

David J. Getsy, “Refusing ambiguity,” for the symposium/reading “Ambiguity Forum” held at the Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, 14 January 2017

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see <http://www.renaissancesociety.org/publishing/739/ambiguity-forum>

Nominations of ambiguity are nothing more than declarations of resignation. We call something ambiguous when we give up on it and when we avoid committing to learning about all that does not fit into our categories. Objects, people, texts, events, and acts are not themselves ambiguous. They are particular, inassimilable, unorthodox, unprecedented, or recalcitrant. To invoke “ambiguity” is to flee from the confrontation with something that does not easily fall into one’s patterns of knowing. This act of exhausted reading disrespects the particularity of that which is before us and instead writes it off as being at fault — as being unknowable, indiscernible, and incompletely categorizable. “Ambiguity” is safe to invoke, because it places blame for our own limitations elsewhere. It is a method of deflection and scapegoating. It enables us to throw up our hands and lead a hasty retreat from confronting how limited our categories and systems are. After all, what do we really mean when we say something or someone is ambiguous? We mean that we cannot read, cannot identify, and cannot classify. Instead, I want to uphold the particularity and inscrutability that the backhanded slur “ambiguous” attempts to manage. I want to see that particularity as a challenge to systems of knowing.

I’ve recently been writing about abstraction and ways in which gender nominations are vexed by abstract, non-figurative, and non-objective forms. My aim has been to show the limitations of binary accounts of gender by using art’s rich history of debating what counts as an adequate figure (or a feasible departure) against compulsions to assign (binary) gender.¹ When the body is invoked but not imaged, gender nominations become open for debate and contestation, and it is in the dialogic situations of discord or successive nominations that gender’s openness, mutability, and multiplicity can be manifested. This is *not* due to the ambiguity of the abstract form. Rather, it is because of the ways in which the same intransigent form means differently for different viewers. To call this situation “ambiguous” is to fall back into hopeless subjectivity and avoidance. Instead, let’s call this situation “competing” to show how much it is in the viewer’s incomplete attempt to classify that differences emerge and supposedly stable taxonomies unravel amidst contestations and divergences of reception. The difficulties of reading abstract art resulted from its withstanding attempts to categorize based on resemblance or the exterior. Instead, the limitations of a binary system of gender erupted repeatedly as viewers negotiated their divergent identifications with forms that resisted easy legibility. For me, such debates were deeply informed by the politics of transgender history and its demand that we look for suppressed evidence of non-binary genders and accounts of self-determination and successive personhood. This history again and again demands recognition that people are not ambiguous. People are themselves, for themselves. Mischaracterizing any particularity for “ambiguity” is a means of making their endurance of your scrutiny into a form of subservience to your desire for comfortable intelligibility.

“Ambiguous” as an invocation or description merely signals the limitations of the one who would deploy that term. This does not mean I want everything clear and in its place. Quite the opposite: I want to embrace the radical particularity that always exceeds and undermines taxonomies. This is a queer stance, for it denies the applicability or the neutrality of those

taxonomies as adequate representations of the world's complexity. Rather, they are artificial impositions of normativity more concerned with policing boundaries than with engagement. To take this term to task is to demand that we see the greater structural limitations that its invocations hope to mask. "Ambiguity" as a description is not just lazy. It's chauvinistic. More to the point, its deployment keeps us from recognizing and embracing the chance to see beyond the categories that are nothing more than blinders forcing us to stay on a narrow path.

Especially today, we cannot afford ambiguity. We must attempt to embrace inscrutability and particularity, and we can defiantly exceed or jam the taxonomic protocols that seek to delimit and define us. The undertow of ambiguity is complacency and surrender, and it is misapplied to acts of refusal and self-definition.

¹ See David J. Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 277. See also "Appearing Differently: Abstraction's Transgender and Queer Capacities; David J. Getsy in Conversation with William J. Simmons," in C. Erharter, D. Schwärzler, R. Sicar, and H. Scheirl, eds., *Pink Labor on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), 38-55; and "Seeing Commitments: Jonah Groeneboer's Ethics of Discernment," *Temporary Art Review*, 8 March 2016, online at <http://temporaryartreview.com/seeing-commitments-jonah-groeneboers-ethics-of-discernment/>