

David Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender*
New Haven, Yale University Press, 2015, 256 pp., 50 colour + 50 b/w illustrations,
Hardcover, £35.55. ISBN: 9780300196757

David Getsy's *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* presents a rigorous art-historical account and a theoretically bold re-interpretation of North American abstract sculpture from the sixties. This richly illustrated volume comprises four main chapters, each one focusing on selected case studies by canonical artists, including David Smith, John Chamberlain, Nancy Grossman, and Dan Flavin. The book's conclusion brings into the discussion post-1980s sculpture by two contemporary artists, Heather Cassils and Scott Burton, successfully carrying the author's theoretical and political concerns on the category of the 'transgender' into their contemporary context. Getsy's reading is set against the grain of the majority of the critical literature on abstract sculpture that typically pits abstraction against figuration as two opposing and mutually exclusive formal categories. Instead, the author undertakes an ambitious interdisciplinary analysis that recasts celebrated examples of abstract sculpture in bodily terms, not by seeking out any formal resemblance with the human figure, or even by evoking the body as metaphor, but by mobilising the category of the 'transgender,' 'an umbrella term used to refer to all individuals who live outside of normative sex/gender relations', as a potent interpretative framework (p. xv). More specifically, *Abstract Bodies* explores how 'the emerging public recognition of the presence of transformable genders and bodies in the 1960s correlate[s] with the sculpture's contentious relationship to figuration and the body in that decade.' (p. xii) While this correlation may seem tenuous at best,

especially with his choice of canonical male artists, Getsy is not oblivious of this fact; instead, he expressly states that he resolves to ‘infect the canon,’ by ‘finding ways to re-read [these artists] to find capacitating sites in their work ... making sure no one can ever look at a John Chamberlain again without thinking about questions of gender that were not his politics, but are maybe ours.’¹

Throughout the book, Getsy posits abstract sculpture as an ‘open and contested category,’ employing a set of recurring operative terms such as openness, variability, possibility and polyvalence. As he writes in the introduction:

‘The cultivation of possibility is an ethical and political, not just a theoretical, aim. The artists I discuss offered abstract bodies and, with them, open accounts of personhood’s variability and possibility. Their sculptures do this by moving away from the human form and the rendering of the body. Rather, they figure it in the abstract. That is, these works evoke the concept of the body without mimesis, producing a gap between that calling forth of the human and the presentation of the artworks that resolutely refuse to provide an anchoring *image* of the body. In that gap, there grew new versions of genders, new bodily morphologies, and a new attention to the shifting and successive potentials of these categories. Activated by the conventions of sculpture’s attachment to the human body, these abstractions posited unforeclosed sites for identifying and cultivating polyvalence.’ (p. 41)

In other words, Getsy identifies a semantic openness or ambiguity in these sculptures that he purposefully reads through the interpretative lens of shifting gender identities. Even though Getsy casts his book in terms of interdisciplinary research -- in ‘the

expanded field of gender,' as the book's subtitle indicates -- his main methods remain decidedly art-historical, encompassing close visual and formal analysis of the artworks, sustained archival research, and an exhaustive discursive analysis of textual material such as artists' statements, interviews, titles of artworks, as well as a rigorous re-interpretation of secondary critical literature. One of the strengths of the book is that Getsy treats the artists' statements, for example, around which he often builds his case, with the same critical rigour with which he dissects the artworks. Indeed, many of the most compelling arguments in the book are supported by the author's insistent focus on the artworks's (often) overlooked titles, as in the case of Dan Flavin, or by reading against the grain key statements by David Smith that have contributed to the critical reception of the sculptor's work.

In the first chapter of the book, 'On not Making Boys', Getsy discusses the work of David Smith by focusing on an enigmatic comment that the artist made in 1964 during his televised interview with the art critic, curator and poet Frank O'Hara. When isolated from the wider context of the discussion, Smith's claim that he did not make 'boy sculptures,' led to many taking the statement at face value by seeking to ascribe a fixed gender to his sculptures. Getsy, on the other hand, insists that Smith's 'statues' (a term that Getsy uses here possibly in order to highlight the personified element of these otherwise abstract sculptures), as well as his statements, invoke the category of the 'human' by allowing for diverse visualizations of the figurative and by embracing ambiguity, unrecognizability and multiplicity in terms of gender designations.

In the chapter on John Chamberlain, Getsy engages the artist's notion of the 'sexual

fit,' which conveys the formal entwining of scraps of metal and other industrial parts and materials that make up Chamberlain's sculptures, to consistently denote 'gender as multiple and variable,' unorthodox and unspecified, rather than prescriptive and conventionally construed. By refusing to designate fixed gender traits to any of the anthropomorphised sculptural components, Getsy argues that Chamberlain's sculptures thus provide an account of gender that emphasizes material transformation and mutability. The author maintains that, crucially, such notions of mutable genders as evoked in Chamberlain's work are indebted precisely to the contribution of transgender studies that have enabled an understanding of gender as neither simply dimorphic, nor wholly biologically determined or static, but as constantly remade and 'temporally construed' (p. 129).

In his analysis of Dan Flavin's *icon V (Coran's Broadway Flesh)*, 1962, in the final chapter of the book, Getsy argues that this early work, whose parenthetical subtitle is a reference to Flavin's gay neighbour, is not so much a representation of homosexuality as it is a rehearsal of the tension between visibility and invisibility that defined the experience of homosexuals in 1960s America. *icon V* consists a square block of Masonite covered with pink oil paint, encircled by twenty-eight commercially available light bulbs around the outer edges of its frame, evoking the Broadway stage lights. Getsy contends that Flavin strategically implemented the indeterminacy around the homosexual's (in)visibility in the social sphere, with this early work that predated his trademark artworks made of coloured neon lights, in order to resolve aesthetic problems concerning the tension between 'illusionism' and 'literalism', a central preoccupation that persisted throughout the artist's entire oeuvre. Compelling as the argument is, as it elegantly brings into view the

unfavorable conditions and prejudices about homosexuality at the time, an inherent risk in this type of reading is that struggles in the social and political spheres might be too readily absorbed into the aesthetic domain, at once illuminated and abstracted.

More specifically, by equivocally equating radical practices of transgender, queer, and homosexuality, with idealized abstract notions such as openness, variability, possibility and polyvalence, an association that develops from formalist, iconographical or textual readings of the artworks, often supported by anecdotal and biographical references and excerpts from gender theory (i.e. Judith Butler), Getsy recasts the political dimension he seeks to instill in these works back into a highly abstracted aesthetic realm, jeopardizing thus the proclaimed radical premises of his project. In other words, the political imagination that fuels his book, disengaged as it is in his narrative from concrete social practice, is often in danger of receding into an idealized abstraction.

Numerous reviews of Getsy's *Abstract bodies* have lauded the book as a 'welcome convergence of the long established academic discipline of art history with the more recent interdisciplinary field of transgender studies' (Susan Stryker), or similarly, as providing a much needed bridge between the fields of art history and gender studies, 'demonstrat[ing] that these fields need each other' (Jennifer Doyle) (from the endorsement on the back of the dust cover). While Getsy's compelling interdisciplinary endeavor opens up both the field of art history as well as that of transgender studies to speak to each other, yet skillfully avoiding the risk of constructing a deterministic and causal narrative, the book might have further benefited by bringing the aesthetic, the theoretical and the sociopolitical in a more

intimate dialogue with each other in the individual chapters. That is, besides dedicating one section in the introduction to the ‘transgender phenomenon of the 1960s’ (pp. 26-34), outlining pivotal events in the social history of transgender struggles in the 1960s, what is perhaps missing from the majority of the chapters, with the welcome exception of the chapter on Nancy Grossman, is an engaged discussion of specific transgender issues and debates that were gaining momentum around the time of the production of the artworks, which might have resulted in a more integrated and sustained narrative.

This integrated narrative is more fully achieved, in my view, in the penultimate chapter of the book, dedicated to the early work of Nancy Grossman. Here, Getsy embarks on a close analysis of the artworks, interweaving sociopolitical and theoretical content that eventually generates an excellent insight into the struggles and nuances between 1960s feminist theory and activism, and the emerging field of transgender studies. The author convincingly argues that Grossman’s work enlists aspects of transgender theory in order to launch, among other things, a powerful critique of feminist essentialist accounts of sexual identity and to demonstrate how transgender theory productively complicates the discussion around traditional gender roles. Overall, despite the identified risks, this meticulously researched book, combining expert archival research, close analysis of less-researched artworks by canonical figures of American abstract sculpture in the 1960s, and a deliberate interdisciplinary analysis, catapults art-historical research that engages the rapidly growing scholarship on transgender studies into the twenty-first century.

Natasha Adamou

¹ David J. Getsy, 'Salon | Transgender in the Mainstream,' Art Basel Miami Beach, Saturday, December 5, 2015, 6pm to 7pm.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsHXmS1jJYE>

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