

Minimalism Forever

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David J. Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (London and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 50 col, 50 b&w ills, 392 pp., £50 Hardcover, ISBN: 9780300196757

Elise Archias, *The Concrete Body: Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, Vito Acconci* (London and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 36 col, 93 b&w, 240 pp., £55 Hardcover, ISBN: 9780300217971

Deep into the second decade of our new century, an ongoing, voracious interest in the 1960s continues to burn brightly, fuelling the contemporary art discourse of the present. Such is the case with two corporeally driven books, David Getsy's *Abstract Bodies* and Elise Archias's *The Concrete Body*, recently published by two distinctive generations of art historian: Getsy is mid-career, an expert on modern European sculpture and the editor of a number of volumes on queer subject matter. This, his third monograph, completes his move from the nineteenth century into the twentieth. Archias is emerging, this book is her first, and last year it was awarded the critic's prize through the College Art Association. Both Getsy and Archias closely explore the individual oeuvres of a range of well-known artists associated with experiments in minimalism and performance: Vito Acconci, John Chamberlain, David Smith, Dan Flavin, Yvonne Rainer, and Carolee Schneemann; both volumes embark upon the expanded field of minimalism situated within a space of embodiment, intent on enlivening the coolly cerebral with an erotics of form.

To be sure, the history of minimalism is both fraught and overworked: for historians and curators tired of shuffling through the same playlist – Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Robert Smithson, and Richard Serra – the reconsideration of the genre was ostensibly initiated through the work of Briony Fer, who included chapters on Eva Hesse and Judd in *On Abstract Art* (1997). This late 1990s incursion was followed by a series of exhibitions and permanent collection museum reinstallations over a decade at institutions such as Dia, Tate Modern, and MoMA, bookended by *A Minimal Future? Art as Object, 1958–1968* (MOCA Los Angeles, 2004) and *Other Primary Structures* (Jewish Museum, 2014). Unseating the masculine grip on the canon has continued unabated throughout the first quarter of the twenty-first century, with a plethora of books and volumes: Mignon Nixon's *Eva Hesse* (2002), James Meyer's *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the 1960s* (2004); Carrie Lambert-Beatty's

Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s (2008); Julia Bryan-Wilson's *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (2009); Fer's *Eva Hesse: Studiowork* (2009); Jo Applin's *Eccentric Objects: Rethinking Sculpture in 1960s America* (2012); Susan Richmond's *Lynda Benglis: Beyond Process* (2013); Kirsten Swenson's *Irrational Judgments: Eva Hesse, Sol Lewitt, and 1960s New York* (2015); and the recent edited volume *Radical Bodies: Anna Halprin, Simone Forti, and Yvonne Rainer* (2017).¹ This is without even considering all the simultaneous museum activity around Walter de Maria, Agnes Martin, and (not without controversy) Carl Andre. We can surely surmise, then, that minimalism is akin to a newly discovered archaeological site: one that will remain continuously excavated, with room enough for everyone who wants to dig.

Getsy produces a daring and fascinating project: mapping transgender theory onto humanly scaled, minimal artworks of the 1960s. In so doing, he theorises that when abstraction becomes the predominant mode of expression during the 1960s, this sculptural transformation is, in fact, set against the backdrop of the mutability of gender and changing sexual mores. But Getsy moves far beyond the heteronormative accounts of the countercultural sexual revolution and the 1968 summer of love. Instead, he produces a deeply researched account that synthesises now-iconic works of American sexuality studies into art history, as a means of uncoupling gender from sexuality, in relation to forms of artistic production that are also, in his words, 'successive and multiple' (p. 36). To offer one such example, the term 'free standing' becomes an apt metaphor for the entwined ideas of unconventional sculpture and the body as a site of inquiry for gender non-conforming experience. This is a productive misreading, meant to drop the lingering binaries that induce assumptions about form: that is, figurative versus abstraction as juxtaposed with male versus female. Such a defiance of categorisation becomes an inventive corollary in thinking through 'parts' versus whole.

His introduction, "New" Genders and Sculpture in the 1960s', itself should become mandatory reading in art history methodology, as it offers a new paradigm for the application of transgender theory to artistic culture and avant-garde aesthetics, and ideas of the self in postwar visuality. It begins with a tidy synopsis of the twentieth century's main ideas around figuration, then works through a compressed précis of the minimalist canon: Gregory Battcock, Frances Colpitt, Michael Fried, Robert Morris, Jack Burnham, Donald Judd, and then finally widens their scope with Lucy Lippard's important contributions – her well-known 'Eccentric Abstraction' exhibition and essay, and 'Eros Presumptive' published in 1968, on the figurative illusions of repetitive forms, which helped her to formulate her own emergent feminist writing.² Getsy makes it clear

that she is a predecessor to his own work, but that he is tracking backwards: rather than engaging with the post-minimalism of Bourgeois, Hesse, and Wilke, he is attempting to extract embodiment and non-binary gender from the subjectivities of earlier, and sometimes less bodily, forms. All of Getsy's analysis begins with the forms themselves, but his strategy is deliberate: he returns to the archive, and uses the artist's own intentionality, and their own language, as a means of emptying the work of its assumed and long-accepted meanings, only to re-pack it with nuanced observations about gender assignment and the physicality, in sculpture, of its own undermining.

In this sense, the most important contribution of the book is the first scholarly work on the overlooked Brooklyn-based artist Nancy Grossman, whose leather-covered wooden head sculptures achieved widespread recognition during the 1960s, but later became (perhaps wrongly, as Getsy suggests), associated with BDSM fetish masks and hoods. Getsy recounts her early rise to fame, her five-year relationship with David Smith (1960–65), and his influence on her work, and the subsequent large-scale assemblage works she began producing after she won the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1965 (at the age of 25, the youngest artist ever, at that time, to have achieved this honour). Her articulations in leather, from found horse tack, belts, boots, motorcycle jackets, and other sources, were structured upon large canvas supports. This chapter provides a fascinating morphology of the bodily and intersexed components that 'complicate and even collide genders' (p. 165) or, as Grossman herself terms the production in assemblage, of 'organic machines' (p. 156).

One of the best passages in the chapter centres on the way in which Getsy analyses Grossman's leatherwork relief of black leather jackets (*Ali Stoker*, 1966–67) against the cultural significations that black leather took on throughout the 1950s and 1960s in various contexts: the machismo, for instance, of James Dean, juxtaposed with the queer angst of Kenneth Anger films and underground homosexuality. Getsy uses a single work by Grossman to consider the material connotations of hypermasculinity across a spectrum of sexual communities and practices, underscoring the transgendered nature of multiplicity itself, as ascribed to the multiple possibilities for genital imagery and the purposeful rejection of the sexed figure or whole body.

In spite of such richness, what seems to be missing is a comparison to the work of Lee Bontecou, nearly a decade older, with a similarly advanced body of work that also drove a wedge between painting and sculpture using non-traditional, densely layered materials. Bontecou is only mentioned once, in the previous chapter on Chamberlain, but her most important body of untitled bas-relief works, known colloquially as voids or black holes, have many of

the same bodily associations that Getsy confirms in Grossman's oeuvre. While each chapter is monographic in nature, the fact that both artists were women working and showing simultaneously in New York City among all-male peer groups seems a curious oversight.

Getsy's book commences with the unquestioned origination point of David Smith's modernist abstraction – undergirded by generations of unquestioned acceptance, propelled forward first by Clement Greenberg then by his influential students, the art historians Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss. Getsy uses gender as a means of proceeding through a pointed analysis of Smith's own artistic production, as told through the story of his professional friendship with the poet and curator Frank O'Hara, who was openly homosexual. By elucidating the delicate personal networks around Smith as part of a treatment of his totemic, standing artworks – what Smith apparently called his 'female sculptures' – the author teases out the precarious complexities of gender identity in not only his human forms, but also his interpersonal relationships, and the jovial uneasiness between gay and straight men during the pre-Stonewall era.

Chapter two, 'Immoderate Couplings' is an extended meditation on John Chamberlain's colourful metal sculptures, made from salvaged auto parts, with exaggerated crumpled and crushed elements with a proto-Pop sensibility. As with Smith, Getsy homes in on the artist's own language about his works, in this case the sexual 'fit' of assembly, sharpening and heightening the range of possibility, spatial anxiety, and paradox for transgendered discourses within the artwork itself.

The fourth and final chapter negotiates the terrain of Dan Flavin's dedications in relation to his signature (and often generic) fluorescent forms, which are assigned, singly or in groupings, as a tribute to individual people – often other artists that Flavin admired – but eschew gender specificity and are as elusively construed as Flavin's own sexuality was.

In sum, Getsy's book sets forth on an audacious experiment: focusing on the a priori transgender theory of the present as applied retroactively to a historical moment in which gender was being simultaneously dismantled and constructed culturally, politically, socially, and aesthetically.

Elise Archias's book is exquisitely written, her descriptions are precise – shimmering, even. This alone makes her something of a provocateur as a historian of performance art, a crowded and imprecise field with a special attachment to the apocryphal, the mythic, and the outrageous. The premise of her book is to re-engage the by-now well-trodden oeuvres of Acconci, Rainer, and Schneemann, and place them firmly within their generational limitations, as advanced abstractionists, rather than as rigorous hedonists. Her methodology is insistently painterly, arguing that the

inherent physicality present in both painting and performance art means that they should be considered in tandem. Their relationship throughout the 1960s was far from settled – since live art, or living art (as performance art was then called) was not a structured attempt to supplant older, more dominant art forms. Rather, it was a mode of working outward towards new forms of expression through a direct relationship of making contact with actual people, things, and concrete structures.

Throughout the book she negotiates what she terms these particular artists and their ‘modernist investment in physical materials’ (p. 12). The primary methodology she employs is T.J. Clark’s close readings of modern paintings and, through this, modern subjectivities and their representations of embodiment. For Archias, the body is a tool similar to painting itself, performing gesture through an alternative set of materials (movement, props, emotion) and the aesthetic cultivation of ‘sensuousness’ (p. 9) – a term used throughout the book. She attributes this investment in body-as-material as a way to respond to various power imbalances in the art world, a rejection of commodity culture, and as a means towards empathy, but without so much as a nod to contemporary affect theory.

To attempt the production of something similar to Clark’s now-classic social art histories, each chapter is a contained set of close readings. These treat the photographic documentation of performances by Rainer, Schneemann, and Acconci (in that unexplained order) as art objects in need of detailed analysis, or re-reading, depicting both the specificity of time and place, vis-à-vis Clark in all of his work on late nineteenth-century painters such as Cézanne and Courbet. Along these lines, this might be the first (and last) book on 1960s performance that actually reproduces a colour image of Madame Cézanne in the introduction. Mining the expansive potential of performance and its use of everyday movements and materials, Archias extrapolates the social structure of each performance – how it came to be – taking the reader into the vast cultural warehouse of bohemian, post-1950s New York.

The first chapter, ‘Hurray for People: Yvonne Rainer’, opens with a close read of a little-known performance still from *Northeast Passing* (1968), a work made in an out-of-the-way place, in the stubbornly utopian enclave of Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont. The chapter then jumps to a performance still from *Trio A* (1966), followed by a digression into Malevich, Pollock, and finally to Rainer’s boyfriend at the time, abstract painter Al Held, before returning to Rainer’s rejection of Martha Graham, her embrace of Anna Halprin and Merce Cunningham, and their attainment, through repetitive action, of the representation of everyday life. The chapter is at its best when it sidesteps the droll historicity of Clark, and closely argues the entrenchment of Rainer within early minimalist history

through a biographical rendition of Rainer and Robert Morris, lovers at the time. But to be clear, this is not new territory: it has been brilliantly analysed in feminist terms by Anna Chave, and by Rainer herself in her 2006 memoir.³

Chapter two is a close restaging of Schneemann’s investment in Wilhelm Reich and the circumstances surrounding her famed performance, *Meat Joy* (1964) – a bacchanalian movement work performed by amateur dancers attenuated to sensually provocative experiences. A performance of cavorting bodies, interspersed with raw meat and quotidian scenes, *Meat Joy* equated sexual rawness with the fleshy corporeality of butchered animals. Again, this is territory well covered in a variety of histories and angles over the last twenty years, by luminaries such as Sally Banes, Sidonie Smith, Kristine Stiles, and Schneemann herself, who is still the prime interlocutor for her own work.

Archias’s central argument is poetically constructed, but frustrating in the narrowness of its approach: ‘How did Schneemann concretise the Reichian dream of a world in which awareness of sensuous, specifically sexual experience would meet and determine cultural patterns?’ (p. 88). It would seem more germane to have asked difficult questions about why *Meat Joy* was excised from avant-garde history at the time it was being written by women, such as Susan Sontag and Jill Johnston, both whom were aware of and even said to have admired Schneemann’s performance works. That is, the backstory of the performance is explored in minute detail, but Schneemann’s larger historical absence goes unmentioned.

While Archias announces this chapter to be about ‘the materiality of sex’ (author’s emphasis, p. 77), in fact she turns her own argument inside out, situating its history of eroticism within a largely modernist frame. This results in a chapter both driven (and hindered) by close visual analysis. The major contribution of the chapter is a too-brief interlude on Schneemann’s earliest paintings, in relation to Cézanne (this time much more sensibly, since he functions as an important and continuous referent for the artist herself) and the multidimensional facets of her performance practice as itself a form of painting in space.

Chapter three, ‘Reasons to Move’ examines the performance works of Vito Acconci. While written and published long before the #metoo movement, it is nonetheless crucial that Archias opens with an acknowledgement of Acconci’s often repugnant aesthetics (my term is stronger; she uses the word ‘repellent’). Today, *Seedbed* (1972) might be protested for its clear strain of sexual harassment, and a video such as *Pryings* (1971) comes uncomfortably close to staging an assault. However, Archias puts Acconci in dialogue with his poetic and painterly heroes: Ezra Pound and Jasper Johns. This is a way to reject the persistent readings of Foucault and Butler as a means of appraising

performance works. Again, the writing is beautiful and the descriptions faultless, but they are all rooted in close visual analysis and an uncritical embrace of white, male-dominant modernism. The chapter closes by putting Acconci in dialogue with Adrian Piper's early street performances. Outwardly, this makes sense: both were making works in New York at the same time – but with the obvious differences of race and gender, which provoked very different receptions from audiences unaware of their motives. In the wake of Black Lives Matter and sexual harassment activism, the argument thus unfortunately comes across as rather tone deaf.

Archias's long conclusion, which she calls a coda, is where the book should have actually started. It demonstrates that modernism as a model both dramatically receded in the wake of intensive social change during the 1960s and how in certain ways the three artists of her focus utilised strategies set against the postmodernist tendencies that ensued during the 1980s and beyond. In so doing, Archias sets the stage for some key contentions about the place of modernism and its strong attempts to delay its own inevitable death. Part of this results in a meditation on Rainer's most recent dance work, *Spiraling Down* (2008), which is put into dialogue with Matisse's dancers, ending with a brief rumination on the artwork's 'sensuous particulars' (p. 182). This is simultaneously the book's blind spot

and its strength: Archias focuses only on the sensuous particulars, while overlooking the larger stakes of how most of this work has been glorified, endlessly historicised, and whether it has true relevance for future generations of artists and historians.

Notes

1. Mignon Nixon, *Eva Hesse* (New York: October Books, 2002); James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the 1960s* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004); Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (2008); Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (2009); Briony Fer, *Eva Hesse: Studiowork* (2009); Jo Applin, *Eccentric Objects: Rethinking Sculpture in 1960s America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012); Susan Richmond, *Lynda Benglis: Beyond Process* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2013), and Kirsten Swenson, *Irrational Judgments: Eva Hesse, Sol Lewitt, and 1960s New York* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015); *Radical Bodies: Anna Halprin, Simone Forti, and Yvonne Rainer*, ed. Bruce Robertson, Ninotchka Bannahum, Wendy Perron (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2017).
2. Lucy Lippard, 'Eccentric Abstraction', *Art International*, 10/9 (20 November 1966), pp. 28, 34–40, and 'Eros Presumptive' (revised), in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), pp. 209–21.
3. See Anna C. Chave, 'Minimalism and Biography', *The Art Bulletin*, 82/1 (March 2000), pp. 149–63, and also Yvonne Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts: A Life (Writing Art)* (London and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

doi:10.1093/oxartj/kcy023