; that story gives us permission to use our scholarship, our art practices, and our politics to give shape to new and unexpected desires, even those we haven’t yet imagined.

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