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IMMODERATE COUPLINGS

TRANSFORMATIONS AND GENDERS IN JOHN CHAMBERLAIN'S WORK

There are two opposed and seemingly irreconcilable tendencies in the critical appraisal of John Chamberlain's sculpture. The first has been to treat the works as if they are simply and purely abstract, attending almost exclusively to their formal traits. The second tack – equally unsatisfying but no less persistent – has been to see the works primarily in terms of allusion: namely, as crushed automobiles commenting obliquely on a notion of the American dream. The critical writing on Chamberlain has been conflicted between these opposed camps since the early 1960s,¹ and both positions emerge as clichés that effectively foreclose the significance of his work at the outset. Neither the formalist nor the pseudo-Pop views of Chamberlain fit fully with the dynamic and poised play between form and reference in his work. The artist himself is often of little help, seeming – as he frequently does – to vacillate between the trivial and the vaguely profound in his statements and in the interviews that he gleefully sabotages. As Elizabeth Baker remarked, "He is, in fact, even as artists go, enigmatic, idiosyncratic, uneven, frustratingly difficult to pin down, and extremely resistant to classification."²

As a means to move beyond the standard ways in which Chamberlain's work has been discussed, it is imperative to examine those tactics and concerns that have remained consistent within his tendency to be "frustratingly difficult to pin down" in both his statements and his work. In particular, this chapter pursues the central technical and conceptual operation of Chamberlain's work – fitting. Not just in his sculptures but also in his



44 John Chamberlain, *Socket*, 1977 (cat. rais. 578) and *Socket*, 1977 (cat. rais. 579). Both painted steel, 68.5 × 82.5 × 48.5 cm (27 × 32½ × 19 in.) and 72.5 × 53.5 × 84 cm (28½ × 21 × 33 in.).

words, Chamberlain interlocked disparate elements that may have previously been discrete, differentiated, unrelated, or distant. Debates about whether his works are simply abstract compositions or patently signifying popular culture, however, often fail to pursue the full implications of what he enigmatically, but regularly, characterizes as this “fit.”

In what follows, I focus on the patterns that emerge in the descriptions of Chamberlain’s works – by others and, importantly, himself. As I shall argue, his statements provide not so much an explication as a parallel manifestation of his process of fitting, and an analysis of them allows for a better understanding of the material and formal dynamics of the works themselves. Evasive and elliptical, Chamberlain’s way of talking about his practice and his sculptures was nevertheless consistent in its reliance on an analogy to which he repeatedly returned, that of sexual activity. His favorite way of discussing fitting was to call it sexual, and he has frequently made such statements as, “With my sculpture the sexual decision comes in the fitting



45 John Chamberlain, *Bouquet*, 1960. Painted metal, 40.6 × 33 × 33 cm (16 × 13 × 13 in.). Martin Z. Margulies Collection.

of the parts.”³ Reading through the writing about Chamberlain, one is immediately struck by the pervasiveness of this connection. The sexual always seemed to be invoked by Chamberlain, but the critical assessments of his sculpture often stop short of serious discussion of just what this recurring metaphor for his practice might imply.

To draw out these implications, I want to propose a related term that has also been used to explain Chamberlain’s tactics – coupling. “Coupling” is sometimes used interchangeably with “fitting” in the literature on Chamberlain but the former does more than simply offer a substitute for the latter. As Michael Auping noted, “The obvious metaphor for sexual coupling in the work is one that has not escaped the artist.”⁴ In many ways, “coupling” is more directly suggestive of the range of possible meanings that Chamberlain circulated around his work and, more to the point, it registers the metaphor of sex that he was fond of when talking about his material practice. An analysis of Chamberlain’s multiple tactics of coupling offers a means to bridge the gap between the ostensible abstraction of his sculptures and the loaded metaphoric language he and others use to explain them. I am not proposing this as a cipher to any hidden iconography – far from it. Chamberlain’s practice, I shall argue, is far more interesting for its derailing of any simplistic iconographic searching for symbols and signs. However, despite the fact that his sculptures largely repudiate any degree of mimetic representation, he has nevertheless insisted on tying his works to sexuality, a topic that has been conventionally registered in art through images of human bodies. This paradox is important. The analogies of sexuality and of gender to his work are crucial to an understanding of his process of generating multiplicity and particularity through fitting, conjoining, and intermingling. By examining how these analogies function both in his practice and in the critical responses to it, one can get not only a better sense of the complexity of Chamberlain’s project but also of the capacity of abstract and non-figurative art to propose unforeclosed accounts of genders and sexualities. That is, an investigation into Chamberlain’s primary metaphor and its role in his work affords a means to come to terms with the range of implications of such a statement as, “My sculpture is not *calculated* to do anything other than what it looks like it’s doing.”⁵

So, what does a Chamberlain sculpture look like it’s doing? His works have always presented a challenge to description and analysis. They are hyper-composed yet chaotic, massive yet delicate, volumetric yet planar, multipart yet unitary, clearly sculptural but patently pictorial, sharp yet pliable, figural yet abstract, seductive yet demurring, recognizable yet unique,



46 John Chamberlain, *M. Junior Love*, 1962. Painted metal, 51 × 51 × 35.5 cm (20 × 20 × 14 in.).

and on and on. In short, they are oxymorons. Chamberlain seems to have fostered a mode of parataxis, relishing the contradictions and inventions that his juxtapositions sometimes engender.⁶ Discussions of his sculpture almost always return to the difficulties of pinning it down, and analyses often read like lists of opposed terms, coexisting somehow in the work itself. For instance, Donald Judd in 1964 wrote, “Chamberlain’s sculpture is simultaneously turbulent, passionate, cool and hard.”⁷ Barbara Rose remarked

that same year: “These strange mixtures, of tenderness and violence, of elegance and brutality, of patience and recklessness, evoke a complex response that for me is part of the unique beauty of a Chamberlain.”⁸ Elizabeth Baker, in a 1969 essay on his films, concluded, “But a complex sensibility is there: innocent and cynical, squalid and elegant, highly intelligent and deliberately mindless.”⁹ In a similar vein to these lists of opposites is Klaus Kertess’s sensitive later assessment of the work, which points to the complex play with meaning that it presents: “[Chamberlain’s] sculptures invite and desire endless adjectives, but none of them can stick. His configurations are in a referential state, but their constant re-forming slips out of the adjectival grip; ultimately they transcend the language of analysis and description. The ravishing opticality must be its own pleasure and reward.”¹⁰ All of these responses are sympathetic to Chamberlain. Nevertheless, they also exemplify the circularity and adjectival accumulation that his work incites in critics. Consistently, writers on Chamberlain have used such descriptive strategies both to evoke but also to evade the oxymoronic multiplicity of his works.

In other words, it is Chamberlain’s multiple tactics of coupling that such critical responses register. It is essential to consider not just the choice of adjectives critics use but also the tendency to pile them onto the work because Chamberlain’s sculptures resolutely resist straightforward description and analysis. As Gary Indiana astutely confessed, with Chamberlain’s sculpture “It’s easier to say what it isn’t.”¹¹ This inability to decide what a Chamberlain is seems to me to be one of the most important things about it. Is it a crushed car or colored sculpture matter? Is it ironically referential or sincerely abstract?¹² Is it art or is it refuse?¹³ Is it sculpture or is it painting? Any possible answer to questions such as these will be circular and slippery, for his coupled works always incorporate a degree of multiple options, fitted together. Once fitted, however, they are greater than the sum of their parts. As Barbara Rose noted in an early review of Chamberlain’s work, “The special charge of his works resides largely, I think, in the tension born of contradiction.”¹⁴

Despite the major changes in his work over decades, Chamberlain’s foundational questions and tactics remained remarkably consistent. In order to examine the way in which coupling operates on multiple material and conceptual levels for Chamberlain, I will outline below but a few of the ways in which this conceptual and material practice was repeatedly put into play in the works themselves. In multiple ways, the parataxical tendencies of Chamberlain’s way of working result in the blurring of boundaries, the conjoining of categories, and the undermining of binaries.



47 John Chamberlain, *Fantail*, 1961. Painted and chromium-plated steel, 178 × 190.5 × 152.4 cm (70 × 75 × 60 in.). Collection of Jasper Johns.

For example, a central characteristic of Chamberlain’s work is how volume and mass are differentiated yet hinged together. Chamberlain’s metallic works are composed of planar elements that eschew mass in the traditional sculptural sense. They have no solidity, yet they are not hollow. They seem both light and heavy. They enclose and enfold space and thus



48 John Chamberlain, *Toy*, 1961. Steel, paint, and plastic, 136 × 98 × 77.5 cm (53½ × 38½ × 30½ in.). Art Institute of Chicago, gift of William Hokin, 1969.809.

establish volume, yet it is not clear where that volume starts or dissolves. They are bodies made up of, only, too much skin.

Another example of coupling often brought up in the literature on Chamberlain is the conjoining of sculpture and painting. A large amount

of critical energy has been spent trying to figure out into which of these two categories Chamberlain can be more appropriately placed. The raucous use of color arrays combined with a refined understanding of the manipulation of space brings together central criteria for both painting and sculpture. This aspect of Chamberlain's coupling has been widely discussed, and it is generally agreed that Chamberlain is art-historically significant for being one of the first sculptors to use bold color effectively as an integral structural element. Judd argued that Chamberlain was "the first...to use color successfully in sculpture."¹⁵ Kertess perhaps said it best when he wrote: "[his] ability to make roundness into color and color into roundness, pushing the two into an overall unity, is without equal."¹⁶

Color is, of course, one of the most important features of Chamberlain's art. As Kertess also observed, he "transgressed lavishly the prohibition of color in sculpture, employing hues that ranged from the virginal to the lurid."¹⁷ Beyond praising Chamberlain's use of it, Kertess rightly emphasized that color had traditionally been barred from sculpture proper. When the nineteenth-century sculptor John Gibson exhibited a neoclassical nude Venus with a light, cosmetic tinting at the 1862 International Exhibition in London, its modest polychromy was greeted with accusations of impropriety (fig. 49).¹⁸ Even though color had emerged by the end of the nineteenth century as a viable possibility for sculpture and was used throughout the modern era, there remained an anxiety about its appropriateness. This is not the place to recount the complex story of color and modern sculpture; suffice it to say that even after the examples of such artists as Pablo Picasso and David Smith, color always needed to be justified or explained for sculpture. At the heart of this concern was the conception that color in sculpture was usually applied to sculptural form, rather than integral to it. Since sculpture has been conventionally regarded as an art of space, matter, and form, any coat of color added to those forms has been understood to mitigate, or merely decorate, the spatial and three-dimensional aspects that are conventionally understood to be modern sculpture's basis.

The anxiety about colored sculpture that Gibson's *Tinted Venus* brought to the surface remained implicit into the next century.¹⁹ Applied color was too much like cosmetics, and its application to sculpture seemed, for many, to cheapen it. E. C. Goosen wrote in the 1960s: "The rush to employ painting-type color in sculpture, as refreshing as it might momentarily seem, has more often than not removed the possibility of the sculptural experience from the work at hand. Moreover, all the radiant color in the world cannot camouflage weak form. And the tendency toward camouflage is tantamount to a return to illusionism."²⁰ A further example of the disdain



LEFT 49 John Gibson, *Tinted Venus*, c. 1851–6. Tinted marble, h. 175 cm (69 in.). National Museums Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery.

OPPOSITE 50 John Chamberlain, *Mustang Sally McBright*, 1965. Automobile metal, 142.2 × 160 × 111.8 cm (56 × 63 × 44 in.).

for sculptural color can be found in a 1968 essay by Darby Bannard on the legacy of Cubism in sculpture, where he flatly stated that “color is usually so unfortunate in sculpture.” Chamberlain, however, seemed to find a way out of this impasse, according to Bannard, who then dismissively continued: “Chamberlain’s crushed auto-part sculptures, although they are not great art, use color effectively because his materials are colored to begin with, so we are prepared for it.”²¹

The importance of the colored auto bodies in the earlier sculptures, as well as Chamberlain’s later processes of painting before crushing metal, have often been marshaled as justifications for the vibrant color central to his art. Perhaps it is not that surprising that Chamberlain would be the one



to overturn the negative connotations of color and use it “successfully.” In the late 1950s, he worked not only as a hairdresser but also as a make-up artist – both jobs in which he could also capitalize on his grasp of volume and its relation to color.²² Chamberlain, himself, occasionally voiced the reading of color in sculpture as cosmetics. For instance, speaking of the resin he used in the paper sculptures of the late 1960s, he said: “The color on it became flashy like lipstick or eyeshadow or something for a girl. Whatever people put on as colors, they put on so that somebody sees it.”²³ In Chamberlain’s work, color is both applied and integral, cosmetic and industrial. That is, color itself is a coupled category in his work. As Judd



51 John Chamberlain, *Miss Lucy Pink*, 1962. Painted and chromium-plated steel, 119.4 × 106.7 × 99 cm (47 × 42 × 39 in.). Private collection.

remarked about Chamberlain, “The color is also both neutral and sensitive...Color is never unimportant, as it usually is in sculpture.”²⁴

A third example of Chamberlain’s consistent strategy of coupling is the shuttling between reference and abstraction mentioned at the outset. Throughout his career, Chamberlain and his advocates refuted the reading of his sculptures in terms of their source material of automobiles. There is little doubt that the interpretations of his sculptures as commentaries on car culture or violence are limited in their scope. Such readings largely fail



52 John Chamberlain, *Son of Dudes*, 1977. Painted and chromium-plated steel, 182.9 × 132.1 × 96.5 cm (72 × 52 × 38 in.). Collection Christophe de Menil.

to account for the range of traits that makes Chamberlain's works compelling – from the complexity of their composition to the subtle dynamism of their color relations to their quizzical and leading titles. As Robert Creeley once put it, with a Chamberlain, the automobile “was there, but now you are contained in a thing already changing, bringing you into its terms.”²⁵ Or, as Chamberlain more bluntly put it, “people say, ‘Oh, that looks like my old Mustang there’ or something. It doesn't look like their old Mustang at all.”²⁶

Some of Chamberlain's would-be supporters, however, have taken this injunction against the car crash interpretation to mean that his sculptures are wholly formal constellations without subject matter or referentiality in any degree. Such a view, as I claimed earlier, also fails to account for the multiple levels on which a Chamberlain sculpture operates. The work is often vigorously non-mimetic yet slyly referential. For instance, a color often sparks an association and/or makes a reference (*Miss Lucy Pink*, *Velvet White*, and so on), materials evoke gendered associations (for example, *Endless Gossip* made from cookie tins and other metal components with floral prints or the *Penthouse* series of sculptures made from brown-paper magazine wrappers; see fig. 58), or are simply descriptive of content (as with perhaps Chamberlain's only figurative or representational sculpture, *Endzoneboogie*; fig. 53). Despite the patent evidence that the titles evoke interpretation of, modify, or connect to the sculptures to which they are attached, some of Chamberlain's advocates have upheld the erroneous belief that not only are his sculptures just formalist but that his titles are also entirely devoid of meaning.²⁷

Chamberlain's abstraction emphasized openness and a play with reference. It achieved this by largely refusing representation or recognizable imagery, but Chamberlain nevertheless cultivated generative allusions that were produced through his parataxical process of fitting (in both his sculptures and his titles). That is, Chamberlain never *signify* automobiles, car culture, and so on. Nevertheless, they *refer* to their previous material existence as industrially manufactured automobile parts, whether recycled or new. Even Judd was careful not to discount this level of reference and its role in Chamberlain's work:

The quality of John Chamberlain's sculpture, in contrast, involves a three-way polarity of appearance and meaning, *successive states* of the same form and material. A piece may appear neutral, *just junk*, casually objective; or redundant, voluminous beyond its structure, obscured by other chances and possibilities; or simply expressive, through its structure and details



53 John Chamberlain,
Endzoneboogie, 1988. Painted
and chromium-plated steel,
295 × 122.6 × 123.2 cm
(116 × 48¼ × 48½ in.).
Froehlich Collection,
Stuttgart.

and *oblique imagery*. The appearance of a mass of colored automobile metal is obviously essential.²⁸

While Chamberlain and others rightly resist the reductive reading of the sculptures in terms of their material sources (that is, cars), the referential vestiges of those materials are nevertheless persistent and crucial, as Judd noted. One sees a Chamberlain not just as abstract but, to repeat Judd, in “successive states of the same form and material.” At least one of those circulating states involves seeing the work as referential – even if to “just junk.” That is, the material components of a Chamberlain work to establish an extensional reference to a pre-existing thing (an autobody, an oil drum) that has been discarded or scrapped (or, in the case of his later use of van tops, ordered fresh). Even if this level of reference is subsumed as the viewer



54 John Chamberlain, *Dolores James*, 1962. Painted and chromium-plated steel, 184.2 × 257.8 × 117.5 cm (72½ × 101½ × 46¼ in.). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 70.1925.

OPPOSITE 55 Installation view, Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas, with John Chamberlain's *Tongue Pictures*, 1979, in foreground.

cycles through seeing the work's multiplicity, it is never invisible or inconsequential, as Judd was careful to indicate. The engagements produced by the visual encounter with a Chamberlain are fueled by the viewer's recognition of the repurposed nature of his materials that have become delicately poised to establish dynamic volumes exceeding their mass.²⁹ In this, the referential status of his materials was foundational for they facilitated the aim that Chamberlain prized for his own work – the “discovery angle” in which art showed us something previously unrecognized.³⁰ Indeed, for much of his career, Chamberlain staged the theme of transformation by facilitating viewers' identifications of his source materials, be they automobiles, bathroom cabinets, women's undergarments, or oil drums.

Like it or not, Chamberlain's materials have never been able to be completely overlooked because he makes their material specificity central to



their deployment. That is, his process ensures that we know that the materials have had a previous history, even if it is just his own acts of making his components. Beyond the use of recycled cars, car parts, van tops, oil drums, and the like, Chamberlain's practice of crumpling and cracking of colored surfaces calls attention to the fact that these materials have undergone transformation – that they once were something else, even if we do not know what. We see the present sculpture as the aggregation of the multiple prior stages his materials have undergone – manufactured, used, acquired by him, sometimes painted, crushed, and then fitted together (fig. 54). However much Chamberlain and others stress that his sculptures are abstract and non-signifying, the sculptures themselves are always permeated by and coupled with this level of reference and this intimation of his materials' previous histories. For instance, the subtle yet distinct role played by a woman's slip, ivory colored with black lace trim, in the sculpture titled *Huzzy* is crucial in establishing a relationship between an ostensibly



56 John Chamberlain, *Socket*, 1975. Painted steel, 58.7 × 69.9 × 45.7 cm (23 × 27½ × 18 in.).

abstract sculpture and its figural and gendered associations (fig. 57). Clothing infers the human body more directly than many other materials. Combined with a title that is inescapably close to a word for an impudent or immoral woman (“hussy”), a particular gender is overlaid on an otherwise non-figural assemblage. That is, the viewer will probably not experience any noetic resemblance between *Hussy* and the human form. Nevertheless, the entire assemblage gains an unmistakably gendered valence once the recognition of source materials (women’s lingerie) and title are conjoined in the successive states of the viewer’s attention. As I shall argue, this emphasis on “successive states” and transformation is a crucial component of Chamberlain’s conceptual process and the possibilities for meaning that it effects.

For a final, fourth example of the importance of “fit” or coupling as a wide-ranging strategy, one could look to the treatment for an unrealized film he planned with Viva Auder. In it, he used “fit” to explain how this



57 John Chamberlain, *Hussy*, 1961. Steel, paint, and chromium plating with fabric, 137.2 × 83.8 × 53.3 cm (54 × 33 × 21 in.). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, gift of Mrs. Charles F. Buckwalter in memory of Charles F. Buckwalter, F64-8.

film's narrative structure would be the result of how "magic moments" could be spliced together. *The Secret Life of William Shakespeare* was to have been Chamberlain's second feature-length film, after his sexually explicit and freeform *The Secret Life of Hernando Cortez* from 1968 that featured Ultra Violet and Taylor Mead.³¹ For the Shakespeare film, he and Auder devised a dream cast for this anachronistic take on Elizabethan court drama that included the trans actress Holly Woodlawn along with the gay men Gary Indiana and Truman Capote because, they explained, "it appears that only actors of a certain sexual persuasion are adept at repartee, at gossip, at picking up the thread of an idea and running with it; in other words only those of a certain sexual persuasion would be able today to fit into the Elizabethan court. Why this is we don't know. Suffice to say it exists."³² (The character of Queen Elizabeth is, in the film, revealed to be a "hermaphrodite."³³) Following on this question of Elizabethan fit, they explained the process for making their improvisational film:

*The film ought to evolve as a piece of sculpture; a Chamberlain sculpture. By this we don't mean the researching, the writing, the casting – we mean the actual filming itself – the recording. The job of the director, like the job of the sculptor, is first to see the pieces, then to put them together. He isn't going to take each piece and twist it, bend it, direct it, before he adds it to the ensemble, he's going to choose each piece because he knows in advance it will fit...Just as a sculpture dictates its own form, the movie must be allowed to dictate its own direction. Since the magic moments are to be allowed to happen spontaneously, the direction will mainly lie in the editing.*³⁴

As this description makes clear, Chamberlain understood the process of fitting as a general strategy. Derived from parataxis and daily tested in his acts of interlocking and balancing autobody parts and other materials, fitting was also the core Chamberlain's attitude toward art and its effects. As he once told Creeley, "[I]t's that fit which really has importance...a very crucial part of what art is really about."³⁵

With the four examples of coupling detailed above – volume and mass, painting and sculpture, abstraction and referentiality, and spontaneity and narrative structure – I have suggested just a few of the ways in which the formal and artistic operations of Chamberlain's work continually return to this strategy of conjoining of differentiated elements to produce new possibilities. Throughout his career, Chamberlain expanded the concept of "fit," seeing it as a general strategy of undermining binaries and categories through conjunction and interpenetration.

Beyond his artistic practice, he also used this strategy relentlessly when discussing his work, persistently undermining any positive assertions with the incorporation of alternative or counter-propositions. He often stressed the ways in which two aspects are distinguished only to be intermingled. Referring again to the paper sculptures in 1972, he said "I think what was also profound about the paper was that you could see the inside and the outside. You couldn't literally see the inside, but you felt the inside because of the nature of the outside. Something like that" (see fig. 58).³⁶ Like the sculptures he described, his words divide elements only to argue that they are inseparable.

Words were significant for Chamberlain, and his seminal year at Black Mountain College (1955–6) taught him an approach to poetry that was analogous to collage.³⁷ This, in turn, suggested a new understanding of sculptural practice as fitting. He recently recalled with reference to his Black Mountain years: "If I have a room full of parts, they are like a lot of words and I have to take one piece and put it next to another and find out if it really fits. The poet's influence is there, plus in my titles."³⁸ Because of this emphasis on language, Chamberlain's own words should never be dismissed, despite their performances of difficulty and shallowness. Through his words, his performed artistic identity mirrors the parataxical formal and strategic operations of his sculpture. He was both forthright and evasive, straight-talking and word-mincing, and if nothing else he mocked the idea that meaning has a single source – in him or elsewhere. That is, beyond being an artistic strategy, oxymoronic coupling also characterized the persona he presented when discussing his work – what Betsy Baker referred to as his "tendency towards evasion and self-camouflage."³⁹ Chamberlain stated that he did not like interviews, but the interview, more than any other critical genre, has dominated the literature on Chamberlain since he began doing them in the 1970s. Whether he liked them or not – or, rather, because he liked to dislike them – the interviews reveal a parallel strategy to the sculptures. When performing his artistic persona in the staged setting of the formal interview intended for publication, Chamberlain consistently proposed an idea only to amend it with a contradiction, a tangent, or a counter-proposition. For instance, in a telling moment in his widely cited interview with Julie Sylvester, she remarked "One of the strongest elements of your sculpture is stance and attitude," to which Chamberlain replied: "Well, that's just what I said. I could have been lying." Sylvester replied, "Were you?" Chamberlain: "I'm not certain. Only time will tell."⁴⁰ In such exchanges, neither proposition nor counter-proposition prevails. They are always neatly fitted together, and it is the on-going dance between them



58 John Chamberlain, *Penthouse #46*, 1969. Watercolor and resin on paper, 13.5 × 17.8 × 11.4 cm (5¼ × 7 × 4½ in.). Dia Art Foundation.

that produces the best window into Chamberlain's artistic practice. That is, Chamberlain never explained his work directly nor pinned down its meaning. Instead, he offered his own circular and coupled words as a further example of how his sculptures operate. As he remarked in a late interview, "And I guess I have difficulty being interviewed because I don't want to talk about my work. Like now, we are talking *around* the work."⁴¹

Consequently, when one reads about Chamberlain, his many interviews seem at first to offer little help. Instead, it has been Judd's writings that have become the key interpretive texts. Judd was a sensitive critic and a long-time advocate of Chamberlain's work. He wrote a great deal about Chamberlain, despite the fact that the latter's art seems, initially, antithetical

to the austerity that Judd favored in his own. Compared to Chamberlain's evasiveness and circularity, Judd's writing about the sculptures is strikingly direct, and it is no surprise that Judd's assessments from the 1960s have been reprinted again and again in exhibition catalogues of Chamberlain's work. With his characteristic concision, he attempted to give an account of the slipperiness of Chamberlain's work.⁴² There is one statement of his, in particular, that seems to me to summarize Chamberlain's sculpture in all its excess. Discussing some of Chamberlain's lacquer paintings in 1965, Judd wrote, "Another important thing about the reliefs is that they don't have the same kind of generality or objective quality as that in the work of the best of older artists. The reliefs are not austere or whatever the quality is – it's usually intrinsic to paint on canvas. They are extreme, snazzy, elegant in the wrong way, immoderate."⁴³ "Immoderate": that is, going beyond proper limits, unrestrained in passions or conduct, excessive, wanton.⁴⁴ There is too much there. A line has been crossed, and that which is normally kept out of bounds is welcomed in. Not just in his work, Chamberlain seems to relish being immoderate, crossing the line.

I borrow this term from Judd to expose further some of the ways in which Chamberlain operates both in his work and in his evasive and obfuscating statements about it. Immoderation was a tactic for him, like coupling, in which boundaries and distinctions are blurred or folded over each other. Beyond his achievement of immoderation in his work, how did he do this in his statements? Anyone familiar with his remarks and the persona he presented to critics will know that this attitude manifested itself most often – and most strategically – in his use of sex to shock and to disrupt interviews.⁴⁵ He relied on sex as a means to break down conventions and to disarm others through his unashamed foregrounding of it. For instance, Larry Bell affectionately recalled,

When he came into the studio, the first thing he would do was remove his clothes, everything except a tank top, and stand around my place like a tour guide. His schlong was quite prominent. I would have guests come over, and John would just stand there looking at us. I would introduce him and he would nod his head but say nothing; his schlong said it all. He had a rooster and a pig tattoo, one on each foot.⁴⁶

Beyond his discomfiting ways of foregrounding the sexual in his personal interactions and as a disruptive tactic in his interviews, Chamberlain also wove sex and sexual metaphors into his practice and the ways in which he characterized it.

One must take seriously – however immoderate it might seem on our part – how Chamberlain persistently introduced sex into discussions of his work. In addition to the artist’s own statements, bodily metaphors are taken up by critics to describe the works, from Judd’s mention of “tumescant planes”⁴⁷ to Kertess’s observation that “The concrete reading of form [in Chamberlain’s sculptures] is frustrated, though we are aware of ambiguous sexual references in the mounting, plugging, and hugging that takes place among the individual components.”⁴⁸ Remember that Chamberlain was the primary origin of this talk. For instance, he said in 1971:

I found that the particular principle of compression and wadding-up or manipulating with the fingers, so to speak, whether you use a machine or not, has a lot of application to a lot of different materials and I only use materials that deal with that....So it all has to do with if it’s sexual, it’s squeezing and hugging. And if it’s instinctive, it has to do with fit and balance; if it’s emotional, it’s presence, and I don’t know how it gets to be intellectual.⁴⁹

This account of his work deviated little throughout his career. By the 1971 interview just cited, this explanation of his sculptural process through the association with sexuality had become commonplace for him. It continued as his main line from that point onward and is evident in interviews over the span of three and a half decades. For instance, in his oft-used artist’s statement, he repeated a similar account of his practice, saying, “I deal with new material as I see fit in terms of my decision making, which has to do primarily with sexual and intuitive thinking.”⁵⁰ Despite Chamberlain’s regular frankness and insistence on this analogy, there remains in the critical record a prevailing reluctance about taking it seriously and saying too much, about being – like Chamberlain – immoderately focused on sex.⁵¹

The sexual is not a diversion from Chamberlain’s art nor is it merely a smokescreen that he came to use. Rather, the sexual emerged as the privileged metaphor for the range of operations of coupling that circulate in Chamberlain’s work and public persona. Chamberlain remarked, “What is important for me about this work is what I’ve learned about assembly. The assembly is a fit, and the fit is sexual. That’s a mode I’m working.”⁵² Since coupling is the persistent formal and artistic strategy for Chamberlain, then it is imperative to investigate why his recurring metaphor for coupling or fitting has been sexual intercourse. This is an artist, for instance, who constantly reminded viewers of the centrality of the sexual for his work, as when he showed a group of participatory foam couches in a 1972 gallery exhibition titled *John Chamberlain/F_____g Couches*, published a series of



59 Poster for John Chamberlain, “*Soft and Hard*”: *Recent Sculpture*, Lo Giudice Gallery, Chicago, 1970. Photography Archives, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

photographs of Ultra Violet and her genitals, or made his sexually explicit improvised films.⁵³ If anything, sex was the one recurring element of content in his work. Speaking in general of his practice, he later recalled that “Softness and sexiness has much more to do with my work than automobile crashes” (see fig. 59).⁵⁴

It is clear from his statements that one must not think of coupling and the sexual simply in terms of Chamberlain’s personal erotic disposition, and I make no claims about him on this biographical level. While no doubt this comes into play, Chamberlain’s work is interesting not because his sculptures might be somehow imprinted by it. My interest, rather, is in Chamberlain’s recurring deployment of the analogy of the sexual to works that seem resolutely to resist figuration. This tells us little about Chamberlain the individual, but it points to the ways that his coupling of reference and abstraction (and his concomitant commitment to the sexual metaphor) has wider implications for how his work evokes and unsettles meanings and identifications. That is, if Chamberlain only ever explained his work

and practice by analogy (and this analogy has most often been to the “sexual fit”), then a way to understand the operations of his work is to pursue the implications of that analogy.

It is significant that Chamberlain himself was careful to emphasize that the sexual fit is not necessarily between himself and the sculpture but rather that it involves a sexuality of the parts, with each other. For instance, in a 1986 interview, he said: “Each part is different, and each part can fit to some place convenient to itself. In other words, if you have two parts and they fit together, not only do they become much stronger because of their union, but they tend to develop certain lines in relation to each other that suggest a marriage.”⁵⁵ In other words, what is this marriage if not a coupling of two gendered parts? But the parts are not securely identifiable as male or female, or even penetrative or receptive. As mentioned above, he 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. As he does repeatedly when talking around his works, he refuses to pin down a specific signification.

Throughout his career, one of Chamberlain’s primary concerns was to maintain possibility and openness in the meaning of his works rather than attempt to dictate how a viewer should respond to them. He once explained that “art is the only place left where a person can go discover something and not have to be told by somebody else whether they discovered it or not.”⁵⁶ This is an important statement, and it reflects Chamberlain’s main priorities for his art – transformation and discovery. Accordingly, his refusal to prescribe an essential meaning for his works was central to Chamberlain’s artistic priorities (and was, as well, reflected in his frequent evasiveness). Similarly, when making his repeated statements about the sexual fit, he rarely specified its variables through recourse to conventional gender or sexual identities. The fit was generative not prescriptive. By and large he preferred to keep the “sexual” in “sexual fit” deliberately vague, open, and inclusive. Ultimately, it is an unorthodox and unspecified gendered and sexual coupling that emerges from this metaphor that he recurrently conjoined with his abstract sculpture. This characterization of gender as multiple and variable was largely consistent in his statements on the sexual fit. For instance, in a late interview Chamberlain retained such strategic vagueness: “So you have a fit, and you have a form and you have a color. And so all of these three parts are – ...They’re having a good time together, if you put them together well.”⁵⁷ When Chamberlain repeatedly invoked sexuality in his work, his willful unspecificity about its makeup and parameters was significant and, furthermore, entirely in accord with his general avoidance of dictating



60 John Chamberlain, *Panna-Normanna*, 1972. Painted and chromium-plated steel, 170 × 218.5 × 261.5 cm (67 × 86 × 103 in). Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas.

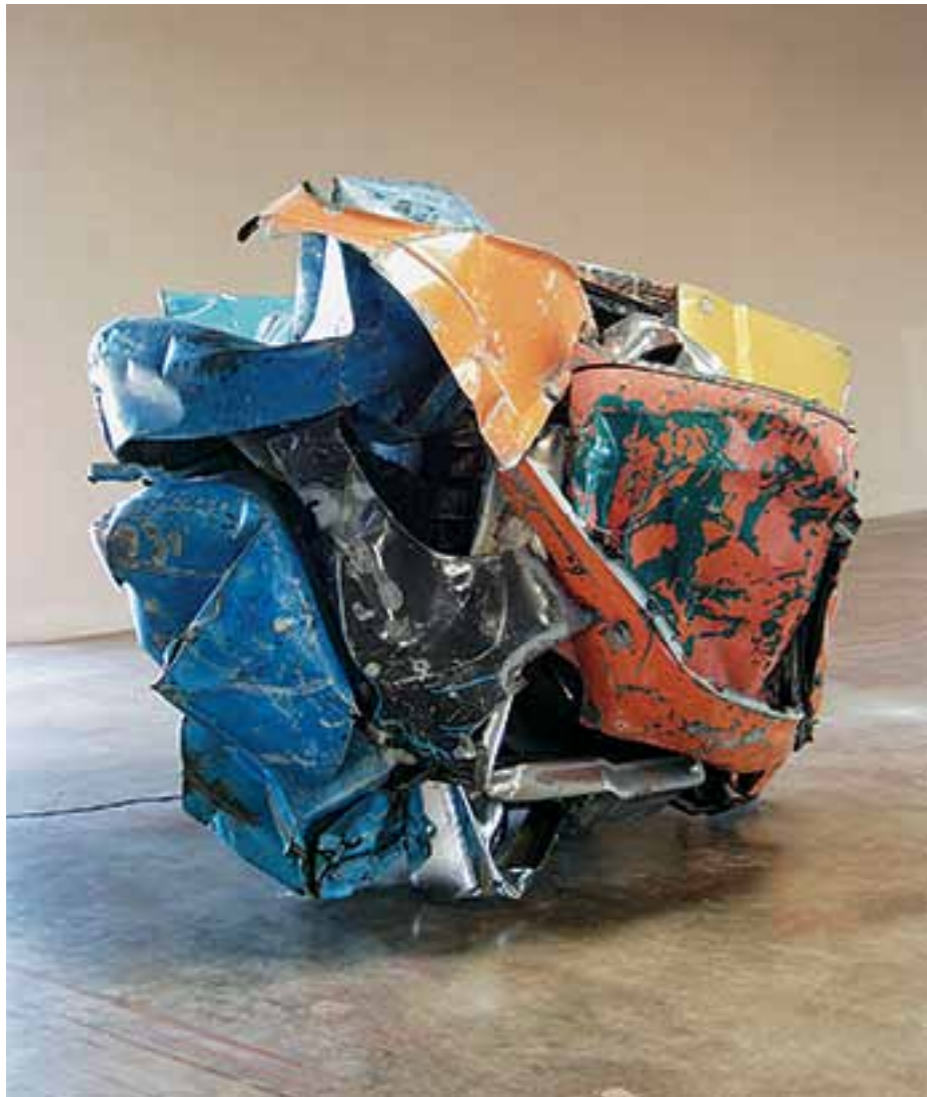


61 Detail of John Chamberlain, *Panna-Normanna*, 1972.

meaning or response for his sculptures. That is, he invoked meaning by referring to the sexual as an analogue for his process but willfully diverted any attempt simply or singularly to define its contours.

The characterization of fit and coupling as sexual, and consequently of his sculptures as summoning multiple but unspecified genders, has been seized on as a descriptive strategy by some commentators. Gary Indiana, writing about *Essex* and other related pieces, remarked:

The general impetus of the work is consciously sexual, not just in the snug interlocking of parts, but in the repetition of certain allusions, the deployment of unusually (and somewhat inexplicably) libidinal objects. The emphasis on certain elements throughout a sequence of works will



62 John Chamberlain, *Chili Terlingua*, 1972–74. Painted and chromium-plated steel, 176.5 × 208 × 264 cm (69½ × 82 × 104 in.). Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas.

stress, say, the erotic lure of crushed door panels, radiator grilles, impacted rear-end assemblies.... Consider the eroticism of the massive foam couches: vast, brooding, carnal invitations *designed for one thing and one thing only*.⁵⁸

This persistent invocation of the sexual in accounts offered by Chamberlain and others of his process and of his work makes it imperative to pursue

how gender manifests itself in those proposed relations. Sexuality continues to be primarily defined through the genders of its protagonists, and one can barely talk about the sexual without at least questioning what genders might be at play.⁵⁹ While gender and sexuality have since the early twentieth century been defined as distinct constellations of cultural and individual traits, they nevertheless implicate each other and are interdependently defined.⁶⁰ Most simply, the invocation of sexuality necessarily brings with it the question of genders (regardless of whether that question is answered or deferred). Chamberlain's deployment of the sexual analogies for his fitting is no different. One cannot avoid the fundamental issue of gender and its centrality to how the category of sexuality has itself been defined. What is significant about Chamberlain's rhetoric, however, is how this mutual implication of gender with sexuality interfaced with his own practice of raising the open-ended analogy of the sexual to his otherwise non-figural work.

As the sampling of critical discussions offered earlier attests, the identification of gender in the components and in the fit has proven difficult to pin down. One becomes easily frustrated if one seeks to assign genders securely to the parts, to the sculptures, or to aspects of Chamberlain's process. There is no hidden symbology of sexual organs or body parts.⁶¹ Many of Chamberlain's commentators have found it easier to leave gender indiscriminate while nevertheless calling for a sexualized reading of the work. Indiana, in the passage quoted, calls the parts "libidinal objects," for instance. Jochen Poetter emphasized a similar polymorphous gendering in Chamberlain's process:

In his work, Chamberlain has spoken repeatedly of the motif of sexuality and eroticism. How this motif might possibly be reflected in the cold metal-works may not be readily apparent. Since the mid-'seventies, Chamberlain has been purchasing car metal directly from the manufacturer. Molded to fit their function, painted and ready for assembly, initially the parts still share an anonymous origin. Only after they have been caught between the metal jaws of the press in the artist's workshop do they metamorphose into living forms.⁶²

Poetter's account of the sexual in Chamberlain's work is careful to leave sexes and genders unspecified, even going as far as to consider them emerging variably from the same raw materials. His metaphor of the primordial forging of gendered and sexual forms – always unspecified and new each time – is particularly suggestive. When asking about gender in these sculp-



63 John Chamberlain, *Four Polished Nails*, 1979. Painted and chromium-plated steel, 142 × 124.5 × 53.5 cm (56 × 49 × 21 in.). Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas.

tures, it is clearly inadequate (and unfruitful) to search for parts that could be nominated as male or female. Stable or static assignments or iconographies are not feasible. Rather, one needs to consider a wider range of possibilities for how the category of gender might be put into play as a result of Chamberlain's process and the analogy he offers for it. Poetter's own

metaphor for this is particularly resonant because Chamberlain's work and practice both rely on transformation as a fundamental priority – from the re-use of scrap metal, industrial products, and detritus to the resulting oscillation between abstraction and reference that this recycling fosters (recall Judd's statement about the "successive states of the same form or material").⁶³ The acts of transformation effected through coupling are what Chamberlain seeks to allude to with his talk of the "sexual fit." However, in order to explicate how his artistic process can support such an analogy to sexuality and, by implication, gender, one needs an account of gender that itself emphasizes material transformations. Required is a definition of gender that incorporates its mutability, its volitional potential, its temporality, and, most of all, the multiplicity of ways it is embodied (fig. 64). In short, Chamberlain's work demands that when pursuing gender one thinks beyond two given, static categories (and, for that matter, those categories' equation with assumptions of dimorphism).

As discussed in the Introduction, a central aim in the emergence of theories and histories of gender in recent decades has been to overturn assumptions that the sexed body is simply dimorphic and that genders are wholly biologically determined, static, and simply binary in scope. Gender identity cannot be assumed to be co-extensive with or deterministically arising from the sexed body.⁶⁴ Indeed, as histories of the medical establishment's problematic attempts to manage intersex individuals come to light, it is clear that the boundaries of the sexed body – beyond the complexities of gender at both the personal and the social levels – have never been inflexible or absolute.⁶⁵ Genders are contingent and hard-won modes of inhabiting bodies in negotiation with the cultural, historical, and social contexts in which they operate. As Judith Butler has remarked, "Terms of gender designation are thus never settled one and for all but are constantly in the process of being remade."⁶⁶ As she has argued, genders may come to seem "natural" or inherent for some, but any sense of "being" a gender is repeatedly subject to the need for its reinforcement. It is, thus, fundamentally temporal rather than static for all individuals, even though many may experience and enact gender identity as consistent. It is this temporal nature of gender that grounds the always-present potential for trans positions. To recall Susan Stryker's definition of trans, it is "the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place – rather than any particular destination or mode of transition."⁶⁷ Such a movement happens within a temporal register, and all genders are to a degree in transformation and changing, even if it is just the conventional narrative of childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Such transitions require work,



experimentation, and commitment to be and to inhabit a gender, however common or unique.

The understanding of gender as temporally construed is the fundamental epistemological shift for which transgender studies demands recognition. Central to this position is a critical analysis of the “idealization of dimorphism” that underwrites traditional notions of the sexed body.⁶⁸ By contrast, transgender histories place value on those many different types of existing genders and bodies that cannot be adequately described through binary, dimorphic, and static categories. The lessons of these accounts of gender are that any all-encompassing and fundamental binary division of humanity into only male and female bodies (and masculine and female genders which are assumed to correspond to those bodies) fails to tell us much about the complexity of individual lives and histories – let alone much about the contingent cultural categories of masculinity and femininity that only sometimes map onto them. Activist movements around transsexual, transgender, and intersex politics have provided the catalysts for such non-dimorphic and temporalized accounts of gender and, importantly, of human bodies. In turn, this more refined interrogation of gender diversity has allowed for the long-standing existences of varieties of transsexual and transgender lives in history to come to light. Ultimately, these critical formulations have deep ramifications not just for how one understands all genders but also for how one conceptualizes sexuality without privileging dimorphism.

While seemingly far from Chamberlain’s crushed auto parts, I contend that these understandings of genders via their temporalities and transformations are necessary to recognize the complexity he himself encourages for his work. After all, Chamberlain made transformation, contingency, and synergistic conjunction foundational priorities at both a material and a conceptual level. As Thomas Crow has remarked about these acts of making, “At the inception of [Chamberlain’s] process, each potential component circulates in a state of flux, a continuum which its ultimate sculptural destination, if it has one, remains undefined.”⁶⁹ Chamberlain’s best way of characterizing this unforeclosed potential was to make an analogy to the sexual, and it is from this analogy that Chamberlain’s work – as he maintained – drew its energy. But it is crucial that his particular overlay of sexuality onto abstraction denies easy identification, standard roles, binary

OPPOSITE 64 John Chamberlain, *F*****g Asterisks*, 1988. Painted chromium and plated steel, 243.8 × 207.6 × 119.3 cm (96 × 81¾ × 47 in.). Martin Z. Margulies Collection.

modes, and simple categorizations. His characteristic evocation and frustration of meaning – present in his titles, his statements, and even in his semi-allusive formal constellations – all demand openness rather than fixity. His deployment of the sexual analogy requires no less. The perspective gained through a recognition of transgender capacities most adequately registers the rejection of foreclosure about meaning, identification, and recognition that he often urged on behalf of his sculpture.

When talking about his own work, Chamberlain repeatedly gave the analogy of the sexual fit to the transformational process that results in each work, composed of multitudes of couplings, conjunctions, and fittings that aggregately make a cohesive whole – a sculpture. When the ramifications of this recurring analogy are pursued in the light of his other concerns over the unfixity of meaning, however, this characterization exceeds the confines of an understanding of genders and of bodies as being simply and irrevocably designated male or female. Most simply put, he always interjects the sexual into discussions of his practice and art in a way that leaves open and unfixed where and how the sexual coupling is located and between whom. In that interjection, gender is offered as a question with an indeterminate answer – one that is never either/or and one that can be posed again and again. It makes little sense to see only male and female in his works when he himself was careful to keep his options from being so limited or static. As many have noted when writing about Chamberlain's works and their relationship to the sexual, far more is going on.

However, it is not precise enough to see the gender operating in Chamberlain's work as fluid. Rather, it is directly rooted in the material possibilities offered by the individual parts and, once coupled with another, how those possibilities are developed or inflected by that new situation. Despite the fact that any assignment of gender to the parts must necessarily be contingent, this does not mean that it is random or arbitrary. It is the temporal process of his fitting of the parts that is significant, for it is one of transforming a material into a particular instance. Just as Judd spoke of the importance of recognizing the "successive states" of Chamberlain's materials and their "oblique imagery," so too must we recognize that the genders that he invokes are also the result of successive transformations – that is, transitioning from one state to another in response to the situations and conjunctions in which they are put.

Chamberlain's statements about ambiguous sexuality could be seen simply in terms of an inclusive definition of the sexual – a kind of "free love" attitude in which the sexual is available to all and any combinations. Such an interpretation of Chamberlain would, itself, be useful, but it would

nevertheless fail to embrace the full implications of his mapping of the sexual and, with it, the gendered onto abstraction. His work also implies a multiplication of genders and not just a limitless recombination of conventional or given ones. That is, the generation of semantic openness that Chamberlain claims over and over again for the work under the rubric of the sexual extends to gender beyond and in addition to sexuality.

It is not that Chamberlain necessarily intended to de-classify gender in the terms outlined here, and I am making no claims about any oppositional or critical intent on his part. Instead, it is the complexity of his artistic practice that prompts a need for an interpretative lens focused on the issues he raised for and through his work. While claiming that his sculpture is largely non-signifying and un-mimetic, Chamberlain nevertheless often titled and explained his works with reference to their manifestation of the sexual. Looking back on his career, he remarked, "A lot of my work is very erotic."⁷⁰ He urged viewers to find their own meanings in the work but gave them a nudge in the direction of the sexual and the gendered. In short, this is another moment of coupling a trait with its contradiction: his rigorously non-figurative art is couched in a rhetoric that constantly invokes the presence and potentiality of gender in it and in his process.⁷¹ Consequently, his work offers itself as an exemplary theoretical object through which to interrogate the manifestations of genders in a non-figurative register.

We are left to ask how and where genders emerge in Chamberlain's works? Some of his sculptures are, in fact, directly designated as simply female or male. This occurs most often with titles, but also can be coded through materials or colors, like the early works *Miss Lucy Pink* (see fig. 51) or the aforementioned *Huzzy* (see fig. 57). Equally, there are those that are titled as male, like *Son of Dudes* (fig. 65 and see fig. 52). These assignments, however, are never completely stable or unquestionable. One could note, for instance, that *Son of Dudes* is designated as male and as the product of male-male procreation. Titles like these more obvious ones leave little doubt that these figures are intended to be somehow understood in relation to conventional binary genders, yet it is not always clear how viewers are to link up that gender with the formal and artistic elements that are shared, across genders, with other work. In addition, the focus of the sexual fit is on the parts that make up the work as a whole, so no sculpture can be monolithically or simply gendered. Furthermore, when one looks more broadly at Chamberlain's oeuvre, these simply gendered works are only a portion of the whole.

Beyond sculpture labeled male or female, what about the works that seem to evoke more than one body with indeterminate genders, such as



LEFT 65 John Chamberlain,
Son of Dudes (see also fig. 52).

OPPOSITE 66 John
Chamberlain, *Three Cornered
Desire*, 1979. Painted and
chromium-plated steel,
177.8 × 261.6 × 177.8 cm
(70 × 103 × 70 in.). Dia Art
Foundation.



Three Cornered Desire (fig. 66), *Crowded Hearts*, and the *Socket* series (see fig. 44)? Just as with his explanations of his work, Chamberlain's titles often invoke genders and couplings without ever fully pinning them down to a color, an iconography, or a formal element. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the titles often go undiscussed (or suppressed) in the literature on Chamberlain. They are difficult to match up with the works, but they nevertheless can color or direct the viewer's experience of the work.⁷² In particular, they often key his sculptures to issues of the figure, the bodily, and the gendered. This is not superfluous to his work, but central to it. Importantly, however, Chamberlain introduces genders in a willfully undefined manner, positing them not as essential traits that simply are or are not there. They are, rather, open to contestation and refiguration in a way analogous to the critique of gender dimorphism and biological determinism

made by transgender theory. This is especially evident in the period when he reinvested his process in working with metal in the 1970s. This retrospective phase coincided with his increasing vocalization of the sexual metaphor for his process and his more explicit and complex staging of genders in the work. When one looks at his body of work as a whole, one can see how this assessment of his own process consistently and repeatedly raises the category of gender only to make its manifestation variable. Again, when talking about making and viewing these works – even the ones identified as a single body – Chamberlain talked about the “sexual fit” within them. For instance, in works from the late 1970s such as *Folded Nude* and *One Twin*, the question of unity and internal division are foregrounded. Both titles ostensibly refer to one body, but one that folds in on itself or is doubled (fig. 67). They are both coupled unities, identified as a body. In



neither, however, do we viewers see a clear identification of gender or any noetic resemblance to a human figure, only Chamberlain's comments about the "sexual fit" within ringing in our ears, prompting us to search for genders both in and of the work. There is no answer to this puzzle, however – no truth of gender there to be recovered once and for all in the sculpture or anchored to its individual parts.

For Chamberlain's most explicit staging of such issues, one could look to the *Kiss* sculptures, also from the late 1970s (figs 68–70; see also figs 72–74). Here, Chamberlain cited a long line of famous sculptures of kissing couples, such as those by Auguste Rodin and Constantin Brancusi (fig. 71), but he left the question open in his works as to who is doing the kissing. The coloring of the works demarcates two halves to each sculpture, implying a kiss between them. As one looks at the series as a whole, it becomes less easy to match up one side with one gender and another side with the other – or even with the same. In some, colors with gendered connotations (pink and blue) are used, but others use different combinations of colors. In all, there is no easy division into halves or segments but, rather, an ambiguity in their generally bilateral compositions. What, from one angle, might be identified as "male" might from another look "female." From yet another perspective, this same element could look like a little bit of both – or neither. Even in Brancusi's paired-down couple, he made sure subtly to indicate sexual difference between the figures with such details as the swelling belly and long hair of his female half. Chamberlain's *Kisses*, however, leave the question willfully open and circulating. The genders, that is, are successive transformations emergent from the same material object (the oil drum). To put it most bluntly, just as transgender theory argues that biology is not deterministic of the infinite variety of genders and the volition of the individuals who enact them, so too can one see in Chamberlain's evocation of the sexual a framing of gender that demands to be seen not as intrinsic or fixed but as the result of particular and unforecastable transformations.

Perhaps only with a full embrace of this open-endedness and – as Chamberlain put it – "discovery," can one understand the ramifications of his practice. His headlong formal ballet of poised, crushed metal is nothing less than a summary of transformations and metamorphoses. His use of the bodily dynamics of sexuality as his primary metaphor has the effect of



68 John Chamberlain, *Kiss #28*, 1979. Painted steel, 63.5 × 90 × 53.5 cm (25 × 35½ × 21 in.).

injecting a sort of free-floating and unspecified anthropomorphism into his work. This metaphor never resolves into an iconography or attaches itself to the work's forms no matter how much it suffuses his triumphantly lusty accounts of its making. It is this very lack of resolution between the committed non-referentiality of Chamberlain's work and his bodily and erotic allusions that produces an open-ended account of metamorphosis. The work took on a life of its own as Chamberlain adapted to the crushed materials and their balances in order to orchestrate its couplings. This was what he meant when he said, "The completion of the piece is intuitive."⁷³ Or as he described the job of the sculptor: "first to *see* the pieces, then to *put them together*. He isn't going to take each piece and twist it, bend it, direct it, before he adds it to the ensemble. He's going to choose each piece because he knows in advance it will fit...a sculpture dictates its own form."⁷⁴ This was the "discovery angle" that Chamberlain understood his polymorphous couplings producing for him and for viewers.

My concern in this analysis is to draw out from Chamberlain's works this capacity to allegorize the transformability of gender that is made visible

and fundamental in transgender theories and histories. It is Chamberlain's long-running insistence on tying the sexual to the non-figural in his particularly open way that seems to me to offer, on the one hand, a way toward a clearer recognition of the conceptual sophistication of his work and aims and, on the other, a way of offering an account of gender as transformed, temporal, and narrativized. This is useful because it is this understanding of gender as narratively construed as a transformation that is itself often difficult to represent, to figure, or to allegorize.⁷⁵

This might all seem far removed from Chamberlain's no-nonsense personality and his stated intentions, however vague. In no way did he espouse a critique of gender when he talked about his work, but he did rigorously attempt to unanchor and multiply meanings in it and in his process. In so doing this under the rubric of the sexual, however, he raised questions about gender in its traditional characterization as static and determined. Sometimes, interviewers posed these questions back to Chamberlain, who appropriately reacted with his characteristic dislike for dictating meanings and intentions. Rather than specify, he preferred openness when it came to his work. This is clearest in a terse but telling response to Henry Geldzahler in a 1992 interview. Geldzahler had remarked:

Aesthetically, the most amazing thing about your work is the same thing that is amazing about you. In order to do the work, you have to be an engineer on the one hand, and a poet on the other. You have to be a realist and a romantic at the same time. You have to be masculine and not afraid of being feminine all at the same time. Feminine in the sense that such an almost "nail polish-lipstick" aestheticizing is going on, which could embarrass someone who's embarrassed by things like that. I don't know, I just admire the fact that the structure is perfect, and at the same time, the color works. So tender. I know the idea of being feminine doesn't thrill you, but I think it's there.

Chamberlain's reply to him was simple and short: "Well it is. Everybody's both."⁷⁶

In this statement, one can see how fundamental the strategy of coupling was for Chamberlain's understanding of his work and his practice. It is not surprising that when confronted with a question about gender and his work, he would offer an answer that defied the conventional limitations of a binary either/or.

One outcome of this analysis of Chamberlain's deployment of sexuality and gender is to suggest connections between his project and larger contexts



69 John Chamberlain, *Kiss #11*, 1979. Painted steel, 62 × 99 × 51 cm (24½ × 39 × 20 in.).

and currents in postwar art history. He is often consigned to the narrow framework of a latecomer to Abstract Expressionism, and many have uncritically disregarded his work as merely formalist abstraction. This labeling of Chamberlain as an Abstract Expressionist (late or otherwise) has always been inadequate for him, and this taxonomy obscures much of the sophistication of his practice.⁷⁷ It is true that he was influenced by painters such as Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, but what are we to make of an artist who was both a fixture at the Cedar Bar and part of the group that filmed *Lone-*



70 John Chamberlain, *Kiss #11*, alternative view.

some Cowboys with Andy Warhol?⁷⁸ Chamberlain's tactics are less similar to the heroicism of the Abstract Expressionists to which he is often compared and more akin to the ambivalent and parataxical approach of a contemporary like Larry Rivers.⁷⁹ Similarly, Robert Smithson slyly saw in Chamberlain's work a comparison to Kenneth Anger's groundbreaking 1964 film *Scorpio Rising* with its camp take on motorcycle culture.⁸⁰ Perhaps the willful unfixity of meaning in Chamberlain's oeuvre is, as well, better compared to the critical engagement with silence and the blocking of direct expression



LEFT 71 Constantin Brancusi, *The Kiss*, 1919. Limestone, 58.4 × 33.7 × 25.4 cm (23 × 13¼ × 10 in.). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950-134-4.

BELOW 72 John Chamberlain, *Kiss #12*, 1979. Painted steel, 76 × 78.5 × 68.5 cm (30 × 31 × 27 in.).

OPPOSITE, TOP 73 John Chamberlain, *Kiss #26*, 1979. Painted steel, 63.5 × 73.5 × 51 cm (25 × 29 × 20 in.).

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM 74 John Chamberlain, *Kiss #12*, alternative view.





75 Installation view, Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas, with *Panna-Normanna*, 1972, in foreground.

characteristic of the work of Jasper Johns or Robert Rauschenberg. Chamberlain works from a different set of starting points from these other artists, with whom he seems to share little stylistic affinity or perspective. Nevertheless, his work – along with Johns, Rauschenberg, Anger, Warhol, and other artists such as Lee Bontecou and Sari Dienes – deployed sophisticated tactics for subverting readability and multiplying meanings that were developed, in part, from a reaction to the dominance of Abstract Expressionism and, significantly, from questions about how and why identity, sexuality, and gender could or should be registered and legible in artwork. In order better to consider Chamberlain's relation to the historical context and art-theoretical debates of his time, it is necessary to look for such connections that may not manifest themselves at the level of stylistic resemblance. One need just remember that Chamberlain's work appealed to a wide variety of his contemporaries – among those who owned his sculpture were Judd, Frank Stella, Johns, Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, and Warhol.

What I have attempted to outline in this chapter is a way of discussing Chamberlain's works that departs from the tired debate about whether they are about abstraction or about cars. Instead, I have sought to extrapolate larger theoretical issues that his practice manifests and that his rhetoric engenders. He persistently reminded his viewers that the key to understanding his work is in grasping the implications of his artistic process and its sexual fit. At base, gender and sexuality were crucial analogies through which he grappled with the full potential of the fitting of elements and the polyvalence that coupling generates. When Chamberlain spoke of the origins of his attitude, he recalled his time at Black Mountain College:

So I had this collection of words that I liked to look at. It didn't matter what they meant, I liked the way they looked. I would look at these words and I would put them together and come up with an image that was unlike what you could achieve if you didn't do it this way. I remember one line I wrote in which I put together two words: *blonde day*. I'd never thought of a day being blonde. I still haven't, but I liked the way that connection functioned, and it's a very good example of how I work....I guess that's part of my definition of art. Art is a peculiar madness in which you use other means of communication, means that are recognizable to other people, *to say something they haven't yet heard, or haven't yet perceived, or had repressed*.⁸¹

Chamberlain claims that the conjoining of the two terms creates new, as yet unimagined meanings. His combination of the words “blonde day” is neither meaningless nor nonsense. The unexpected coupling of the terms draws out their contingency and demonstrates the ability to create something wholly new. Even in this example, the body and gender are invoked but left ambiguous. A “blonde day” may mean something different to each of us, but it nevertheless has different possibilities from a “brunette night” – not to mention a “salt and pepper afternoon”. It is openness and the capacity for transformation that Chamberlain stresses. The act of fitting creates new possibilities for seeing the words differently and for seeing in their combination something that could not previously be visualized. One of Chamberlain's own mottos warrants repeating here: “art is the only place left where a person can go discover something and not have to be told by somebody else whether they discovered it or not.”⁸²

By now, it should be clear that Chamberlain's work is not about sex in any simple or banal way. Rather, to understand why and how the sexual operates for Chamberlain as an analogue to his practice is, on the one hand, to begin to understand how complex his works are with regard to their



play with meaning and, on the other, to see formulations of both sexuality and gender that are at once both more open and more inclusive. Throughout his statements about his work, Chamberlain left space and time both for coupling and for genders to be imagined otherwise. In this way, Chamberlain's work can be understood to push the long-running issue of abstract anthropomorphism beyond its limits – both in his consistent rejection of mimetic rendering of the human form and in his work's concomitant opening up of the ways in which the human may be located without recourse to resemblance to known bodies. This fostering of potentiality and this allegorization of transformation is precisely why his work is compelling, both visually and conceptually. By underscoring the strategic play in the works and in his words – and specifically the way they persistently call forth sexual and gendered possibilities in spite of the apparent abstraction of his sculptures – I think we can begin to understand how important it is to ask just how Chamberlain fits.

OPPOSITE 76 John Chamberlain, *Ultrafull Private*, 1967. Cor-ten steel and galvanized steel, 169.2 × 138.4 × 146.1 cm (66³/₈ × 54¹/₂ × 57¹/₂ in.) Dia Art Foundation.

99 Paraphrased in Joan Marter, “Arcadian Nightmares: The Evolution of David Smith and Dorothy Dehner’s Work at Bolton Landing,” in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen Landau (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 637.

100 Smith said, “Did I tell you I just made 130 or 140 paintings this year from models, all nude models. I don’t use drapery. When there’s pussy, I put pussy in. And when there’s a crack – on some of these girls who are so young you can’t even see a definition – I put it in because I think it will be there, sooner or later.” A more complete version of this 1964 interview was published as David Smith and Thomas Hess, “The Secret Letter,” in McCoy, *David Smith*, 180–81. Smith expressed reservation at this interview’s frankness, writing to the collector Lois Orswell, “Here is the catalog. A bit embarrassed about this tape [sic] revelations and bad English”; David Smith to Lois Orswell, n.d., in Marjorie Cohn, *Lois Orswell, David Smith, and Modern Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with Harvard University Art Museums, 2002), 289.

101 David Smith, radio interview with Marian Horosko, 25 October 1964, WNCN, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, transcript, p. 8.

102 Krauss, *Passages*, 148.

103 Smith, “Perception and Reality,” 78. Emphases original.

104 This was a general tactic for O’Hara. See Jim Elledge, “The Lack of Gender in Frank O’Hara’s Love Poems to Vincent Warren,” in *Fictions of Masculinity: Crossing Cultures, Crossing Sexualities*, ed. Peter F. Murphy (New York University Press, 1994), 226–37.

105 Cleve Gray, ed., *David Smith by David Smith: Sculpture and Writings* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 137.

106 David Smith quoted in Belle Krasne, “A David Smith Profile,” *Art Digest* 26, no. 13 (1952): 13.

107 David Smith, “Second Thoughts on Sculpture,” *Art Journal* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1954): 205.

108 Smith, “Language Is Image,” 81.

109 Gene Baro, “Some Late Words from David Smith,” *Art International* 9, no. 7 (20 October 1965): 51.

110 Humor was, after all, a key tool for O’Hara in his poetry and his criticism. As Perloff has remarked, “But as so often in O’Hara’s writings, the jocular tone masks an underlying seriousness”; Perloff, “O’Hara and the Aesthetics of Attention,” 798. On laughter and affect in O’Hara’s work, see Josh Robinson, “‘A Gasp of Laughter at Desire’: Frank O’Hara’s Poetics of Breath,” in Hampson and Montgomery, *Frank O’Hara Now*, 144–59.

111 Gray, *David Smith by David Smith*. For one of many examples of Gray’s rewriting of Smith’s words, compare p. 71 to Smith, “The Language Is Image,” 81.

112 Cleve Gray, ed. (memorial portfolio for David Smith), *Art in America* 54, no. 1 (January–February 1966): 47.

113 Gray, *David Smith by David Smith*, 87.

114 The only significant voice of skepticism about this statement has been Potts, who followed the literature in accepting the epigram as sincere but rightly notes that “ambiguities are apparent in Smith’s own commentary when he feels compelled to envisage his works as gendered presences and yet refuses any fixed associations between them and the viewer”; Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 176. At the time of writing his book (it was published in 2000), the only part of the Smith–O’Hara exchange that would have been readily available to Potts continued to be Gray’s altered version published more than three decades before and repeated throughout the Smith literature. (The only other variant I have found is not in the Smith literature but in the writing on O’Hara. An entirely idiosyncratic version can be found in Perloff, *Frank O’Hara*, 211 n. 22, which provides another instance of the desire to stabilize

gender ambiguity, decontextualize Smith’s joke, and remove O’Hara’s agency in the exchange by casting him as “self-effacing.” In Perloff’s version, Smith’s lines have been rewritten as the assertions “I don’t do males. I like the presence of these females.”) No full transcript was attempted until the 2006 Guggenheim exhibition, when the recording of the fully televised program was restored and transcribed. The availability of the original program was extremely limited before this. The Guggenheim’s full transcript has recently been published in Sarah Hamill, ed., *David Smith: Works, Writings and Interview* (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafia, 2011). See further discussion in n. 1 above.

115 Karen Wilkin, “A Sculptor Draws,” *Master Drawings* 40, no. 1 (2002): 54. My emphasis.

116 This is also the core argument of Krauss’s earlier “Essential David Smith 1,” 43–9 and later *Passages*, 147–81.

117 Sigmund Freud and James Strachey, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989).

118 Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works*, 93.

119 Anne Applebaum, “David Smith: Whitechapel Gallery,” *Artforum* 25, no. 8 (April 1987): 143.

120 In Krauss’s defense, it should be noted that she conveyed her anxiety about such simplifications, however obliquely, at the close of her chapter: “merely to scan his work for the brute recurrence of certain thematic material is to be left with nothing but an endless litany of characterological difficulties and irrelevant private preoccupations”; Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works*, 114.

121 David Smith as quoted in *ibid.*, 93: “the subject is me / the hero is the eye function / the image doesn’t lead / the morality is above / the work, or below / but never with.”

122 Tucker, “David Smith,” 29.

123 Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works*, 114.

124 Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 11. See further discussion in the Introduction.

125 *Ibid.*, 28. Such a stance is an expansion of earlier statements such as “the matrix of gender relations is prior to the emergence of the ‘human’”; Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 7.

126 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 24. Importantly, however, Butler’s use of the term “recognition” goes far beyond the discernment of familiar forms or formats. Instead, it is used with reference to her long-running account of subjectivity (and intersubjectivity) developed from her engagement with the writings of G. W. F. Hegel. See the foundational arguments for these ideas in Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections on Twentieth-century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

127 David Smith, Sketchbook no. 49, dated 1962–3, Estate of David Smith. Similarly, he said in 1952, “No artist ever finishes a picture. It’s up to the person who looks at it to finish it”; quoted in Krasne, “David Smith Profile,” 26.

2 IMMODERATE COUPLINGS: TRANSFORMATIONS AND GENDERS IN JOHN CHAMBERLAIN’S WORK

1 This is the foil for an early defense of Chamberlain, e.g., in Barbara Rose, “How to Look at John Chamberlain’s Sculpture,” *Art International* 12, no. 10 (January 1964): 36–8. Within critical, though not popular, opinion, the denial of reference has remained the dominant position. For a spirited, but ultimately unconvincing, rejoinder, see Duncan Smith, “In the Heart of the Tinman: John Chamberlain,” *Artforum* 22, no. 5 (January 1984): 39–43.

2 Elizabeth Baker, “The Chamberlain

Crunch,” *Art News* 70, no. 10 (February 1972): 26.

3 John Chamberlain, “A Statement,” in *John Chamberlain Sculpture: An Extended Exhibition* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1982), n.p. This is one of two nearly identical pamphlets prepared by the Dia Art Foundation for its long-term exhibitions of Chamberlain’s work, at 67 Vestry Street in New York and also at “Chamberlain Gardens” in Essex, Connecticut. This same text has been used by the Chinati Foundation since 1983 and it regularly distributes it in its permanent installation of Chamberlain’s work in Marfa, Texas. Archival copies of the Dia pamphlets can be found in the Richard Bellamy Papers, III.A.11, Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

4 Michael Auping, “John Chamberlain: Reliefs 1960–1982,” in *John Chamberlain: Reliefs 1960–1982* (Sarasota, FL: John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 1983), 12.

5 Chamberlain, “A Statement,” n.p. My emphasis.

6 Parataxis, defined as “The placing of propositions or clauses one after another, without indicating by connecting words the relation (of coordination or subordination) between them” (*OED*), was a fundamental strategy of modernist writers such as Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and William Carlos Williams. At Black Mountain College, Chamberlain developed his artistic practice, in part, out of his reading of such authors. See Julie Sylvester, “Auto/Bio: Conversations with John Chamberlain,” in *John Chamberlain: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Sculpture 1954–1985*, ed. Julie Sylvester (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1986), 11. On the importance of parataxis, see e.g. David Hayman, *Re-forming the Narrative: Toward a Mechanics of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987).

7 Donald Judd, “Chamberlain: Another View,” *Art International* 12, no. 10 (January 1964): 39.

8 Rose, “How to Look,” 38.

9 Elizabeth Baker, “The Secret Life of John

Chamberlain,” *Art News* 68, no. 2 (April 1969): 64.

10 Klaus Kertess, “Color in the Round and Then Some: John Chamberlain’s Work, 1954–1985,” in Sylvester, *John Chamberlain*, 38.

11 Gary Indiana, “John Chamberlain’s Irregular Set,” *Art in America* 71, no. 10 (1983): 208.

12 “And if it is possible any longer for sculpture to have an expressive as well as a formal content, then it is John Chamberlain, who, uniting the fragile with the massive, the poignant with the brutal, and the gentle with the violent, seeks at the moment its fullest realization”; Rose, “How to Look,” 38.

13 Brian O’Doherty related the story of a Chamberlain accidentally hauled away as garbage; Brian O’Doherty, “Chamberlain: Projective Sculpture,” in *John Chamberlain: Recent Sculpture* (New York: PaceWildenstein, 1994), 5–6.

14 Rose, “How to Look,” 38.

15 Donald Judd, from an August 1964 article repr. as part of Donald Judd, “John Chamberlain,” in *John Chamberlain: New Sculpture* (New York: Pace Gallery, 1989), iv.

16 Kertess, “Color in the Round,” 38.

17 *Ibid.*, 26.

18 For discussions of Gibson’s *Tinted Venus* and of sculptural polychromy in the nineteenth century, see Andreas Blühm, *The Colour of Sculpture 1840–1910* (Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers for Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, and Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 1996).

19 For a general discussion see David Batchelor, *Chromophobia: Ancient and Modern, and a Few Notable Exceptions* (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute Essays on Sculpture, 1997). This argument about sculpture was later reprised in David Batchelor, *Chomophobia* (London: Reaktion, 2000).

20 E. C. Goosen, “Two Exhibitions,” in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), 173.

21 Darby Bannard, “Cubism, Abstract Expressionism, David Smith,” *Artforum* 6, no. 8 (April 1968): 32.

22 Fielding Dawson understood Chamberlain’s work as a hairdresser and make-up artist to be central to his artistic practice. In a stream of consciousness remark, Dawson declared, “If I had any doubts that his work had somehow emerged from barbering and hairstyling – and painting – the head as foundation, even *lapis*, is not at bottom, but in the center, with all parts around it, to give head body, which in part the Hollywood film did pursue, and was indeed too close, to John”; Fielding Dawson, “Self Portrait in Steel: A Talk with John Chamberlain,” *Arts Magazine* 64, no. 8 (April 1990): 56. Such an emphasis on this earlier career is also central to Carl Andre’s concrete poem for Chamberlain, which is based on the words “shear” and “thought,” with the resulting combination “shearthought” relying on the homonym “sheer”; Carl Andre, “A Word for John Chamberlain” (1961/71), first published in *Artforum* 10, no. 6 (February 1972): 6 and reproduced in Dieter Schwarz, ed., *John Chamberlain: Papier Paradisio* (Winterthur: Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 2005), 44. Chamberlain briefly discussed his work as a hairdresser in Sylvester, “Auto/Bio,” 10. See also Michael Auping, *30 Years: Interviews and Outtakes* (Fort Worth, Tex: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 2007), 97, where Chamberlain remarked: “As it turns out, car metal offers me the correct resistance so that I can make a form – not overform it or underform it. At one time, hair offered me the right resistance. I think I probably learned about resistance when I was cutting hair.”

23 Phyllis Tuchman, “An Interview with John Chamberlain,” *Artforum* 10, no. 6 (February 1972): 40. Chamberlain also ended his artist statement for the Dia Foundation with “As an artist I give away more than I would if I ran a beauty shop”; Chamberlain, “A Statement,” n.p.

24 Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965): 82. In this essay, Judd opposed “sculpture” to “three-dimensional work” (i.e., specific objects) that would be “neither painting

nor sculpture” (74). He saw Chamberlain as a central example.

25 Robert Creeley, “John Chamberlain,” in *Recent American Sculpture*, ed. Hans van Weeren-Griek (New York: Jewish Museum, 1964), 17.

26 John Chamberlain quoted in Marcia Corbino, “Creating Art from Industrial Waste,” *Sarasota Herald Tribune* (18 January 1981): 16. I am grateful to Adrian Kohn for alerting me to this reference. Chamberlain also explained his hiatus from using automobile bodies along these lines: “I was tired of using automobile material, because the only response I ever got was that I was making automobile crashes and that I used the automobile as some symbolic bullshit about society. All of a sudden sculpture was the only thing that was supposed not to have color in our society. The fact that all this material had color had made it very interesting to me. But the more interested I got in it, the more everyone kept insisting it was car crashes”; in Sylvester, “Auto/Bio,” 21.

27 This contradiction between a hope for pure formalism on the part of some of Chamberlain’s critics and the artist’s more promiscuous and wry play with meaning and reference (both in the works themselves and in the modifying titles he gave to them) is evidenced in the recent catalogue to the 2012 retrospective at the Guggenheim. The catalogue paradoxically contains an essay claiming that the titles should be understood as meaningless combinations of words for their visual properties while, at the same time, the book concludes with a lexicon of Chamberlain’s titles that traces their references and allusions. See Susan Davidson, ed., *John Chamberlain: Choices* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2012).

28 Donald Judd, “Local History,” (1964), in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959–1975* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), 152–3. Emphases mine. For a discussion of the importance of this quotation for

Judd, see David Raskin, *Donald Judd* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 42–8.

29 In Chamberlain's late work with aluminum tubes, he came to emphasize compression and twisting as a modification of his practice of fitting. This work, as well, turns on the recognition of the repurposed and transformed material as a signal of art's capacity for "discovery." See discussion in David Getsy, "John Chamberlain's Pliability: The New Monumental Aluminium Works," *Burlington* magazine 153, no. 1304 (November 2011): 738–44.

30 This particular phrase was used in the course of Bonnie Clearwater, "John Chamberlain interview, 1991 Jan. 29–30" (Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1991), 38, but the theme of art as transformation and discovery are repeated throughout Chamberlain's statements. See further discussion later in this chapter.

31 John Chamberlain and Viva Auder, treatment for *The Secret Life of William Shakespeare*, n.d., Richard Bellamy Papers III.A.12, Museum of Modern Art Archives. For a discussion of Chamberlain's *Secret Life of Hernando Cortez*, see Angelica Beckmann, "The Roving Eye: On John Chamberlain's Approach to Photography and Film," in *John Chamberlain*, ed. Jochen Poetter (Stuttgart: Edition Cantz and Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, 1991), 115–24, with a transcription of the improvised film's lines on pp. 187–205, and Baker, "Secret Life," 48–51, 63–4.

32 Chamberlain and Auder, treatment for *Secret Life of William Shakespeare*, 6–7.

33 *Ibid.*, 20.

34 *Ibid.*, 7. Emphases original.

35 Robert Creeley, "Interview with John Chamberlain, 11/29/1991" (unpublished), 13; original in artist's estate.

36 Tuchman, "Interview," 40.

37 For a useful account of the impact of Black Mountain on Chamberlain, see Dieter Schwarz, "To Create the Flow," in Schwarz, *John Chamberlain*, 8–25.

38 Hans Ulrich Obrist, *John Chamberlain*, The Conversation Series (Cologne: Buchhandlung Walther König, 2006), 69.

39 Baker, "Secret Life," 49.

40 Sylvester, "Auto/Bio," 24. Compare John Chamberlain and Klaus Kertess, "John Chamberlain in Conversation with Klaus Kertess, 8 October 2005," *Chinati Foundation Newsletter* 11 (October 2006): 10. Kertess began: "So can we talk about those urethane [foam] pieces a little? Chamberlain: I thought we would lie a lot."

41 Obrist, *John Chamberlain*, 63. Emphases original.

42 Referring to his attempts to write good art criticism, Judd said: "A little article on John Chamberlain's work long ago is the nearest I've come to this effort"; Donald Judd, "Art and Architecture," (1983), in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1975–1986* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 1987), 27. On Judd's priorities in his art criticism, see David Raskin, "Judd's Moral Art," in *Donald Judd*, ed. Nicholas Serota (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), 78–95; David Raskin, "The Shiny Illusionism and Krauss and Judd," *Art Journal* 65, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 6–21; Raskin, *Donald Judd*.

43 Judd, "Chamberlain," (1965), 190. This is, in fact, one of the most frequently quoted statements by Judd on Chamberlain.

44 Judd also re-described excess in a positive light when he repeatedly praised Chamberlain for using more metal and space than required. His term for this was "redundancy." See Judd, "Chamberlain: Another View," 39, and further in the collected writings of Judd on Chamberlain in Judd, "Chamberlain" (1989), i–xi.

45 E.g. in response to Fielding Dawson's question as to why he began making independent films, Chamberlain replied, "So I could take Ultra Violet to some secret place and fuck her"; Dawson, "Self Portrait in Steel," 57.

46 Larry Bell, "Perfect Fit," *Artforum* 50, no. 7 (March 2012): 239, 241.

47 Judd, "Chamberlain: Another View," 38.

48 Kertess, "Color in the Round," 30.

49 John Chamberlain in Elizabeth Baker et al., "Excerpts from a Conversation," in *John Chamberlain: A Retrospective Exhibition*, ed. Diane Waldman (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1971), 17.

50 Chamberlain, "A Statement," n.p.

51 Kertess's sensitive and exemplary essay for the 1986 catalogue raisonné comes closest to a full analysis of this issue, but his commentary was largely limited to a few sentences. In a promising but unfulfilled move, Kertess argued: "And clearly the *motive* of his *auto* is erotics – the erotics of art." Immediately after this sentence, he used this wordplay to jump to a discussion of automobiles. Kertess, "Color in the Round," 30.

52 John Chamberlain, unpublished interview with Michael Auping, 1 October 1981, quoted in Auping, "Chamberlain: Reliefs," 12.

53 *John Chamberlain/F_____g Couches* was at Lo Giudice Gallery, New York, in affiliation with Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, in 1972. Chamberlain had been experimenting with foam couches since the late 1960s. Dan Graham has discussed the "shared body experience [that is] very '60s 'hippie'" afforded by these works in Dan Graham, "John Chamberlain: Conceptual Artist," in *John Chamberlain: New Sculpture*, ed. Kara Vander Weg (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2011), 140. The Ultra Violet photographs were published in John Chamberlain, "Ultra Violet in Depth," *New York Review of Sex & Politics* 1, no. 2 (1 April 1969): 12–16.

54 Creeley, "Interview with John Chamberlain," 22.

55 Chamberlain in Sylvester, "Auto/Bio," 23.

56 Clearwater, "John Chamberlain interview," 16.

57 Chamberlain and Kertess, "Chamberlain in Conversation," 17.

58 Indiana, "Chamberlain's Irregular Set," 212. Emphasis original.

59 However, sexuality need not be defined

exclusively in terms of the sex(es) or gender(s) of participant(s), even though this remains the dominant convention. As Kosofsky Sedgwick remarked, "The definitional narrowing-down in this century of sexuality as a whole to a binarized calculus of *homo-* or *heterosexuality* is a weighty fact but an entirely historical one"; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 31. Similarly, Judith Butler asked: "If a sexuality is to be disclosed, what will be taken as the true determinant of its meaning: the phantasy structure, the act, the orifice, the gender, the anatomy?" Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 17. See further discussion in the Introduction above.

60 For a discussion of the effects of the categorical separation of "gender" from "sexuality" in the twentieth century, see David Valentine, "The Categories Themselves," *GLQ* 10, no. 2 (2003): 215–20 and David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 29–65.

61 Some literal-minded critics have attempted to see such elements as paint splatters as ejaculations. This attempt to find obvious iconographies is not only counter to Chamberlain's way of characterizing the work but also fails to account for the ways in which the work is painted before being made into sculpture.

62 Jochen Poetter, "'No leaning on the oars': On John Chamberlain's High-energy Ideograms," in Poetter, *John Chamberlain*, 30.

63 In 1979, Chamberlain remarked, "I think of my art materials not as junk but as – garbage. Manure, actually; it goes from being the waste material of one being to the life-source of another. That is, if you acknowledge that, by their resistance and form, the cars have been re-invested by me with aesthetic power. That attitude – of

recycling – spills over into my other subjects or materials – foam and glass”; repr. in Schwarz, *John Chamberlain*, 92.

64 A recent overview of the complex relationships among biology, psychology, and social context for the emergence of gender is given in Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World* (New York: Routledge, 2012). See also Rebecca M. Jordan-Young, *Brain Storm: The Flaws in the Science of Sex Differences* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010).

65 See the important book by Elisabeth Reis, *Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009). See also Melanie Blackless et al., “How Sexually Dimorphic Are We? Review and Synthesis,” *American Journal of Human Biology* 12 (2000): 151–66.

66 Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 10.

67 Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, Calif: Seal Press, 2008), 1.

68 The phrase “idealization of dimorphism” is Judith Butler’s from *Undoing Gender*, 203. On the topic of the body and the cultural inscription of sex, see further her *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

69 Thomas E. Crow, “Figures of Emergence in the Recent Sculpture of John Chamberlain,” in Vander Weg, *John Chamberlain*, 6.

70 Obrist, *John Chamberlain*, 115.

71 A related but distinct claim is made about Eva Hesse in Anne Middleton Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O’Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

72 In a late interview, Chamberlain remarked about his titles’ ambiguity, “And the titling has nothing to do with the object, any more than, for example: Hans is your name, you’ve had it all your life, you’re quite used to it, everybody would know you...But there’s nothing specific about

the word ‘Hans’ with the person other than everybody’s got used to it”; Obrist, *John Chamberlain*, 111–12. Despite its arbitrariness, however, naming does, as Chamberlain’s words reflect, come to affect how we know, recall, and relate to the named person or thing.

73 Chamberlain, “A Statement,” n.p.

74 Chamberlain and Auder, treatment for *Secret Life of William Shakespeare*.

75 See discussions in Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005); Jay Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

76 Henry Geldzahler, “Interview with John Chamberlain,” in *John Chamberlain: Recent Work* (New York: Pace Gallery, 1992), n.p.

77 Elizabeth Baker urged such a distinction in 1972, when she wrote, “The idea that Chamberlain remains a ‘Tenth Street Abstract-Expressionist’ dies hard – and it was not much of an insight to begin with. This is the crudest of misconceptions still in circulation about his work today”; Baker, “Chamberlain Crunch,” 27.

78 As David Bourdon explained, after Ondine failed to arrive in Arizona for the filming of *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968), Chamberlain was offered his role as “Padre Lawrence, described in the scenario as a ‘degenerate and unfrocked priest who tries to hide his addiction to opium-laced cough syrups.’...[He] was also invited to play the father of the cowboy brothers, but declined that part, too, on the grounds that he wasn’t old enough”; David Bourdon, *Warhol* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 271. See also Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol ’60s* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 260–2. As Matthew Tinkcom has discussed, *Lonesome Cowboys* explicitly problematized the heteronormative mascu-

linity that was seen as definitional of the Western genre: “Indeed, the hostility towards masculinity voiced at moments in the film would suggest that part of the film’s effect is to offer no identificatory pleasure for the straight male spectator, a turnabout from the usual expectations of the Hollywood Western”; Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 112–13. For further discussion of Warhol’s relation to Chamberlain, see Edward Leffingwell, “A Box with a Hole in It,” in *Wide Point: The Photography of John Chamberlain*, ed. Donna De Salvo (Southampton, N.Y.: Parrish Art Museum, 1993), 33–9.

79 See Larry Rivers and Arnold Weinstein, *What Did I Do? The Unauthorized Autobiography of Larry Rivers* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 74–105.

80 Robert Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments,” *Artforum* 4, no. 10 (June 1966): 30.

81 Chamberlain in Sylvester, “Auto/Bio,” 11. Emphasis mine.

82 Clearwater, “John Chamberlain interview,” 16.

3 SECOND SKINS: UNBOUND GENDERS OF NANCY GROSSMAN’S SCULPTURE

1 Transcript of Arlene Raven presentation, Photography Institute, New York, 1999; archived at <http://www.thephotographyinstitute.org/www/1999/raven.html>, accessed 3 April 2014.

2 Grossman’s engagement with abstraction and assemblage (and the shift to “figuration” in the form of head sculptures) could be productively positioned in the narrative about hybrid practices and realist aims for American and Euro-

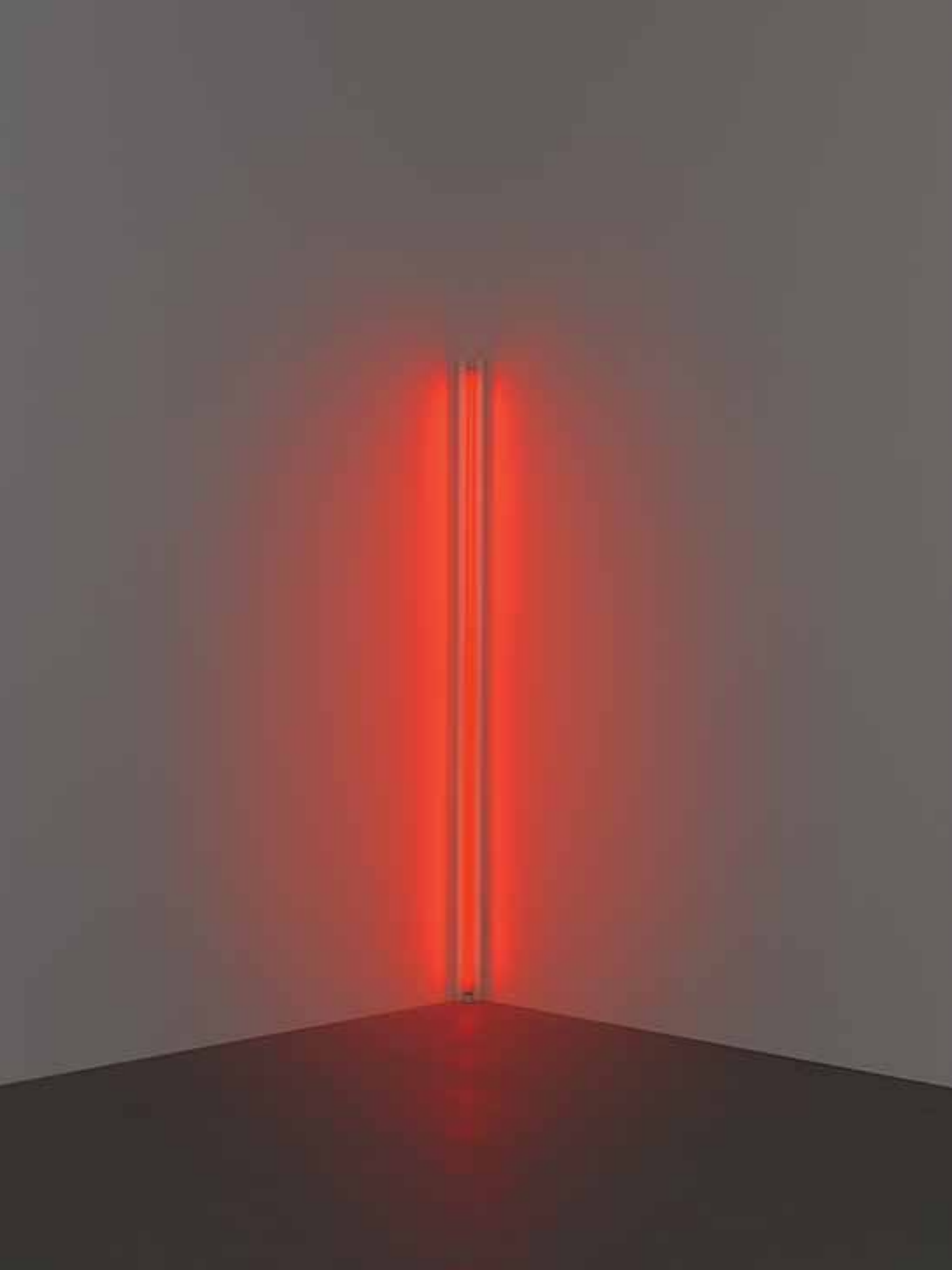
pean art in the postwar period offered by Alex Potts in his recent book. He compellingly argues that oppositions between abstraction and figuration are not just artificial but have hindered recognition of postwar art’s political and social engagements; Alex Potts, *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013).

3 Much more attention, e.g., has been given to Philip Guston’s shift to figuration in 1970, two years after Grossman had also pivoted from abstraction. For a detailed assessment of Guston’s “return” to figuration and the context for such shifts, see Robert Slifkin, *Out of Time: Philip Guston and the Refiguration of Postwar American Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 237–54.

4 B[rian] O’D[oherty], “Nancy Grossman (Krasner),” *New York Times*, 23 February 1964, X18.

5 Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1975). Early in the 1970s, Grossman appeared in the pantheons offered in Barbaralee Diamonstein, “100 Women in Touch with Our Time,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, 3110 (January 1971): 104–16 and Mary Beth Edelson, “Some Living American Women Artists,” *Off Our Backs* 4, no. 2 (1974): 10–11.

6 By 1976, one writer was claiming about the artist’s mixed success and isolation from the mainstream art world that “She has been in a half-dozen solo shows, been included in group exhibitions around the country, is represented in the collections of some of the most sophisticated art patrons around. But Nancy Grossman, at 35, remains almost unknown to the general public and much of the art world. Her name is not one of the ‘musts’ automatically included in any big art-now museum survey. Her work is rarely discussed or even listed in new books”; Emily Genauer, “Big ‘Unknown’ Talent: Drawings by



ABSTRACT BODIES

SIXTIES SCULPTURE IN THE
EXPANDED FIELD OF GENDER

DAVID J. GETSY

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Frontispiece: Dan Flavin, *red out of a corner (to Annina)*, 1963/70 (detail of fig. 116).
Page vi: Detail of Nancy Grossman, *For David Smith*, 1965 (fig. 82).

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