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ART & PERFORMANCE NOTES



Gordon Hall, *STAND AND*, October 25, 2014, at the handball court in Chelsea Park, New York. Photo: Amy Mills.

LEANING, CARRYING, STANDING

Gordon Hall and the Politics of Form

Ethan Philbrick

Gordon Hall, *STAND AND*, Chelsea Park, New York, NY, October 25, 2014, performance and sculpture as part of *FLEX*, a group show at Kent Fine Art, New York, September 5–October 31, 2014.

In March of 2014, art theorists Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy published a conversation in *Art Journal* entitled “Queer Formalisms.” Taking up artistic practices that ranged from the contemporary sculptural work of Math Bass and Jonah Groeneboer to the work of figures who have long made their way into the art historical establishment such as Andy Warhol and Robert Morris, the dialogue has been widely engaged among artists and critics interested in the political implications of non-representational artistic practice. One of its foremost concerns is how artistic strategies traveling under headings such as abstraction and formalism—as well as interpretive strategies attuned to such practices—might be resources for reimagining and rearticulating a radical approach to sexuality and gender, in the registers of both aesthetics and politics. In the conversation, Doyle and Getsy wonder about the many ways sexuality, gender, and race appear, or resist appearance, in work that operates beyond explicit representations of sexually non-normative or gender

non-conforming subjects and collectivities. How might an artistic practice be described as queer without signs that are readily legible as being attached to queer lifeworlds, or without deploying a reductively identitarian interpretive framework that calls a work queer based on who the maker sleeps with or how they do gender or how they complete the phrase “I am ____”?

Perhaps abstraction and formalism are capacious strategies for artists wanting to make work that resists the assimilation and subsumption of queer subjects within coercive modalities of mainstream cultural visibility and political recognition. As Getsy puts it, he is interested in how “abstraction is being used as a resource by young trans and queer artists because it allows for a less prescribed capacity for artists and viewers to see themselves in it,” or in Doyle’s words, “What [does] sex become when practiced or expressed or manifested through things like speed, gesture, plasticity, or texture[?]”

These questions bring us to some long-standing debates around the politics, or perhaps we should say meta-politics, of form—from Theodor Adorno, to Jacques Rancière, to Frederic Jameson—as well as debates within queer theory about the relationship between insurgent politics and artistic practice. They also bring us, perhaps more interestingly, to the work of Gordon Hall. While included in a top 40 list of “Transgender Art & Culture in 2014” assembled by the Museum of Transgender History & Art (MOTHA), Hall makes sculptures, performances, and lectures that don’t necessarily include clear signifiers or representations of gender variance or sexual deviance. Instead, Hall opts for repertoires of minimal, abstracted forms and gestures—ones that hover around indiscernibility and invisibility, confusing distinctions between objects and persons and ideas and things, and proposing indeterminate collective gatherings. For Hall, there is a critically expansive politics to formal practices that don’t necessarily have an explicitly political content. In a conversation between Hall and the curator Orlando Tirando from the catalogue for *FLEX*, the exhibition curated by Tirando that featured Hall’s performance and sculpture *STAND AND*, Hall states, “I am interested in work that teaches me phenomenologically how to move through the world and how to perceive differently, in ways that will make queerness and gender variety more possible.”

There is a politics to perceiving differently, to disrupting the hierarchical distribution of the sensible (to use Rancière’s idiom), to engaging in a perceptual politics that encourages productive confusion and unreadability, to creat-

ing forms that resist the submission of bodies and objects to coercive and rigid taxonomies. Perhaps what Hall’s performances and objects suggest is that the set of aesthetic strategies that are being gathered under the heading of “queer formalism” might be alternatively thought of as experiments with queer formlessness. By invoking formlessness, I don’t mean an ideal concept of absolute formlessness that would be akin to invocations of queerness within social theory as a heroic modality of absolute normlessness, but instead as a practice that explores zones of formal and medial indistinction, zones of unclear shapes and movements that never cohere into clear signifiatory coordinates. Queer formlessness would be a political and aesthetic style that experiments with forms and shapes that risk opacity and illegibility, formlessness and shapelessness, or the un-formed, not-yet formed, and indeterminately formed.

I arrived a few minutes late to the performance of Gordon Hall’s *STAND AND*, a piece for seven performers and a sculpture on a handball court in Chelsea. It was a sunny and crisp afternoon, the kind of fall day when most people are either wearing too many or not enough clothes. As I came onto the court, things were already underway. Performers (including Hall, Orlando Tirado, the curator of *FLEX*, and a group of performers and visual artists: Chris Domenick, Ariel Goldberg, Andrew Kachel, Millie Kapp, and Colin Self) each moved singularly around the court, pausing in various states of repose in relationship to the handball court wall, the ground, portions of Hall’s sculpture, or each other. There was a slowness to everyone’s movements that bordered on



Gordon Hall, *STAND AND*, October 25th, 2014, Chelsea Park, New York, NY. Part of the exhibition FLEX at Kent Fine Art, curated by Orlando Tirado, September 5–October 31, 2014. Top photo: Courtesy Gordon Hall. Bottom photo: Amy Mills.

both calm and smoldering. No words were spoken. The atmosphere seemed somewhere between a vaguely unsettling blankness and a semi-erotic ease. The modality of movement at play felt like cruising, a paradoxically aimless and aim-ful mode of desirous wandering.

The performers moved through the court as if cruising for a provisional formal relation rather than a trick: cruising for a line, a shape, an object, a wall, a body, relation, an arrangement. There was a resonance between the movements of the performers and the movement of the audience around them. Hall's announcement for the performance had invited onlookers to arrive, wander, and leave at their own whim. We kept to the periphery, circling slowly around the edge, pausing for a moment, positioning ourselves in relation to others, taking a seat, seeing and being seen, moving on. There was no one point from which everything could be seen (performers moved and took positions on either side of the wall that bisected the court), and this felt okay. We drifted in and out—positioning ourselves, watching, wondering about we couldn't see. Shapes, forms, and relations were drifting in and out, potential and mutable.

The sculptural component of *STAND AND* began in the center of one of the handball courts. While the performance technically only lasted from 2:00 until 3:00 P.M., in some ways the performance had been going on for more than a month. The sculpture, an assemblage of seven large, off-white polygons arranged symmetrically and propped together by two rounded supports, had been on display since September 5th

in the exhibition FLEX at Kent Fine Art. Hall discusses their work as a kind of practice in which performance and objects are not necessarily distinct categories of things: all objects are potential performances and all performances are anticipated by and live on within and through objects. Hall's sculptures are a bundle of virtualities for performance. Hall's performances are sculptural enactments of the mutual entanglements between bodies and things.

Eventually performers began to manipulate the sculpture, working together to carry the heavy polygons away from the central assemblage and to lean them against the central wall of the court. As the parts of the sculpture began to be carried and arranged into shapes along and next to the bodies of performers, there seemed to be a kind of blurring between what constituted and differentiated a body, an object, and a space—a confusion between what determined what, what was being leaned on and what was propping up. Hall's score for the performance was set up as an open series of constraints for improvisation that took the performers through successive stages of disassembling the sculpture, experimenting with bringing the parts into relation with each other, the wall, and their bodies, and then reassembling the sculpture in a variety of ways. It seemed as if the performers were operating with a series of rather simple questions in mind: how can I put my body together with this? How might we make bodies together? What does this sharing of weight, arrangement of shapes, or distribution of support feel like? What does it do? The performers, objects, wall, and ground folded and

unfolded each other, finding and then unfolding various collective lines and shapes. Sculpture leaning on wall, body leaning across sculpture. Body upright next to line, line next to body, ground below them both. Wall standing up, body folded onto it, sculpture propping other body.

STAND AND seemed to approach bodies and things as malleable and shifting shapes among shapes: shapes drifting in and out of shapeliness. In the *Art Journal* conversation on queer formalism noted above, Jennifer Doyle argues, “Queer/feminist art practices will hover over the thingness of the body as a way of exploring the weight and history of that body, as a way of exploring the politics of making bodies into things, and things into bodies.” Doyle’s statement helps us attune ourselves to the gender and sexual politics of artworks such as Hall’s that enter into a zone of indistinction between bodies and things. For Doyle, these kinds of practices hold critical potentiality for queer and feminist formations by their capacity to work otherwise with the history of the differential objectification of human bodies, to take objecthood in hand and see what sorts of potentialities and criticalities it might hold.

Tirado, echoing the discursive moves of Doyle and Getsy’s conversation, framed the *FLEX* exhibition more broadly as an encounter between 1960s minimalist aesthetics and “an emerging queer, transgender, renegade post-minimalist strategy” that eschews representation (both aesthetically and politically) for a (re)turn towards abstraction, conceptualism, and formalism. As Hall’s perfor-

mance took place, I was reminded of the work of sculptor and dancer Simone Forti. Forti and Hall seem to share an attunement to the interanimation of bodies and objects. Forti’s dance constructions from the 1960s and 70s, while often art-historically overlooked, were greatly influential in the development of minimalist sculpture and postmodern dance, often playfully disrupting the ways in which objects and spaces determine movement and vice versa. In *Handbook in Motion* (1974), Forti begins her book (part memoir, part book of performance scores and documentation) with a series of phrases and sketches. One fragment in particular came into my mind as Hall’s performance unfolded, “I saw a man in pajamas walk up to a tree, stop, regard it, and change his posture.” Forti’s phrases are separated by large gulfs of space on the page, occasionally interjected with a loosely drawn sketch, bordering between the figural and the abstract. Forti’s minimal instructions, like Hall’s performances and sculptures, imply a processual practice between bodies and objects, a practice that doesn’t assume to know where it is going or what it is—that becomes itself relationally, presupposes no form, risks formlessness.

STAND AND seemed to propose an experimental modality of being together as bodied things—a practice of leaning into and onto shapes without presupposition and without demanding knowledge or legibility of them, instead bringing oneself into relation and changing one’s posture. There are political ramifications of Hall’s practice of carrying, caring, lifting, placing, and folding bodies and things within form-

lessness. It is a corporeal politics that doesn't necessarily succumb to the stultifying categorical regimes and political hierarchies of our times, an aesthetics

and politics of dwelling (and cruising) within a capacious field of indeterminacy or indiscernibility.

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