

## DAVID J. GETSY

I NEVER INTENDED to study art history; I had no exposure to it. I was a first-generation college student, and the most important thing to me was queer activism and the AIDS crisis. My first job, as a high-school student in upstate New York in the late 1980s, had been working at Binghamton General Hospital delivering food to patients. I still remember the first time a patient was there due to AIDS-related complications. I could barely see his face behind layers of protective curtains, and I was told to wear a special mask and gloves before entering this room that looked so different from any of the others on my route. I was 16, and I saw myself for the first time. Soon after, I started volunteering at the Southern Tier AIDS Program (and met my first queer mentor, Laurie Bennett, the volunteer coordinator who took me under her wing and whose example and guidance helped me more than she ever knew).

I went to college with these experiences and the determination to do something. Art was not really part of the plan, but in my first year at Oberlin College, I became swept up (as many did) by the powerful teaching of feminist art historian Patricia Mathews. She modeled a mode of engagement with culture that was political and critical.<sup>1</sup> She taught me the importance of looking beyond and beneath the observable to visualize resistance and respite. Still, I couldn't help but see a contradiction between my work on queer issues in campus politics and the excitement of wading into academics and art history.

in Yasmeen Siddiqui and Alpesh Patel, eds., *Storytellers of Art Histories* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Books, 2022), 75–79.

One of my other Oberlin professors, the inimitable William Hood, would—every time I saw him in subsequent years—remind me how I cried in our methodology seminar. My reasons were good. We were talking about Ernst Gombrich's oblique writing about the Holocaust, and it led to a question of personal responsibility to history and to the world. Bill told a story about his own past and explained his conflicted experience of taking a leave from graduate school during protest movements against the war in Vietnam. I lost it. What was the point, I thought, of doing something as effete as art history in the face of all that needed to be done? My crisis of faith hit me in that seminar, with Bill looking incredulously but supportively at me (shocked, I think, that his own story had such an impact).

I didn't leave art history, however, but this event made it clear to me that I needed a sense of purpose greater than I had given it. Art history, for me, became a place where I could make a case for finding positions outside and against the expected or the "natural" ones—that is, queer positions. I still feel ambivalent about letting my activist energies wane, and only years later did I come to balance that feeling with a recognition of how important it has been to do the often unseen work of supporting other scholars and students of transgender and queer topics. Or, at least, I hope it makes up for it a little.

I emphasize this formative undergraduate moment because it comes back for me often when I ask myself (as we all do), what's the point of all this effort? Scholarship is rarely activism, but it does make a difference. Whether in the classroom, in the reader's report, or in a publication, I can facilitate a conversation with far different horizons than were available to me or to those who came before. We need to be in those conversations for them to happen, and they can happen anywhere.

My attempt to contribute has been to ask about the ways art history can address the determining role of the visual for queer and transgender people. We don't know a person when we see a body, and trans and queer people have to negotiate (differently) questions of disclosure and exposure daily through the navigation of scrutiny, surveillance, camouflage, defiant spectacle, and the searching look. For me, this is why there is an organic relationship between art history's ongoing debates about the human form and transgender and queer histories and politics.

I started on this path out of frustration with the ways in which a queer art history was limited (by both its advocates and its detractors) by a demand for visual evidence. This came down to an exclusive focus on bodies and sexual acts, and “gay and lesbian art history,” as it was just beginning to be called when I started graduate school, remained largely focused on the figure, often nude, perhaps coupled. From the beginning, my work has been about thinking about queer experience more broadly, with the understanding that outlawed desires and ways of living are about much more than just sex. This isn’t to avoid or deny sex, but to decry the narrow taxonomy of allowed visualizations of its effects on the ways we live and love. For those antagonistic to a queer art history (or for a scholar who thinks it is merely “niche” or auxiliary to art history), there is a persistent demand for visual confirmation. If they cannot clearly see evidence, it must not be there. Traditional historical methodologies demand evidence but have no way of redressing the erasures and suppressions of histories that made evidence of homoeroticism, queer desires or nonascribed genders impossible, unarchivable, or invisible. In particular, it was my dissertation work under Whitney Davis on the queer forebear John Addington Symonds that laid the foundation for me.<sup>2</sup> I struggled with Symonds’s coded ways of arguing that queer experience mattered and that history offered a means of being seen in a culture that refuses to do so. His desire to find evidence of homoeroticism outside of the easily recognizable and identifiable became mine. I also began to see how much a queer or transgender history was a history not just of self-evident objects of study but also of others’ disavowals, refusals to recognize, and condescending silences.

I also had to face my own refusal to recognize, however. Soon after I started teaching, I was afforded the opportunity to teach queer theory and queer art history. I was excited about this, but teaching is not reading. It is a conversation. Through the conversations with my students about how to wrestle with these ideas, I kept stumbling on my own language.

It became increasingly clear to me that my received accounts of queer experience (including my own) had been hampered by a presumption of binary genders. I came to see how the queer theory I was reading made transgender subjects invisible or, at dubious best, deployed stereotypes about them. This was over fifteen years ago, and it was then that I committed

myself to learning the literature on what was then coalescing as transgender studies. I remember thinking at this moment about my undergraduate crisis of faith, and I resolved to do something.

This was a risk, as is any attempt to write about an identity that one does not share, but I also understood that I was in the position to be able to contribute. When I started learning from and eventually contributing to transgender studies, you could still count the number of tenured transgender studies scholars in the humanities on one or maybe two hands. The fabled “transgender tipping point” was still to happen. Work was being done in literature, film studies, and popular culture, but there was no sustained work in art history about transgender issues. I asked myself how I might support its growth. My answer to this was not to write from an experience I did not have, but rather to ask how gender’s multiplicity had been obscured from historical narratives. I came to study abstraction, with its avoidance of figuration, as a test case to discuss the limitations of binary ascriptions—and how to imagine what might be beyond them.<sup>3</sup>

For the first few years of graduate school, I always got embarrassed when I remembered crying in my undergraduate seminar, but now I recall that moment when I need to keep myself honest or on the path. That conversation was about the question of personal responsibility in the face of forces beyond control or even comprehension. I didn’t take from it the answer about what to do, but I did take the conviction that I had to keep asking myself the question.

## Notes

1. This is exemplified in Mathews’ and Thalia Gouma-Peterson’s coauthored state-of-the-field essay “The Feminist Critique of Art History,” *Art Bulletin* 69, no. 3 (1987): 326–57, and her book *Passionate Discontent: Creativity, Gender, and French Symbolist Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), which I have often used in my own teaching.
2. The result was my article “Recognizing the Homoerotic: The Uses of Intersubjectivity in John Addington Symonds’ 1887 Essays on Art,” *Visual Culture in Britain* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 37–57. During this time, Davis was working on the book that became his *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics*

*from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

3. See “Capacity,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, nos 1–2 (May 2014), 47–49; “Introduction: Trans Cultural Production” (coauthored with Julian B. Carter and Trish Salah), *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (November 2014): 469–81; and *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015).