

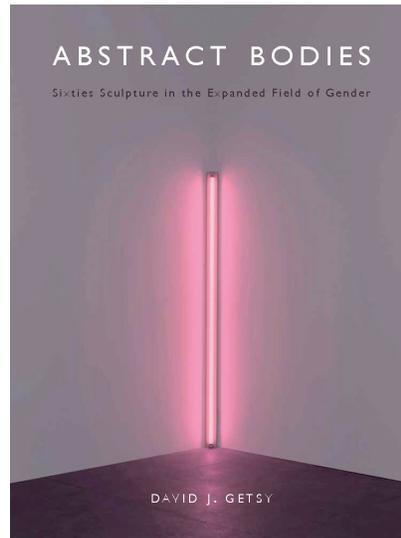
**Christa Noel Robbins**  
**Transgressing Gender in  
1960s Abstract Sculpture**

**David J. Getsy. *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender*.** New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. 392 pp., 50 col. ills, 50 b/w. \$65

David Getsy's new book *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* starts out the way a lot of books about 1960s sculpture begin: with a cursory account of the revolutionary turn sculpture underwent in that decade away from modernist containment and toward something more relational, situational, and bodied. But unlike the majority of histories that track this turn, Getsy's book just as quickly takes a turn of its own: "The 1960s in America," Getsy writes, "also saw a fundamental shift in the ways that persons were understood" (xi). With this added historical lens, Getsy provides an account of how the debates over anthropomorphism in sculpture and statuary at mid-century track in relation to parallel shifts in our understandings, descriptions, and performances of personhood around the same time. While the last decade and a half has seen the publication of several books concerned with personhood and the art of the 1960s—such as Carrie Lambert-Beatty's *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (MIT Press, 2011) and Julia Bryan-Wilson's *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (University of California Press, 2011)—Getsy's book goes against what I would call the archival impulse of recent art-historical studies and puts pressure not just on the historical framing of 1960s sculpture, but also on the concept of personhood. Instead of historicizing personhood according to sociological or political frames of reference, Getsy theorizes it, allowing the radically abstract sculpture of the 1960s itself to raise questions as to how persons get figured, identified, and addressed as such. The interpretative framework within which Getsy interrogates personhood is provided by transgender studies, an area of political, ethical, and aesthetic theory with which art history has had little or nothing to do before now. The core question grounding Getsy's inquiry in this regard is how and why genders get assigned to sculptures in the first place and despite their radical move away from any identifiable form of figuration. As

the first art-historical study to include both a transgender history and theory, this book is an important contribution to the field and a call to expand not just our archival knowledge of modernist and contemporary art, but also our theoretical categories.

Through a series of case studies, which



include David Smith, John Chamberlain, Nancy Grossman, and Dan Flavin, Getsy pursues a seemingly simple question: "How . . . does the emerging public recognition of the presence of transformable genders and bodies in the 1960s correlate with sculpture's contentious relationship to figuration and the body in that decade" (xii). The difficult task the book performs is encapsulated in the term "correlate." Getsy does not seek out queer or transgender artists or even works of art that feature queer or transgender representations. Rather, he sees in the radical abstraction of the 1960s a potential: the ability of certain abstract sculptures to function as figures in space before or beyond the assignation of type. For Getsy the status of abstract sculptures, which he argues signal bodies, despite their having left figuration in the form of statuary behind, is like the status of bodies before they have been slotted into biological, social, or political designations. While he is taken by and speaks eloquently about the opening up and aesthetic plenitude of this state of abstraction—a space of possibility that, he argues in his conclusion, abstraction is uniquely suited to figure in the world—Getsy's focus is less on that plenitude than on the many ways by which it has been foreclosed within both art history and queer studies.

The book begins with just such a closure. Focused on a brief, televised exchange between the poet Frank O'Hara and the modernist sculptor David Smith in 1964, Getsy's first chapter unfolds the significance of Smith's emphatic statement to O'Hara that he doesn't "make boy sculptures" (quoted on 43). Getsy points out that scholars' access to this statement and the interview it comes from was, for decades, egregiously misrepresented. In *Art in America* in 1966, Cleve Gray "liberally rewrote" the exchange, and it has been to that revision that most references to the interview have referred (82). In response to Smith's statement that his sculptures "are all girls"—itself a response to O'Hara's asking whether Smith regards his sculptures as "people around your house"—Gray has O'Hara affirming Smith's unsolicited gendering of the sculptures: "Yeh, they're all female sculptures." O'Hara's actual response, however, as Getsy shows, was less agreeable. When Smith quips that the sculptures "are all girls," O'Hara actually objects to the categorization: "They're all girls? Very angular girls." To which Smith rejoins: "They're all girls, Frank. . . . I don't make boy sculptures" (82–83).

In characterizing Smith's sculptures as "people," O'Hara was carrying forward a description of Smith's work that he first published in a 1961 essay for *Art News* wherein he likened Smith's totemlike sculptures to "people who are awaiting admittance to a formal reception and, while they wait, are thinking about their roles when they join the rest of the guests already in the meadow."<sup>1</sup> Despite this likening, as Getsy points out, O'Hara never links his personification of the sculptures to a gender. It is for this reason that Getsy finds it surprising that Smith himself genders the work in response to O'Hara's question during the televised interview. Instead of simply offering up this exchange as an example of Smith's normative attachments and possibly homophobic response to the openly gay O'Hara, however, Getsy returns us to the original scene of the exchange, which took place after the sculptor and poet had been engaged in a protracted conversation about sculpture, form, and figuration, and demonstrates a far more complex relation among gender assignation, sculptural abstraction, and sexual politics around this time.

Getsy's recounting of the extended dialogue between O'Hara and Smith preceding the televised interview returns us to the intellectual intimacy between these two

men, within which both had expressed an acceptance of the other's sexuality and, more than that, a deep respect for their respective artistic practices. As proof of their mutual admiration, Getsy points to Smith's positive reception of O'Hara's 1961 essay in which the poet first personified the sculptures. That essay ends with O'Hara's declaring a strong, personal identification with the work: "The best of the current sculptures didn't make me feel I wanted to have one, they made me feel I wanted to be one."<sup>2</sup> Smith was flattered by the essay, and it was following an expression of his gratitude for O'Hara's sympathetic reading that the two initiated a relationship that developed for three years before they sat down for the public interview. Within this context, the televised exchange appears somewhat lighter, infused with an ease that allowed a jocular banter to unfold. Getsy acknowledges, however, that Smith's evocation of gender still managed to counter O'Hara's regard for his sculptures as exemplary beings that transcend dimorphic gender assignments, demonstrating a need, on Smith's part, "to rein in the variability and multiplicity that Smith's abstract bodies supported" (75). In this detailed account of Smith and O'Hara's relationship, Getsy manages to demonstrate both the semantic plenitude of 1960s sculpture, achieved in its signaling bodies without succumbing to gender categories, and the social and discursive restrictions that prohibited a full acknowledgement of that plenitude. The result is a complication of the discourse of gender and sexuality as it met up with the radical abstraction of the decade, demonstrating in the process a historical confrontation between a practice and politics increasingly able to accommodate a conception of gender and sexuality as non-dimorphic and a discourse either unwilling or unable to keep up with such accommodations.

Opening the book with this anecdotal exchange is indicative of Getsy's approach to his problem throughout. He is not simply interested in finding representations of gender and sexuality in sculpture, or in investigating the relation of artists' identifications with the works they made. Instead, Getsy offers a close reading of the reception of individual works and the multiple manners by which gender gets evoked and invoked despite a radical move beyond such assignments. The book moves on from Smith's harnessing of his emphatically figural

and radically abstract sculptures to female-identified bodies to a series of case studies that demonstrate similar closures: the art-historical tendency to read John Chamberlain's sculptures as examples of either an Abstract Expressionist or muscle-car version of masculinity; the identification of Nancy Grossman's heads—hand-sculpted, disembodied heads to which Grossman has carefully tailored leather-bound skins—as male and associated with an emerging underground sadomasochism community in New York City; Dan Flavin's naming his fluorescent tubes after a variety of personalities whose sexuality Flavin was himself attempting to navigate. In each case Getsy locates an abstraction that he takes to be typical of personhood prior to assignment: for example, the couplings at the center of Chamberlain's sculptures, which evoke bodies through "the temporal process of his fitting together parts" (130), and Flavin's discrete, modular, and interchangeable units. And in each case, that unassigned, but still-figurative formation is corralled through a variety of methods. In Chamberlain's case, his nonreferential sculptures are read as an iconography of mid-century masculinity, and in Flavin's, through the sculptor's own process of attribution and personal dedication, the interchangeability of his tubes "through naming, become unique" and indexed to specific persons (257). According to Getsy, the restriction of the "unforeclosed potential" (130) of 1960s abstraction occurs at the hands not just of artists and art historians, but also in the name of feminist and queer studies, which Getsy argues have aggressively excluded transgender possibilities from their practical and theoretical purview.

In bringing to light a grossly neglected approach to the topic and action of gendering in art production and interpretation, Getsy's book demonstrates that we are still processing the profound event that was 1960s abstraction, still reconciling ourselves to its categorical refusals, semiotic disruptions, and relational revisions. It is the "semantic openness" (80) itself of the art of this moment that provoked, as Judith Butler put it, "a crisis in the norms that govern recognition"—whether recognition of gender, race, sexual orientation, or even art-historical periods and styles (quoted on 94). We continue to live in the wake of that crisis, still organizing our analyses and histories of 1960s abstraction according to historical categories and methodologies that

are themselves attempts to return to the "norms" of recognition. This is most clear in the tenacious nature of our periodization of the decade's culture as a category unto itself. It is most common in talking about either 1960s sculpture or queer studies, for example, to remain focused on neo-avant-garde movements like Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptual art. Getsy's text is refreshing in its refusal to parse his study according to such art-historical designates. The book moves from the high-modernist sculptures of Smith, through Chamberlain, Grossman, and Flavin in a manner that allows readers to view modernist sculpture as occupying the same historical and conceptual space as minimalist and conceptual practice.

Getsy is further unburdened by art history's normative periodizations in his reprioritizing the critical texts of the period. Instead of setting Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" (1967) at its helm, Getsy designates Lucy Lippard's "Eccentric Abstraction" (1966) to be the key text characterizing abstract sculpture in the late 1960s. Doing so helps somewhat to unseat hard-core Minimalism (à la Robert Morris, Tony Smith, and Donald Judd) as the so-called crux of the decade and shows instead Postminimalism—a messier and more diverse field of practice—to be "the more fundamental move away from traditional sculpture" during the course of that decade (16). This bodes well for future studies and demonstrates the benefit of freeing ourselves from art history's most entrenched periodizing views of twentieth-century art (which come in the standard sizes of "modernism," "Minimalism," "Conceptualism," and so on) in order not just to think differently about 1960s and post-1960s art, but also to learn something about how that art was itself provoking different forms of thinking. It is just such a difference that Getsy discerns in the sculptures he studies.

Christa Noel Robbins is an assistant professor of twentieth- and twenty-first-century art in the McIntire Department of Art at the University of Virginia. She is currently completing a book manuscript, "Unmaking the Self in Late-Modernist American Painting," which is a historical study of authorship in postwar abstract painting.

The epigraph is from Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 3-4, quoted in the book under review, 278.

1. Frank O'Hara, "David Smith: The Color of Steel," *Art News* 60 (December 1961): 33.
2. *Ibid.*, 70.