

# QUEER RELATIONS

DAVID J. GETSY

. . . wavering line  
between two solids  
themselves immersed

– Stephen Jonas, “Exercises for the Ear” (1968)<sup>1</sup>

There is nothing intrinsically queer about a form. Rather, queer capacities are engendered by activating relations—between forms, against an opposition or context, or (in the case of complex forms) among the internal dynamics of their components. Queer counternarratives and sites of otherwise identification can be located in the associations, frictions, and bonds between and among forms.

After all, one cannot be queer alone. Whether in the embrace of another or against the ground of a hostile society that seeks to enforce normativity, a life is thrown into relief as queer through its commitment to unauthorized or unorthodox relations and the transformative potential they represent. (Of course, the organizing synecdoche for this commitment is a set of sexual relations that refuse “natural” rites of procreation and, by extension, propose new modes of desire, pleasure, family, and kinship.) Even those theoretical models that assert negativity and the antisocial thrust of queer existence come to emphasize relationality as a locus of refusal and redefinition. Whether lone sexual outlaw or utopian

collective, forms of living as queer are caught up with fundamental questions about what we do with each other. In all its many and varied forms, that is, queer existence takes relationality as the matrix in which difference and defiance become manifest.

I’m being somewhat stark in my characterization of both form and relation in order to draw out what I see as the most promising potential of a queer attention to their dynamics. Rather than expecting that we might find some form, formality, or format that is queer anywhere or everywhere, we need to engender a queer formalism that can pursue the *intercourse of forms*. There is both subversive and utopian potential in attending to the ways in which forms and their components get on. This is not an iconographic task. Rather, there is potential in striving to see the uses of formal relations beneath, beyond, in consort with, or against ostensible “content.” Historically, we should remember, there have been many times when

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formal manipulation has been the only vehicle through which queer insubordination could be conveyed. Its proponents escaped censure by means of this dissemblance and coding through forms, and they mobilized formal traits and relations as metonymies of unauthorized desires and positions of queer resistance. In effect, they relied on *how* something was said or imaged rather than the purported *what*.

With its invested attention to the relations between and within forms, a queer formalism can offer a heuristic counterpart to such coding through its cultivation of ways to read against the grain, beyond intentionality, and in pursuit of inadvertent potential. It can be a means for mobilizing formal relations in order to call forth counternarratives, to challenge given taxonomies, to attend to unorthodox intimacies and exchanges, and to subvert “natural” and ascribed meanings. Such subversions can come from examining how forms interact with each other, the patterns such relations adopt, the differential effects of context, or the ways in which form contradicts

“straight” readings. There is queer potential in insurrections of form, shape, and pattern, as well as in their uses.

An attention to the queer dynamics of forms does not mean that we should abjure or ignore ostensible “content.” Rather, it allows us to investigate how form can be mobilized in relation to content as a way of fostering such queer tactics as subversion, infiltration, refusal, or the declaration of unauthorized allegiances. We shouldn’t think of formalism as turning away from content or context but rather as the focused pursuit of queer potential through the questioning of how content is shaped, transmitted, coded, patterned, undermined, and invested by means of form.<sup>2</sup> In the capacious and un-technical sense in which I am proposing it here, formalism is less a method than a belief in the politics of form and the unruly potential of form’s relations.<sup>3</sup> Any queer formal reading must itself be relational, particular, and contingent on its situation and context. This is a strength, not a weakness. It echoes the tactical mobility of queer refusals of normativity.

This brief essay is my first attempt at owning a sentence I wrote in the conclusion to my book on gender assignment and abstract sculpture in the 1960s: “Relations are meaningful, ethical, and political, and it is in its syntactical staging of relations that abstract art produces its engagements.”<sup>4</sup> In the book, I took it as axiomatic that genders are multiple, that bodies are transformable, and that personhood is successive. I tracked moments where binary

and dimorphic assumptions about genders and their forms broke down. This was facilitated by focusing on a historical period in which formal dynamics and abstraction became priorities, and I reinvestigated canonical art histories of the 1960s where divergent accounts of gender were debated through abstract sculpture. The mapping of gender onto abstract forms often resulted in contention, reprisal, or discovery. Alternative or inadvertent accounts of gender's multiplicity emerged out of these debates. In this way, I made a case for the methodological urgency and broad implications of transgender studies and its refusal of binary and dimorphic presumptions. In support of this, allied queer methods and, in particular, a queer attention to forms and their dynamics became crucial to the aim of denaturalizing and derailing the binary and normative taxonomies for personhood. This approach also allowed me to examine the unintended effects of intentionality and to move beyond a reliance on one-to-one equations of artists' own identities with their work (an *ad hominem* fallacy that many critics continue to propagate). Sculptural abstraction—with its avoidance of representation and its opposition to anthropomorphism—served as an enabling matrix for the eruption of inadvertent counter-narratives of successive genders, non-dimorphic bodies, and acts of transformation. Abstraction does this by distilling formal relations, thus allowing one to track how form itself prompts divergent attempts at recognition. What became clear through the writing of the book was how much rebellious potential there was in the identification with form's dynamics.

However, I want to emphasize here that this ethical and political capacity of form does not require abstraction. That is, while my own guiding examples have been shapes, patterns, conjunctions, and other visual forms and formalities, my intention has been to use these simplifications to call for a greater attention to formal relations in more complex representational systems, socialities, performances, and texts. We need to hold close the recognition that formal dynamics themselves can offer the basis for cultivating such positions of resistance and counter-narratives—the counternarratives that must be sought as models of survival for trans and queer lives facing daily their attempted erasure.

Queer existence is always wrapped up in an attention to form, whether in the survival tactic of shaping oneself to the camouflage of the normal, the defiant assembling of new patterns of lineage and succession, or the picturing of new configurations of desire, bodies, sex, and sodality. A queer formalism can track issues of shape and relation such as the erotics of sameness, refusals of conformity, non-monogamous couplings, defiant non-reproducibility, the encouragement of misuse, the vexing of taxonomies, achronological temporalities, and the creation of self-made kinships. It might examine the ways in which forms exceed boundaries; how they behave differently in different contexts; how they are being deployed against their intended use; or how they disrupt the ostensible meaning of a text or an image's claims to naturalism (in style or content). In short, a queer formalism

attends to the ways in which insubordinate relations can be proposed through form's dynamics, and it strives to identify those configurations from which queer defiance can be cultivated. After all, it is relations themselves that queer politics seek to open and remap.

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/ **Notes** /

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<sup>1</sup> From Stephen Jonas, "Exercises for the Ear, LVI," in *Stephen Jonas: Selected Poems*, ed. Joseph Torra (Hoboken, New Jersey: Talisman House Publishers, 1994), 47.

<sup>2</sup> A text I have found particularly helpful in thinking through these questions is by the painter Amy Sillman, "AbEx and Disco Balls: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism, II," *Artforum* 49, no. 10 (Summer 2011): 321–25. Indeed, it is often the writings by artists that address most directly the queer or trans potentials of formal dynamics and formal decisions. Here, I am thinking of contributions like the important recent text by Gordon Hall, "Reading Things: Gordon Hall on Gender, Sculpture, and Relearning How to See," *Walker Art Gallery Magazine*, August 8, 2016, <http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/2016/gordon-hall-transgender-hb2-bathroom-bill/>.

<sup>3</sup> For further on this, see "Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation," *Art Journal* 72, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 58–71. I am indebted to many conversations with Jennifer Doyle before and after this published exchange that have informed my thinking about these issues.

<sup>4</sup> David J. Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 277. For related arguments about abstraction and for a

differentiation of transgender and queer histories and issues, see also "Appearing Differently: Abstraction's Transgender and Queer Capacities; David J. Getsy in Conversation with William J. Simmons," in *Pink Labor on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices*, ed. C. Erharter, D. Schwärzler, R. Sicar, and H. Scheirl (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 38–55; and David J. Getsy, "Seeing Commitments: Jonah Groeneboer's Ethics of Discernment," *Temporary Art Review*, March 8, 2016, <http://temporaryartreview.com/seeing-commitments-jonah-groeneboers-ethics-of-discernment/>.

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