

Camilla Boemio, "Beyond the Wall: Body, Gender, Sexuality, and Art. A Conversation with David J. Getsy," *Exibart.com* (29 March 2017)

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David J. Getsy is Goldabelle McComb Finn Distinguished Professor of Art History at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His books include *Queer* (2016), *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (2015), *Scott Burton: Collected Writings on Art and Performance* (2012), and *Rodin: Sex and the Making of Modern Sculpture* (2010).



Gordon Hall, *Set (XI)*, 2015 (installed in its disassembled arrangement). Pigmented joint compound and tile mosaic.

Camilla Boemio: As you say on your website, the questions you ask of the history of art are developed from engagements with the interdisciplinary fields of transgender studies and queer studies, and you focus on topics relating to sculpture and performance. Your aims are to infiltrate canonical narratives and to use transgender and queer theories as the basis from which to reconsider all artistic practice. Tell us more about your research? And How developing the basis to reconsider all artistic practice?

David Getsy: Gender and sexuality are always in play when we look at a picture or a sculpture of a body, but they also inform the ways in which we seek to make sense of the world and how we engage with each other socially and politically. I am committed to advocating for those positions that we are told are

“wrong,” that supposedly do not exist, or that should not be permitted. I study the ways in which the history of art offers episodes of resistance to attempts to police identity and to reduce the complexity of the world and its people to simple oppositions (male/female, normal/abnormal, natural/unnatural). There is much evidence for gender’s multiplicity, for the transformation of genders, and for many different forms of sexualities. For instance, this means asking how non-binary thinking about gender allows us to see abstraction differently, how sexual subcultures provide different models for community, and how gender and sexuality operate beyond a narrow focus on the human body alone.

My research into art from the nineteenth century to the present day pursues these questions. This means working on transgender and queer artists, but also by looking differently at artists who do not share those identities. So, for instance, I wrote a book on Rodin and talked about the ways in which sexuality informed his studio practice. Rodin was famously heterosexual, but I discussed the ways in which — early on — he developed his attitude toward sculpture out of a complicated identification with Michelangelo and the sexuality of his work. My last book talked about the ways in which abstract sculptors’ commitments to non-figuration led them to create works that complicated a simple binary view of gender. This was above and beyond their own identities and their intentions, and there were even moments when they faced the gender complexity in their works that they had not intended.

A narrow view would be that queer topics have nothing to do with straight people and that transgender issues have nothing to do with cisgendered people. That’s not just inaccurate, but it is also a practice of compartmentalization and marginalization. Instead, I argue that an attention to non-normative

sexualities and complex genders allows us to see larger structural issues and, ultimately, to get closer to the unruly ways in which art objects ask questions and compel multiple responses. For instance, the reality is that there has been a suppression of centuries’ worth of evidence about gender’s multiplicity and transformability. This is because it affects the way we understand the category of the person and impacts everyone’s understanding of themselves — regardless of their individual relationship to gender. The reception of art objects can show just how fragile our conceptions of what is “normal” really are.

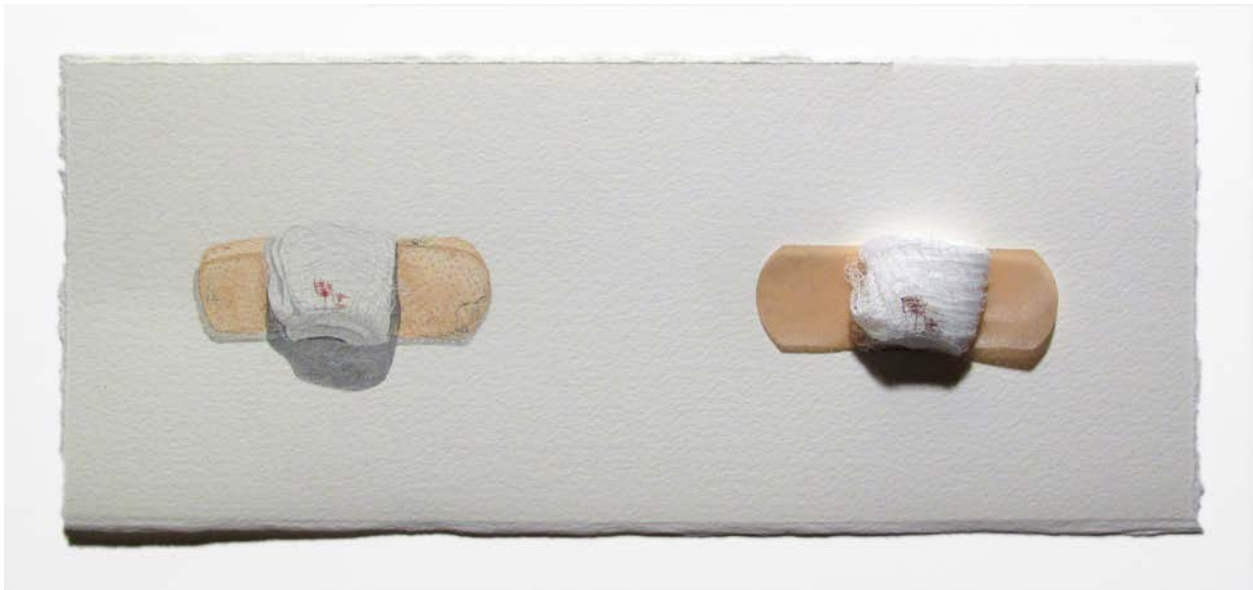


Installation view of the exhibition *Bring Your Own Body: transgender between archives and aesthetics*, 2015-2016, curated by Jeanne Vaccaro with Stamatina Gregory. Photograph by Marget Long of originating exhibition at Cooper Union Gallery, New York. Installation view showing drawings by Mark Aguhar and sculptures by niv Acosta (foreground) and Math Bass (background).

CB: Historically, “queer” was the slur used against those who were perceived to be or made to feel abnormal. Beginning in the 1980s, “queer” was re-appropriated and embraced as a badge of honor. The book of artists’ writings, *Queer*, edited by you and published by MIT Press and from Whitechapel, It’s a really masterpiece. Tell me more.

DG: I work both in transgender studies and queer studies (the politics and issues are different, but are often in alignment). After my book on abstraction and transgender studies, I was approached to do an anthology on queer art. I chose to focus only on artists’ statements, because I believe that art works are also sites of theoretical discourse and that artists, in their own particular ways, grapple with big theoretical questions through their material practices. (That belief is also something that informs my historical work on the complexities of artworks’ reception.) So, I decided that — unlike the other books in the series — this would really be about artists’ own words about their work. There are a couple of exceptions, but mostly the book showcases how artists used outlaw sensibilities toward sexuality to make work that is both political and poetic. I took as the organizing idea the political view of the term “queer.” More than just gay or lesbian, “queer” was a term adopted by politically engaged activists (starting in the 1980s) who signaled a desire not to *be* normal but to question just what the normal *is* and how it is policed.

It was incredibly difficult to narrow down the list of artists, and the eighty I did include are only a fraction of what is out there. I tried to look globally for different kinds of activist practices, and I am happy to have included artists from every continent (other than Antarctica!). I had some texts translated into English for the first time, had some artists update their earlier texts, and sought out things that were difficult to find or that had not previously been accepted into scholarly discourse (like blog posts, where some amazing writing has been done). Overall, I wanted to give other artists, scholars, and critics a sense both of the global range of positions and a feeling of the political urgency and utility of these ideas.



Tuesday Smillie, *Lab Work*, 2014. Watercolor and found object on paper.

CB: Who are now the most interesting queer or trans practices around?

DG: That is such a tough question, because of the amazing energy right now. Here are some who I think deserve more recognition. Because of my last book, I've been very interested in contemporary queer and trans artists who use abstraction. I think some of the best recent examples of artists who use some form of abstraction to address queer or trans issues are Gordon Hall, Jonah Groeneboer, Adam Pendleton, Prem Sahib, Shahryar Nashat, Shinique Smith, Elijah Burgher, Ulrike Müller, Patricia Villalobos Echeverría, Chris Bogia, Carrie Yamaoka, and Andrew Holmquist. These are just a few. Beyond abstraction, there are other artists who are doing incredibly engaging work informed by trans experience and politics (such as Cassils, niv Acosta, or Tuesday Smillie), the role of social media in relation to community and desire (Amber Hawk Swanson or Sean Fader), queer critiques of normative masculinity (Slava Mogutin or Jared Buckhiester), queer opposition to repressive histories and institutions (Carlos Motta, Yan Xing, or My Barbarian), queer insurgence against the legislation of bodies (Park MacArthur, Anna Campbell, Brendan Fernandes, or Loo Zihan), or technologies of resistance (Zach Blas or Mahmoud Khaled). I also just saw a great exhibition of artists from this year's Fire Island Artist Residency, and these multiple tendencies were evident in the work of this year's cohort: Wilder Alison, Paolo Aro, Edie Fake, Jesse Harrod, and Derrick Woods-Morrow. It was a fantastic little show. I'm forgetting many more, I'm sure.



Brendan Fernandes, *Standing Leg*, 2014. Photograph: Brian Lye.

CB: This was a title of one of your upcoming lectures, but it's also an important point for analysis of how the social context has evolved and of the story in American art: " On Being a Public Artist with AIDS in 80s America". Tell me more.

DG: This will be a lecture for the symposium accompanying the Chicago installment of the important *Art AIDS America* exhibition. My lecture will be about Scott Burton — the topic of my current book project. Burton was deeply engaged with queer politics and issues in the 1970s in his performance art, and he shifted to working as a public artist in the 1980s. He died of AIDS in 1989, and this paper talks about the ways in which politics can sometimes be expressed in subtle or coded ways. This was especially the case for Burton and his negotiation of state organizations and institutions that granted him major public commissions. As with a lot of my historical research, I'm interested in the ways in which queer and trans issues contribute to artistic practices that do not — at first — look like they are related to issues of gender or sexuality.

CB: A considerable part of our actuality has dimensions of violence, including structural violence. Too frequently we take physical harm and/or killing as the only paradigm of violence. But this can blind us to other forms of violence that involve humiliation and suffering. Why?

DG: There are daily moments of oppression that are endured by gender non-conforming individuals, and these range from overt political prejudice and legal aggression to more subtle, but no less damaging, confrontations with ignorance and bias in people's presumptions about how genders relate to bodies and how bodies are forced into one of two genders. As I was writing my responses to your questions, the American president signed an order that took away protections for transgender students. The central issue was the right to use the bathroom of one's chosen gender. Some readers may think such a thing as bathroom access is a minor or a private issue, but that's because they have not daily had to find themselves unwelcome and unsuited to an architectural expression of a limited and binary view of gender. It is a prime example of the structural violence against transgender and gender non-conforming people. It is a privilege to not think about which bathroom you use (or where you will be safe), and that privilege comes at the cost of others who are made to feel unsafe or who do not see their own sense of self reflected in a narrow, binary understanding of gender. That limited understanding, however, structures the ways in which we build our buildings, form our institutions, and relate to each other. It produces humiliation and shame and tells all those who do not fit that they are not welcome. That kind of violence needs to be fought just as much as physical violence. Similarly, we need to look back and revise histories and combat the ways in which transgender and queer lives have been erased, caricatured, and marginalized. This involves not just bring to light new artists from the past, but reconsidering all histories and figures with the understanding that genders are multiple, mutable, and frequently do not fit easily in a simple binary structure. There is a lot of work to be done, and we need to demand a more inclusive (and consequently more accurate) view of the world and of each other's differences. It's one part of how we can attempt to overturn the kind of structural inequality and violence that occurs at many levels. In this, art can be a critical tool in prompting new ways of seeing and acting.