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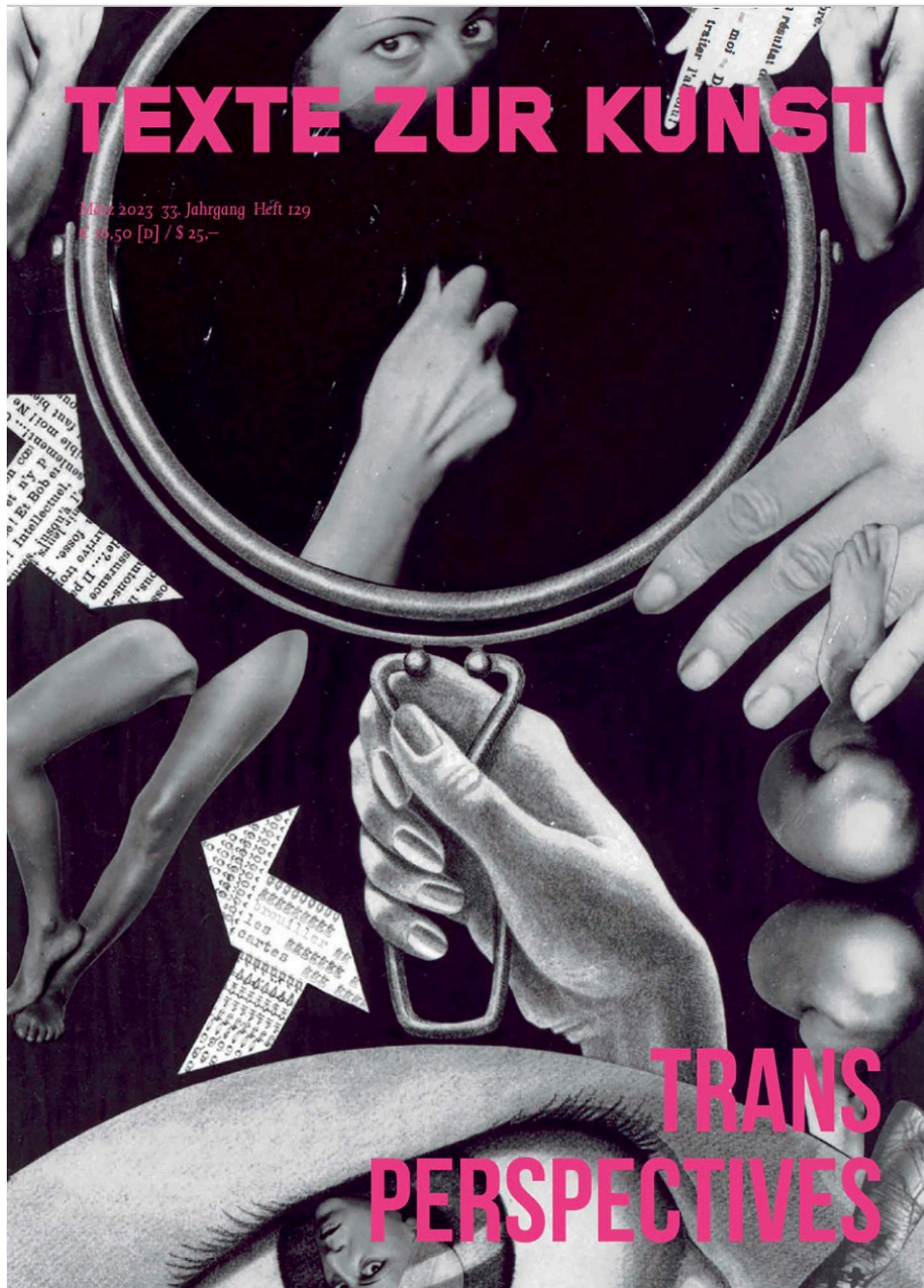
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TEXTE ZUR KUNST

Lancaster, Lex Morgan, "Trans Abstractions, Decomposing Figurations: Young Joon Kwak and Kiyon Williams,"
Texte Zur Kunst, March 2023



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PREFACE

At some point during the past decade, trans stopped being fringe. In 2022 alone, we have seen Vladimir Putin summon the specter of “sex change operations” in his justification of the invasion of Ukraine. We have seen the United Kingdom on the verge of a constitutional crisis over progressive trans legislation in Scotland. In the United States, hundreds of laws have been suggested to legislate trans people out of existence. And in Germany, Justice Minister Marco Buschmann recently justified delays in passing a long overdue *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz* (self-identification law) by barely hiding his transmisogyny behind safety concerns for visitors of women’s saunas. Yet these are in no way new developments. For many years, so-called anti-gender movements have functioned as the connective tissue of the global Right – with trans people as one of the most visible and most contentious subjects of debate.

Simultaneously, the last decade has seen a proliferation of self-authored representations of trans and nonbinary individuals. In 2014, for instance, Laverne Cox graced the cover of *Time*, with the magazine proclaiming a “transgender tipping point.” *Pose*, coproduced by Janet Mock and starring the largest cast of Black and Latinx trans actresses in TV history, was met with critical acclaim. And this year, Kim Petras won a Grammy for her duo with the nonbinary singer Sam Smith. Yet just as the visibility has increased, so has the violence. Homicides, especially of Black trans women, are continuously on the rise.

How do these larger social and political developments relate to the art world? Many major galleries and museums now present some non-cis artists, and the list of participants invited to the 2022 Venice Biennale to imagine a “magical

world where life is constantly re-envisioned” and “where everyone can change, be transformed, become something or someone else” included many trans and nonbinary creators. The age of the trans freak show, apparently, is over. But what’s next? Was this just a means to pinkwash major art-world institutions as they fail to change structural discrimination and create spaces hospitable to trans people? Does the framing of trans artists’ alleged transgressiveness reduce the complexities of their lived experience to romanticize them as brave epitomes of Queer Theory? Transness itself quickly becomes a reference to describe countless other things: lives give way to metaphors in the wake of an easily interchangeable affix; trans is curtailed to a state of superfluidity in which questions of structural inequality, unequal access to health care, and so on are too easily ignored.

Shifting the perspective, *Texte zur Kunst* deliberately foregrounds trans artists and writers, who reflect on, among other things, the prevalence of transmisogyny; the intersections of racism, anti-Semitism, and transphobia; the necessities and joys of (digital) spaces for trans people from all backgrounds; and a productive new language for trans aesthetics. Methodologically speaking, many texts envision a peculiar trans materialism: linking lived experience with, for instance, a critical engagement with the politics of visibility or institutional critique, the contributors explore how trans materializes on the art market, in museums, and beyond. This means expanding the canon, since access to the pantheon of alleged high art is often limited to the few who can satisfactorily handle the master’s tools. This is a claim that Farah Thompson exemplifies in her reading of Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley’s game designs. Because of her experience as a Black bisexual trans

woman, Thompson reads these games as meditations on the peculiarity of Black trans aesthetics. Questions about unequal access and the necessity to create exclusive spaces also drives the conversation between artists Vidisha-Fadescha, Chris E. Vargas, Kübra Uzun and philosopher Luce deLire: What does it mean to access institutions where the prerequisites for participation are based on cis white standards? And what role can hospitality and kink play in creating post-authoritarian alternatives?

In a separate contribution, deLire offers a critique of what she characterizes as *representational justice* and its theoretical foundations in Judith Butler's politics of subversion. The politics of visibility, she argues, often thwart sustainably alter violent, and especially transmisogynist, environments – with significant consequences for the artistic sector. Thinking about how to weather hostile environments, Hil Malatino describes a concept of endurance, with which trans artists and writers imagine what it means to subsist. Based on the work of Young Joon Kwak and Kiyan Williams, Lex Morgan Lancaster discusses the effects of histories and processes on the material behaviors and morphologies of trans and racialized bodies while expanding the idea of what has been termed *queer abstraction*. In a similar vein, in their interview, Williams, P. Staff, and Jeanne Vaccaro reject the current discourse of representation versus abstraction in writings about work by trans artists.

As many of the texts in our features section articulate the need to challenge the paradigm within hegemonic institutions, this issue of *Texte zur Kunst* continues its editorial theme to other sections of the magazine as well. The reviews, for instance, discuss the works of artists ranging from

Toni Ebel to Greer Lankton to Kim Petras to Wu Tsang. The image spread presents artworks commissioned from not just one but multiple artists: Andrea Illés, Eburn Sodipo, El Palomar, Katayoun Jalilipour, Pippa Garner, Raju Rage and Nad MA. In addition, this issue includes literary forms of artistic research by artists and writers Aristilde Kirby, Maxi Wallenhorst, and Ginevra Shay.

Texte zur Kunst's cis team is extremely grateful for the trust and work our contributors invested in this issue – especially to Luce deLire, who put in much more additional labor than she initially signed up for. As the following pages underscore, trans artists have repeatedly been disregarded by art history, the art market, and the media (and *Texte zur Kunst* has been no exception). Yet narratives and institutions won't be transformed by merely changing one's perspective. Institutional transformation is about engaging with the lived and material realities of transness, about making spaces more hospitable for trans people, and about (re)distributing resources equitably. We hope that this issue not only conveys the necessity for such a change but also contributes to the possibility of deep structural transformations in the future.

LUCE DELIRE, ANTONIA KÖLBL, CHRISTIAN LICLAIR,
AND ANNA SINOFZIK

An extended and annotated version of this preface, alongside a comprehensive bibliography, can be accessed on TZK's website.

LEX MORGAN LANCASTER

TRANS ABSTRACTIONS, DECOMPOSING FIGURATIONS:
YOUNG JOON KWAK AND KIYAN WILLIAMS



Kiyon Williams, „Between Starshine and Clay“, 2022

In the works of Young Joon Kwak and Kiyon Williams, bodies are present only in parts. But rather than pinning down the relation of figuration to abstraction in their art, Lex Morgan Lancaster digs into the materiality of it. In applying trans and crip as processes of experience, the scholar and curator moves beyond appearance and instead brings to the fore the often-violent material histories and forces that shape bodies. At the same time, Kwak's and Williams's engagements with their respective materials underscores the fugitive capacities of these materials, which circumvent control and subvert stable notions of what is natural or artificial.

A long, rectangular sheet of brittle amber-colored fiberglass cloth arches up in a tall fold, both ends resting on the gallery floor, creating a narrow space for us to see in between the two ends. Two cast resin hands emerge at the corners on one end, crawling with fingers grasping the floor. A third disembodied hand – more naturalistically cast and painted with modulated skin tone and gold fingernails – is placed on the floor at the other end, delicately lifting up the edge of the sheet. This is *Hermaphroditus's Reveal I* (2017) by Young Joon Kwak. This sculpture might recall the abstract fiberglass and resin sculptures of Eva Hesse, which emphasize the uncontrolled behavior of raw, base materials. Kwak's hands drag this material down to the floor, accentuating its fold and flow to create a negative space where there is nothing to be revealed, defying our expectations.

Playing between presence and absence, Kwak grounds their work in ontological processes without succumbing to either a coherent bodily composition or an immaterial abstraction.

Kiyan Williams similarly sculpts forms that are excessively material and create open spaces for what is de-formed or yet to be figured. *Terrestrial Form, Pour #2 after Benglis and Serra* (2021) is a tall black mound of earth, black truffle fungi, and Vaseline. There is a fluorescent lime-green extension cord draped around it – living matter wrapped in a potentially live wire – and a digital connector plug embedded in the surface, as though the form could communicate data or project image and sound. A long, synthetic, fluorescent-green braid hangs down from the top of the sculpture, and two black feet appear on the floor, slightly separated from the mass. This work directly references the abstract postminimal sculptures of Lynda Benglis and Richard Serra, deploying the dirt and ooze of impure abstraction along with everyday objects and bodily extremities to insist on the body's vital impurity as well.

Producing decomposing or disintegrating figurations that exceed the boundaries and capacities of a normative anatomy, Kwak and Williams convey trans senses of embodiment that are irreducible to taxonomies of gender. Their sculptures perform what I have called the “drag away” from categorical perception that abstraction offers while maintaining clear ties to expansive embodiments that are so crucial to trans inquiry and engagement with the world. In the process, they undermine binary conceptions of abstraction versus representation.¹ While my previous work on queer abstraction argues for the activation of desire and the subversion of gendered and racial taxonomies in works where bodies are

emphatically absent, my analysis of trans abstraction here deals with the irreconcilable tension between materiality, figuration, and the body that works by Kwak and Williams make palpable, and with which trans artists and theorists continue to wrestle.² Most notably, David Gettsy has argued that abstraction offers methods for pursuing trans politics of the body without directly representing them and that abstract sculptures specifically can activate “transgender capacities” that help us to engage with gender as mutable and multiple.³ Pursuing abstraction as an active force that undermines the presumed correspondences between form and body, this essay mobilizes understandings of trans or transgender that do not cohere around binaries and instead are about fugitive movements, contentious multiplicities, unmanageable matter, and wild materializations.⁴ I similarly deploy affective and relational concepts of “crip” in the sense of destabilizing material experiences and refusing corporeal compliance that we see in the objects themselves (rather than a straightforward representation of a disabled person).⁵

The objects and spaces I discuss here contribute to these understandings of trans and crip as processes, actions, and modes of engagement with the world rather than just appearances. Trans and crip are distinct as well as overlapping categories of experience, and I am pursuing trans theory as it is shaped by critical race and crip perspectives. This short essay emphasizes a trans approach that also centralizes these intersections, particularly concerning issues of materiality, with the understanding that transness is shaped by race and crip experiences that also cannot be conflated. While there is a tendency to view even the most nonrepresentational sculptural forms



Kiyon Williams, „Terrestrial Form (Pour #2 after Benglis and Serra)“, 2021

in anthropomorphic terms of bodily metaphor, especially from trans and crip perspectives that centralize the body, my approach to abstraction focuses on the material processes that interrupt perceptions of a form-as-body. Even when the work is partly figural, I am less concerned with bodily resemblance and more with the active materiality that shapes and misshapes ontological processes and perceptions.

Kwak and Williams drag abstraction down to the ground, rejecting the presumed transcendence of an incorporeal abstraction while also dragging away from corporeal legibility and coherence, insisting instead on material impurity and instability.⁶ In these trans abstractions, the

artists explore a vexed tension between absence and presence to suggest a potentiality, opening space for the otherwise of trans embodiment that is constituted by sensual experience, not compulsory figuration or operation. Rather than the cohesive wholeness of a body contained, they produce fragmentation, deformation, elasticity, and multiplicity, returning to the body's base impurity and mutability or to the seemingly corrupted matter of the body, which also makes us aware of its instability. Kwak and Williams deploy this fugitive potential of excessive materiality otherwise marked as monstrous – using media such as dirt and plastic in their unruly capacities and everyday objects against their normal function – in order

to refigure our conceptions of embodiment: not just what it might look like but what it might do in relation to matter in the world.⁷ This worldly matter is not external or separate from the material behaviors and morphologies of our bodies; rather, it actively shapes them.

Kwak's and Williams's approaches to materiality insist on abstraction that is not extraction – as in a withdrawal from the senses or the material, or violent settler-colonial processes of removal, or essentialist logics – but that gets down and dirty with the disintegrating processes that might undo and that we may yet do something with. Central to my thinking here is Jill Casid's proposition for “doing things with being undone,” or an aesthetic praxis that works with the deformation, decomposition, and decay of our states of disposability in what Casid considers the “crisis ordinary of the Necrocene,” in living death.⁸ Casid prompts me to ask how Kwak and Williams contribute “deformative” aesthetic tactics to a politics of abstraction that would not lift off in a transcendent path of transformation but that would instead pursue the minoritarian agencies of matter that decays and matter that lives while accounting for loss and for life in the wake of being discarded.⁹ Further, Kwak and Williams mobilize the potentials of this fugitive materiality to produce figurations that prompt new ways of thinking abstraction as trans and crip tactics for the unresolved, unrevealed, and decomposing of matter that refuses to cohere or compose into representative bodies (bodies that must either maintain normative composition or be subject to ongoing surveillance and violence).

Kwak's sculptural works often manipulate objects in ways that shore up bodily objectification while undermining categorical ontological

perceptions. Also a performance artist, Kwak is the founder of Mutant Salon, an ongoing collaborative project with other queer, trans, femme, and BIPOC artists and performers. Williams's sculptures and installations often use dirt and clay to create abstracted figures, exploring historical ties between Black bodies and the land in the United States, as well as the imbricated ecological and political forces that continue to shape both. These artists engage with legacies of sculpture in relation to ontological forces, and they both deploy base, unstable matter to render alien forms. Although the artists' identities are not the subject of my analysis (I focus on their artworks rather than their biographies), I do take seriously that their practices are shaped by their subject positions while also exploring more expansive implications that may exceed their intentionality. My approach is object-oriented and engages in subjectless critique while maintaining its grounding in the everyday material forces that shape individual and collective bodies, taking my cue from these works that respond to gendering, racism, ableism, and histories of forced enslavement that persist in the heteropatriarchal racial capitalism of our present.

Considered together, these artists' abstractions reckon with the unmanageability of trans, crip, and racialized existence by figuring bodies that are at once excessively material and torn apart, dis-figured, and beyond the human. This work speaks to the experiences of those who are excluded from human subjectivity and yet nevertheless live in the face of violent regulatory regimes that insist they shouldn't. I would not say that trans, crip, and racialized experiences are *only* material, but this work prompts me to look critically at how materiality constitutes their

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Kiyon Williams, „Between Starshine and Clay“, 2022

trajectories and provides possibilities for working with certain unmanageable material states.

Williams uses dirt as a charged, historically loaded, and unruly sculptural medium. Their installation *Between Starshine and Clay* (2022) transports us to a dirt-covered landscape or planet bathed in a warm orange glow. First, we encounter *Sentient Ruin 3*, a tall cylinder of cracked earth with a head held by a long thin neck, its calm face turned slightly upward with eyes closed. Reminiscent of ancient ruins, the head is cracked open to reveal the metal rod that supports it. Behind this being, an explosion of earth and sandstone is suspended in midair: rocks with imprints of the artist's touch and fragmented impressions of their face and hands float above a reflection pool. The placement of the face at the top center and hands on either side, gesturing up and out, suggest a shattered and uncontained body. Williams figures these decomposing beings from the living matter of earth that bears a heavy historical weight, plunging us into a queer trans Afrofuturist time-space that is not here or not yet here, and yet shows us how bodies are formed and deformed by everyday matter.

These fragments of suspended earth contain soil excavated from sites where ships carrying enslaved Africans first landed in the United States, and the sandstone is from the facade of the US Capitol, which was built by their labor.¹⁰ Williams has explained that soil contains historical memories of violence and trauma, traces of lives stolen in processes of settler colonialism, but that it is also the basis for new life: "The soil embodied the abjection of being Black and queer and poor, the structural violence and conditions that shaped my life. But it too represented the possibility for transformation."¹¹ Williams's abstracted figures

bear witness to the afterlives of settler colonialism and chattel slavery, and the Black queer and trans capacities for growth and transformation in the wake of this history. Destruction and creation, past and future, pessimism and utopia all share the same space – a space of multiplicity that would be totally unmanageable if not for Black queer trans capacities for working with such deeply ambivalent matter. The material instability of Williams's chosen medium aligns with Jessica Cooley's theory of crip materiality, specifically the "inherent vice" of artworks that deteriorate over time, undermining institutional demands for physical integrity and conservation. An insurance term used during the transatlantic slave trade, "inherent vice" once applied to enslaved humans deemed property, to absolve enslavers of liability for their deaths at sea.¹² Cooley understands Williams's materials as crip specifically because they hold volatile material histories of lives deemed disposable and carry them into the present.¹³ The Black, trans, crip materiality of this work mobilizes noncompliant matter that undoes itself from within to undermine the persistent white supremacist, patriarchal, imperial capitalist logics that mark some lives and bodies for death. At the same time, this decomposing matter is used to figure beings that refuse to be contained.

When we enter the installation, we hear a recording of Lucille Clifton and Williams's collaborator, Kumi James (BAE BAE), reading Clifton's poem "won't you celebrate with me":

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman

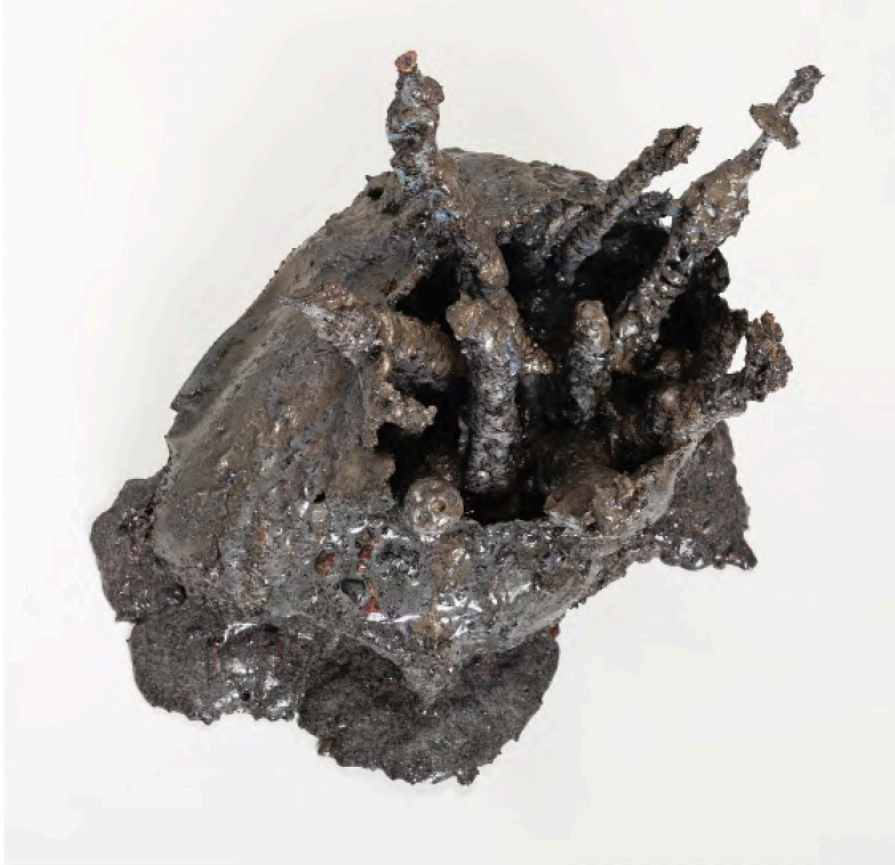


Young Joon Kwak, „Sleeping Muse“, 2020

what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

Considered through the lens of Clifton's poetics, Williams's work manifests from forces of self-determination in the wake of ongoing anti-Black patriarchal violence. The gritty materiality of their work, producing life-forms that persist and emerge from the vital matter of shattered ruins, forge alternative ways of sensing and being from within, even as one is othered and objectified from without. Black trans studies scholars C. Riley Snorton and Marquis Bey, following and extending the work of Hortense Spillers, have

posited Black and trans as fugitive processes of unfixing gender by mobilizing the fungibility of flesh. This fungibility (commodification of the human as object) is a violent component of slavery that persists today and yet becomes a form of possibility in Black trans analysis and cultural production, a fugitive undermining of gender binaries along with ableist understandings of the fixed or captive body.¹⁴ Williams's installation materializes this sense of a body that cannot be held captive, but it visually captivates us with a refusal of corporeal or symbolic integrity. It suggests the Black, queer, trans, crip subject position that is both made monstrous in its rejection from the symbolic and material order of things and mobilizes that excess to claim a power of refusal – to mobilize the violence of an abstraction of the body from the outside for a capacity to explode limiting signification according to racialized, gendered, and ableist material codes. The violence is still there, and still felt, but within that process



Young Joon Kwak, „Sleeping Muse“, 2020

there is the possibility for re-creation in new material terms.

Kwak similarly deploys the grit and slime of impure matter to sculpt abstracted, decomposing figures. In Kwak's exhibition "Dilectio" (Cerritos College Art Gallery, 2020), the artist used plastic matter to engage with the plasticity of sex and gender. They created objects from the interiors of vagina "replicas," sex toys made to be penetrated but that become abstract geometric forms and multiplying protrusions. *Sleeping Muse* (2020) – a re-creation of Constantin Brâncuși's *Sleeping Muse* (1910) – is an abstracted head with a mask-like face lying on its side, covered and soaking in a pool of shiny, gritty brown goo (a compound of

aluminum and nickel silver powder, dirt, rocks, and resin). The top of the head bursts apart, and cast resin interiors of vagina replica sex toys protrude out, their sharp edges caked in dirty residue. This reference to a modernist sculpture suggests that the tradition of abstracting the body, in order to create a "universal" human body, violently obscures difference; Kwak recasts this figure using base, impure matter to reclaim it for difference, for a vibrant monstrosity.

In Kwak's work, bodies are not merely plasticized; bodies and gender are shown to be already plastic. The prosthetic is transformed from a to-be-fucked object into something that penetrates, its interior made exterior, absence made

presence. I am reminded of Paul Preciado's claim that "gender is first and foremost prosthetic" and that sex is not a natural but rather a technological phenomenon.¹⁵ Prosthetics are generally thought to support a disabled body but are not considered a "real" part of that body; indeed, Preciado notes, the dildo marks lesbian and trans bodies disabled.¹⁶ Kwak's work similarly reminds us of the constructedness of gender and sex and notions of ability, using fragmented, plastic part-bodies to undermine the very borders of signification (the divide between signifier and signified – the seeming truth of the body itself and the representation of the body). Kwak's use of both plastic and organic matter to render these abstracted figures suggests a fluid border between what we assume to be a body's natural state and the biotechnological and prosthetic devices that both support heteropatriarchal ableist constructs and enable us to shatter them. Brâncuși's passive muse is exploded here, uncontained, leaking primordial ooze, transed, and crippled.

I wonder what this work can contribute to new materialist understandings of vital matter – not a universalist notion of matter unmarked by difference but how living matter and the afterlives of material processes can be mobilized for queer, trans, crip, anti-racist lifeworlds, where the stakes of ontology are always high. For now, I suggest that Kwak and Williams produce trans abstractions that show us how bodies are dis-figured by harmful material histories and processes – the kind of harm that seeps into the skin and the bones and the earth – and yet also contain the capacities for material fugitivity in their decomposition and deformation, taking shape and making space in the world in and through the unmanageability of our matter.

Thanks to Jill Casid and Cyle Metzger for their feedback and suggestions on this essay.

Notes

- 1 Lex Morgan Lancaster, *Dragging Away: Queer Abstraction in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022). In my chapter on "Transforming Everyday Matter" (110–32), I insist that queer abstraction is a process rather than a look, and I also pursue "deforming" aesthetic processes as queer, crip strategies. I build on those arguments here.
- 2 Abstraction is now considered a major force within trans art practices. Current conversations about the viability of abstraction in trans visual studies and art history are fueled by the shared understanding that visibility and representation are not inherently liberatory for transgender subjects; see Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017). David Getsy and Jack Halberstam have argued that transgender approaches to abstraction can destabilize harmful visual taxonomies and binary perceptions of bodies; see David J. Getsy, "Seeing Commitments: Jonah Groeneboer's Ethics of Discernment," *Temporary Art Review*, March 8, 2016, <https://temporaryartreview.com/seeing-commitments-jonah-groeneboers-ethics-of-discernment/>; and Jack Halberstam, "Trans Representation after the Figure," *Frieze*, no. 227 (May 2022).
- 3 David J. Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 34. Importantly, Getsy argues that tracking these trans capacities is "a hermeneutic rather than an iconographic task" (36).
- 4 Definitions of "trans" have expanded to describe aesthetic and material concerns beyond a singular identity; see Cyle Metzger and Kirstin Ringelberg, "Prismatic Views: A Look at the Growing Field of Transgender Art and Visual Culture Studies," *Journal of Visual Culture* 19, no. 2 (August 2020): 159–70; see also Aren Z. Aizura, Marquis Bey, Toby Beauchamp, Treva Ellison, Jules Gill-Peterson, and Eliza Steinbock, "Thinking with Trans Now," in "Left of Queer," ed. David Eng and Jasbir Puar, themed issue, *Social Text* 38, no. 4 (December 1, 2020): 125–45.
- 5 Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013); Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).
- 6 Nicolas Cuello writes about "impure abstraction" in the

zine catalogue for "Mis-Shapes," a group exhibition curated by Catalina Schliebener Muñoz for Tiger Strikes Asteroid New York (2022), to describe problematized uses of the abstract where languages of geometry and taxonomy clash to suggest queer, trans, nonbinary, racialized, crip possibilities of embodiment. See also the classic text from Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997) for an approach to base materialism in modernist art practice that celebrates the debased and uncategorizable.

- 7 On monstrosity in relation to trans embodiment, see Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 244–56. Stryker crucially understands materiality as central to the trans violation of the symbolic order and also that trans subjects are considered monstrous precisely because they expose the constructed and unnatural foundations for all gendered embodiments.
- 8 Jill H. Casid, "Doing Things with Being Undone," *Journal of Visual Culture* 18, no. 1 (April 2019): 31.
- 9 See Jill H. Casid, "Queer Deformativity: Mark Morrisroe, Jack Pierson, and Jimmy De Sana at Pat Hearn," in *The Conditions of Being Art: Pat Hearn Gallery and American Fine Arts, Co. (1983–2004)*, ed. Jeannine Tang, Lia Gangitano, and Anne Butler (New York: Dancing Fox Press, 2018), 212–37.
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