

# Object Lessons: Thinking Gender Variance through Minimalist Sculpture

Gordon Hall

What lessons can we learn from objects? Art objects can tell us many things—about their origins, their intended and received meanings, their makers. But what can objects teach us about how to see? About how to see other objects, or bodies, in realms far removed from the museum, gallery, or studio? If it is possible to learn from objects how to see bodies differently, can they teach us to see gender differently, to shift the ways we perceive nonnormative genders? “Object Lessons,”

my title here, refers to a methodology in which we might understand our lived experiences of sculptural works as capable of teaching us conceptual frameworks through which to recognize new or different genders, in one another and in ourselves. I propose a strategy for reading a group of Minimalist sculptural practices against the grain, finding in them renewed possibilities for theorizing nonnormatively gendered embodiments. I see sculpture as occupying a unique place to learn about and transform our experiences of the gendered body, not primarily because of what we see in the sculptures, but because of how they might enable us to see *everything* else.

Often, artwork is described as queer when it depicts LGBT subjects or figures, is produced by a self-identified LGBT person, or references gay culture through recognizable motifs, references, or aesthetics. I call this the glitter problem. Or the leather problem. Or the pink-yarn, 1970s-crafts, iconic-diva, glory-hole, pre-AIDS-sexuality, post-AIDS-sexuality, bodies and body-parts, blood-and-bodily-fluids problem.

In the spring of 2012 I participated in *Lifestyle Plus Form Bundle*, an exhibition of screenprinted multiples that explored what the artist-curator Daniel Luedtke describes as “queer abstraction.” As Luedtke wrote in his exhibition text:

Can we make space for a political interpretation of non-representation?  
If formalism entails pure visual exploration devoid of context or content,  
is a feminist/queer formalism possible?

or

Without dicks, vaginas, menstrual blood, references to Jean Genet, cum, anuses, bondage, surgery scars, reclaimed pronouns, reclamation of the male/female ga(y)ze, sidelong glances cast at Woman’s Work (Womyn’s Werq), etc. etc. etc. HOW DO WE KNOW IT’S FEMINIST/QUEER?!

To return to the question of Minimalism, I periodically hear the terms “queer minimalism” or “gay minimalism” used to describe artwork that borrows from the language of Minimalism while simultaneously embodying LGBT themes or references. Felix González-Torres is often positioned as an example of this strategy, along with more contemporary artists such as Tom Burr, Terence Koh, and Elmgreen and Dragset—diverse practices that could all be described as using the formal language of Minimalism with the addition of gay or queer content. I love González-Torres’s work, and have literally been so moved by some of Catherine Opie’s photographs that I stood in the corner of the Guggenheim and wept. But here I want to discuss the relationship between artwork and gender in a different way. I want to briefly elaborate two object lessons—ways of seeing that we can learn from sculpture that resonate with accounts of nonnormative gender, taught to us by Minimalist objects that have no apparent connection to gender whatsoever.

In memory of Richard Artschwager, 1923–2013.

This text was first presented as a lecture on February 14, 2013, as part of the panel “Sexing Sculpture,” organized by Jillian Hernandez and Susan Richmond for the CAA Annual Conference in New York City.

1. Daniel Luedtke and Joel Parsons, *Lifestyle Plus Form Bundle*, press release for the exhibition *Lifestyle Plus Form Bundle*, Beige Space, Memphis TN, November 16, 2012.



**Richard Artschwager, *Up and Out*, 1990**, Formica and wood,  $93\frac{1}{4} \times 65\frac{1}{4} \times 46\frac{3}{8}$  in. (236.9 x 165.7 x 118.4 cm) (artwork © 2014 Richard Artschwager/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)





Cover and various prints from **Lifestyle Plus Form Bundle, 2012** (artworks © Daniel Luedtke, Joel Parsons, and the artists)

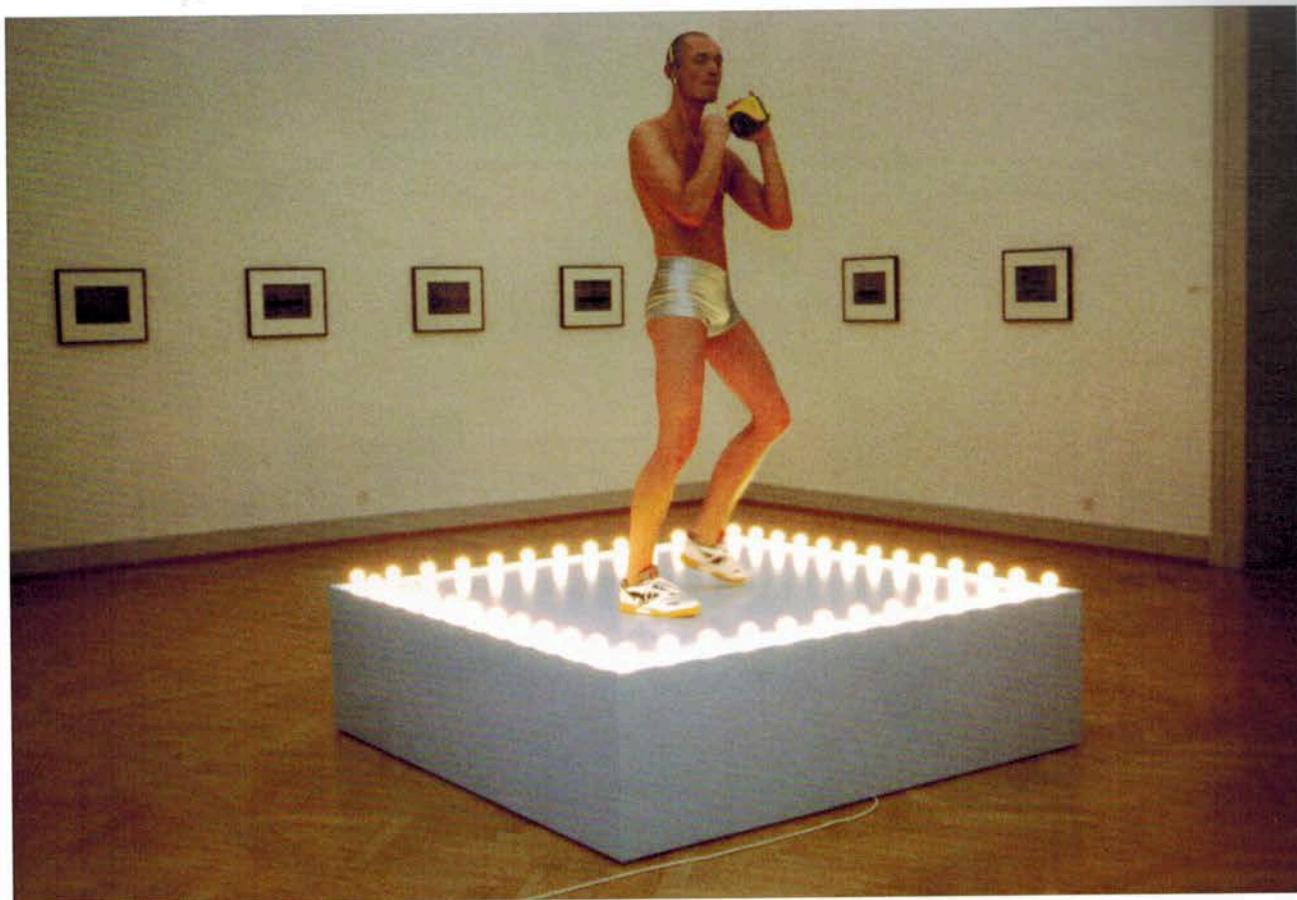
**Felix González-Torres, *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)*, 1991**, wood, light bulbs, acrylic paint, and go-go dancer in silver lamé bathing suit, sneakers, and personal listening device, overall dimensions variable, platform: 21½ x 72 x 72 in. (54.6 x 182.9 x 182.9 cm), installation view, Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, Switzerland, 1997 (artwork © The Felix González-Torres Foundation; photograph provided by Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York)

## Object Lesson I: Blankness

Blankness, monochromality, and consistency of surface are hallmarks of Minimal sculpture. Robert Morris described the importance of this blankness of surface as originating in the way it permitted the viewer to experience the physicality of the sculpture as a whole, to create strong gestalt sensations. Without excessive color or ornament, the viewer, he believed, would not be pulled into an intimate interaction with the object, but would instead remain focused on the experience of the shape, light, and surrounding architecture. These are nonnarrative, nonsymbolic sculptures—their surfaces reveal nothing, and as objects they can tell us nothing. They do not speak in any language but that of their presence in space. They are physical embodiments of an ethos of silence, telling no story.

John Cage, in his 1959 “Lecture on Nothing” articulates this nonnarrativity in the following passage:

I have a story: “There was once a man standing on a high elevation. A company of several men who happened to be walking on the road noticed from the distance the man standing on the high place and talked among themselves about this man. One of them said: He must have lost his favorite animal. Another man said : No, it must be his friend whom he is looking for. A third one said: He is just enjoying the cool air up there. The three could not a-gree and the discussion (Shall we have one later?) went on until they reached the high place where the man was . One of the three asked: O, friend standing up there , have you not



lost your pet animal	?	No, sir,	I have not lost any
.	The second man asked :		Have you not lost your friend
?	No, sir,	,	I have not lost my friend
either	.	The third man asked:	Are you not enjoying
the fresh breeze	up there?	No, sir	,
I am not	.		What, then
,	are you standing up there	for	,
	if you say no		to all our
questions	?	The man on high said :	
I just stand	."		
			If there are
no questions,	there are no answers	.	If there are questions
,	then, of course,	there are answers	,
final answer	makes the	questions	but the
,	whereas the questions,	up until then,	seem absurd
than the answers	?		seem more intelligent

2. John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing," *Silence* (1961; Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 95-96.

It is not often that we are able to produce answers that make the questions posed to us seem absurd. More often, we cede authority to the questions posed, and we acquiesce, not only to provide an answer, but to provide an answer that makes





**Imi Knoebel, *Raum 19, 1968***, installation view, Dia Art Foundation, NY, 1987 (artwork © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn)

sense in terms of the question as it is asked. Specific questions produce specific kinds of answers—they outline a world which our answers must then inhabit. We are always choosing from among options, even when the questions are open-ended. What are the conditions under which we can “just stand”?

Michel Foucault, throughout his scholarship, had an ongoing interest in silence—he probed the possibilities of silence as a tool of political and social resistance. One example of this line of thinking was his skepticism of solid and unified personal identities based on sexuality. For Foucault, sexuality—meaning the amalgamation of desire and personal identity into a stable and “truthful” feature of an individual, the “truth” of one’s identity—was a tool of social and self regulation, an answer to a leading set of questions.

Just because this notion of sexuality has enabled us to fight [on behalf of our own homosexuality] doesn’t mean that it doesn’t carry with it a certain number of dangers. . . . There is an entire biologism of sexuality and therefore an entire hold over it by doctors and psychologists—in short, by the agencies of normalization. We have over us doctors, pedagogues, law-makers, adults, parents who talk of sexuality! . . . It is not enough to liberate sexuality; we also have to liberate ourselves . . . from the very notion of sexuality.<sup>3</sup>

I am struck by how current Foucault’s comments, from 1973, feel to me now. The increased “acceptance” and “visibility” of nonheterosexual sexualities, and

3. Michel Foucault quoted in David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford, UK, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 95–96.

increasingly of nonnormative genders as well, produce legible self-identification as their price of admission. As we gain visibility we are expected to identify ourselves, to make ourselves legible according to terms that continue to multiply—our acronym just keeps getting longer. Silence may, indeed, equal death, but now I am tempted to say that there may be something valuable in an embrace of silence and blankness as strategies of resistance to this imperative to answer. The term “queer” gets used in so many different incompatible ways that its meaning has become confounded, thus losing much of its usefulness. But I periodically return to David Halperin’s defense, in his book *Saint Foucault*, of the term in its original manifestation, stemming as it did from Foucault’s skepticism of the type of self-regulation we engage in by making ourselves legible. Halperin describes queerness as a creative and generative refusal to clarify oneself and one’s position—“not a thing but a resistance to the norm” which, ideally, enables us to uncover for ourselves a space of concrete freedom in the possibilities for our own self-transformation. Gayness was, for Foucault, not an identity but a relational position toward ourselves and one another, one that was accessible only through problematizing our faith in the normativizing discourse of sexual and gender identity.

We can, of course, read queer significance into Cage’s work because we know that he loved men (as Jonathan D. Katz has elegantly done regarding Cage’s relationship with Merce Cunningham). Or see queer content in Morris’s early sculptures because of the gay themes that emerged in his later work. (See, for example, Morris’s 1974 poster for his exhibition at Castelli-Sonnabend, in which he is pictured naked to the waist, clad in steel manacles and a studded collar.) But I don’t think it’s necessary. Might it be enough to let the blank surfaces of a wide variety of Minimalist sculptures teach us how to see bodies without demanding explanations of them? To pause before we expect a narrative of all gendered bodies, resisting our imperative to decipher where they came from and where they are going? What would it be to allow a body to be silent, fully present without telling us anything? Abstraction may be a valuable resource in thinking beyond the terms that are readily available to us in the present, what Judith Butler calls “the possible in excess of the real.”<sup>4</sup> Nonnarrative surfaces can point toward a future that is different from our present conditions, what Jan Verwoert, in his incredible essay “Exhaustion and Exuberance” expresses by saying, “On the contrary, the insistence to speak—or make work in any other way—about that which is neither readily understandable nor immediately useful is in itself a strong claim to agency: I Can speak or make work about what I Can’t speak or make work about. While this in a more general sense applies to any form of art or writing, it may have a special bearing on abstract work.”<sup>5</sup>

I have nothing to say  
and I am saying it      and that is  
poetry                      as I need it      .<sup>6</sup>

4. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 29.

5. Jan Verwoert, “Exhaustion and Exuberance,” in *Sheffield 08: Yes No and Other Options*, exh. brochure (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Contemporary Art Forum, 2008), emphasis in original.

6. Cage, 109.

7. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

## Object Lesson II: Virtual Bodies

Judith Butler, throughout her work and especially in *Bodies that Matter*, gives what still feels to me to be a stunning materialist account of gender.<sup>7</sup> Butler counters the distinction between sex and gender—that is, the distinction between the



physicality of bodies and the immaterial realm of our ideas about bodies—by arguing for a return to the notion of matter itself, to rethink the very terms with which we understand bodies as gendered. Matter must lose its status as an a priori and unconstructed surface onto which gender is applied, in lieu of an examination of the ways in which the materiality and materialization of sex itself operates. There are not bodies first and then ideas about bodies—bodies are always also ideas about bodies.

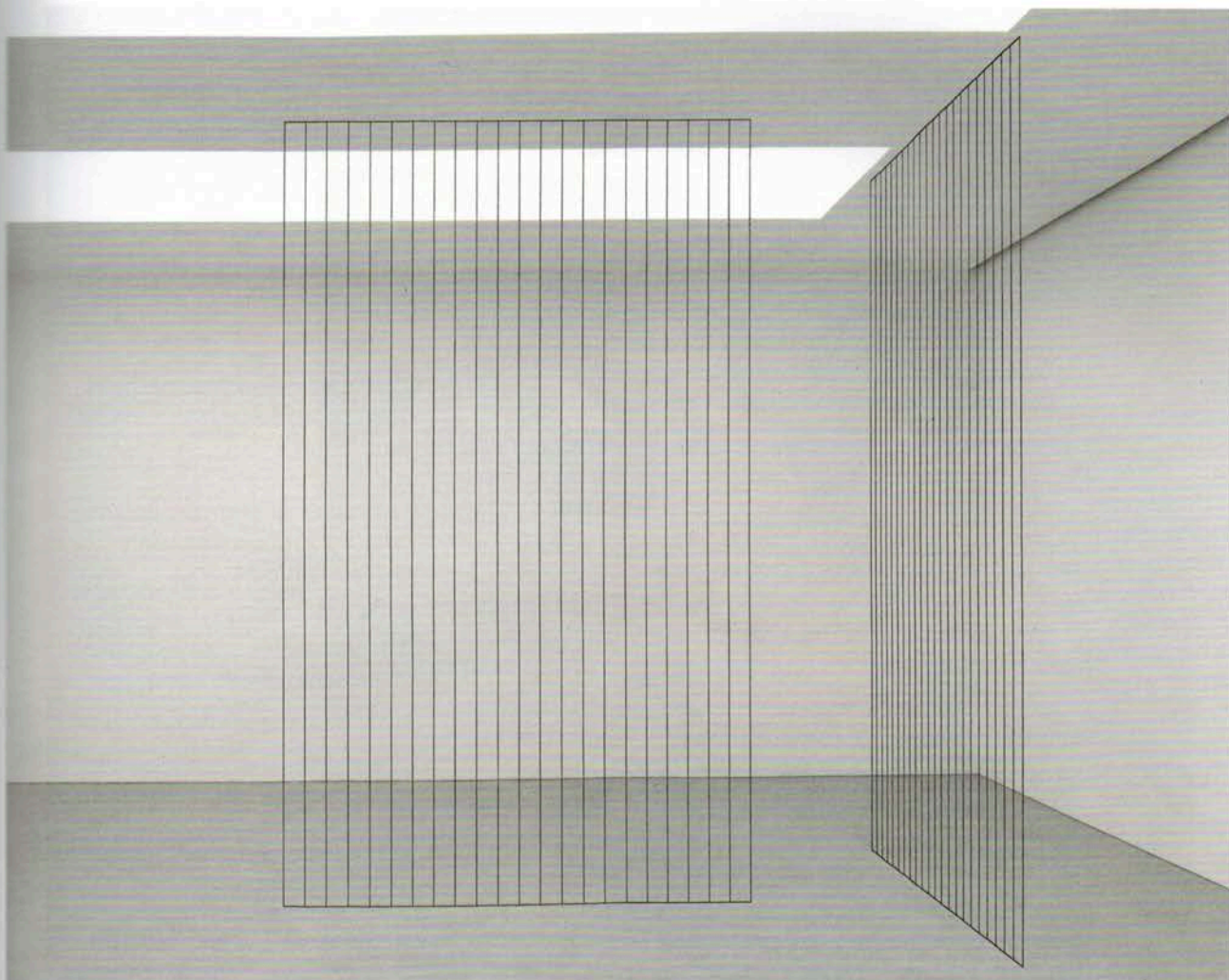
Understanding the gendered body in this way involves a fundamental shift in our thinking, in which the real—bodies, body parts, sex characteristics—is not distinct from the immaterial—gender, identity, fantasy. Gendered personhood is—to borrow the term from Maurice Merleau-Ponty—an irreducible intertwining of the actual and the immaterial. People of nonnormative genders embody this nonopposition between materiality and immateriality in a particularly salient way—testing the limits of our ability to see ourselves and one another according to this shifted framework. Dominant narratives of transgender people—the trapped-in-the-wrong-body experience—rely on this problematic opposition between sex and gender, and potentially limit our ability to theorize our gendered embodiments as simultaneously and profoundly actual and virtual. Gayle Salamon, in her book *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*, wonderfully explores this intertwining of the material and the immaterial in trans-embodiments through the work of Merleau-Ponty—arguing that these genders “unsettle the question of subject and object, of material and phantasmatic.”<sup>8</sup> Numerous other queer and feminist thinkers have articulated diverse yet strong calls for an understanding of the body as irreconcilably wavering between the real and the imaginary. Theorizing gender-variant embodiment is a matter of reexamining the relationships between these fundamental categories.

The majority of Fred Sandback’s sculptures consist of lengths of acrylic yarn in different colors stretched taut in the gallery space from floor to ceiling or wall to wall in order to create various lines, shapes, and planes. *Untitled (from Ten Vertical Constructions)*, for example, a work from 1977, consists of two red strings stretched in the same formation side by side, each string creating the shape of a box without a top, a large angled U-shape, originating at the ceiling and stretched straight down to the floor, then across the floor several feet, and then back up to the ceiling where it is fastened and cut. This creates a body-scaled environment in which the viewer moves around the elements of the works that appear both to be exactly what they are—taut strings—and to create the sensation of a transparent wall or plane floating in space.

Curiously enough, there are remarkable parallels between Butler’s understanding of the sexed body and Sandback’s descriptions of his sculptures. While Sandback had no apparent interest in gender, he regards his sculptures as embodying the same confusion of the distinction between materiality and ideology that Butler employs in her emphasis on the materiality of sex. For both, the impetus to distinguish the ideas that define a thing from the material fact of the thing itself is ill conceived, leading to an incomplete understanding of the ways objects, bodies, and ideas operate and have power in the world.

Sandback talks about his work in terms of an indivisible unification of material and idea. In his writings and interviews he denies a separation between the form of his works and their content. For him the distinction itself between the

8. Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 65.



**Fred Sandback, *Untitled (Sculptural Study, Two-part Vertical Construction)*, ca. 1986/2008**, black acrylic yarn, dimensions variable, installation view, David Zwirner, New York, 2009 (artwork © Fred Sandback Archive; photograph provided by David Zwirner, New York)

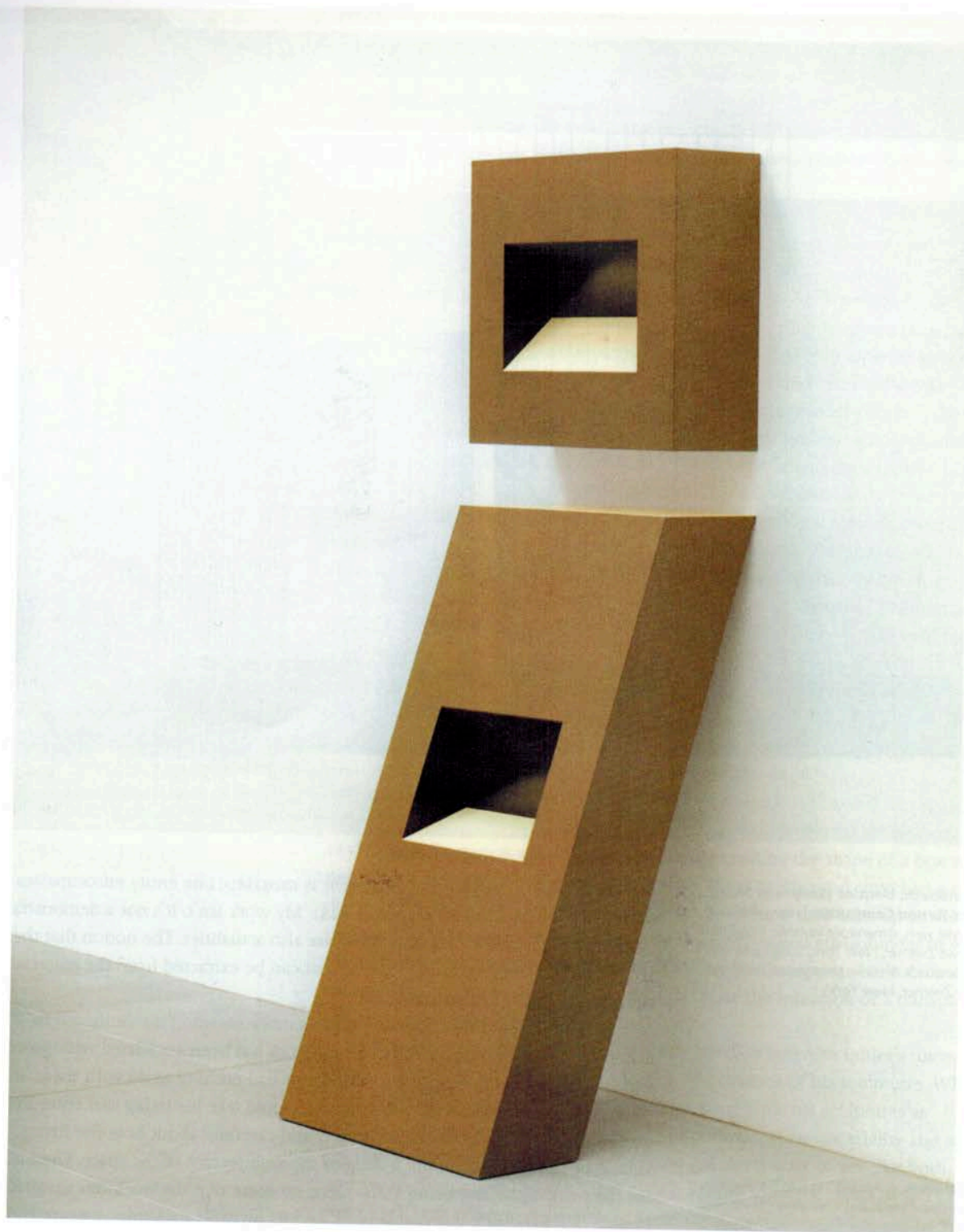
objects and the ideas that they represent is mistaken; one entity encompasses both. "I'm full of thoughts (more or less). My work isn't. It's not a demonstration of an idea either. It's an actuality. Ideas are also actualities. The notion that there are ideas that then take form, or ideas that can be extracted from the material substratum, doesn't make any sense."<sup>9</sup>

This understanding of the way objects make meaning is manifested in Sandback's creative process. Although his work has been associated with geometry and systems of measuring, he insisted that it had nothing to do with these. In order to make one of his pieces, Sandback would take his string and enter the gallery space and make decisions, slowly and carefully, about how the string should be hung, based on the feeling of the architecture of the space. The idea for the work came into being at the same moment that the work was materially created. For Sandback, his visible work and its invisible meanings are one and the same thing—"Ideas are executions . . . My work is not illusionistic in the normal sense of the word. It doesn't refer away from itself to something that isn't present. Its illusions are simply present aspects of it. Illusions are just as real as facts, and facts just as ephemeral as illusions."<sup>10</sup> Sandback's sculptures manifest the

9. Fred Sandback, "Untitled," in *Fred Sandback*, ed. Friedmann Malsch and Christiane Meyer-Stoll, exh. cat. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005), 96. Sandback originally wrote the notes in 1975 for an exhibition catalogue published by Kunstraum, Munich.

10. Fred Sandback, "Notes, 1975," at [www.diabeacon.org/exhibits/sandback/sculpture/notes.html](http://www.diabeacon.org/exhibits/sandback/sculpture/notes.html), as of July 26, 2009.





**Richard Artschwager, *Step 'n' See*, 1966,**  
Formica on wood, 108 x 33½ x 32 in. (274.3 x 85.1  
x 81.3 cm) (artwork © 2014 Richard Artschwager/  
Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)



**Richard Artschwager, *Book III (Laocoon)*, 1981,**  
Formica on wood, metal handles, vinyl cushion, 48 x  
28 x 41 in. (122 x 71 x 104 cm) (artwork © 2014 Richard  
Artschwager/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)



same confusion of terms that is necessary for a rethinking of sex and gender: in light of this reformulation, I see them as capable of teaching us to differently perceive our own and one another's bodies.

How shall we consider the projected bodies and corporeal capabilities that manifest in trans gender and gender-nonconforming people? How can we recognize these virtual bodies and body parts, simultaneously actual and imaginary? The media historian and theorist Anne Friedberg in her book *The Virtual Window* offers a compelling definition of the virtual, as that which appears "'functionally or effectively but not formally' of the same materiality as what it represents."<sup>11</sup> A virtual object is effectively the same, yet formally different. A virtual body does even though it isn't.

Looking at a group of sculptures by Richard Artschwager, for me, conjures just such a virtual body as a response to the ambiguous presence of the works. Artschwager came to art-making through a career as a builder of commercial furniture. His last furniture commission before his transition to sculpture was to construct a large batch of church altars—which, by his account, catalyzed him to finally focus on making sculpture—a progression, in a sense, from more to less useful objects, from function to form, marked by the middle point of the ritual object. Artschwager frames his artistic project in terms of this progression from use to non-use, explaining that "by killing . . . the use part, non-use aspects are allowed living space, breathing space."<sup>12</sup>

I am interested in Artschwager's sculptures featuring stairs, handles, and other usable surfaces and attributes which, as sculpture, have been rendered non-usable by the human body. If furniture conjures a real body—one that sits in a chair or opens a drawer—what kind of body do these useless furniture sculptures conjure? When I approach one of these sculptures, I experience my own body in a relationship of use to the piece—I imagine myself stepping up, sitting down, grabbing hold, while standing perfectly still in the gallery. Artschwager writes of these works: "When I instruct through a work to touch, sit on, open, these—both the instruction and the execution—still tend to be acts of the imagination rather than acts of the will."<sup>13</sup>

Can I say that these sculptures, through their noninteractive representation of typically interactive situations, produce for me a virtual double of my body? An imaginary experience of my own body based in the experience of a material object? And why does this allow me to conceive of myself, my own gendered experience, in these terms, with this level of ambiguity between the real and the virtual? Ambiguity abounds in Artschwager's work—these "objects of non-use" as he calls them, that waver between furniture, sculpture, architecture, ornament, optical illusions, and jokes. As Jerry Saltz commented in an essay on a recent show of Artschwager's work at the Whitney Museum, this is his permanent aesthetic condition: "The coexistence of yes and no, almost, in between, not quite, both, and neither."<sup>14</sup>

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11. Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 11, emphasis in the original.

12. Richard Artschwager, "Jan McDevitt—The Object: Still Life" (1965), in *Richard Artschwager: Texts and Interviews*, ed. Dieter Schwarz (Winterthur: Kunstmuseum and Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2003), 9. The essay was first published in the 1968 catalogue for *Directions I: Options* at the Milwaukee Art Center.

13. *Ibid.*, 28.

14. Jerry Saltz, "How I Came to Embrace Richard Artschwager's Weirdness," *New York Magazine*, November 19, 2012, at [www.vulture.com/2012/11/saltz-on-richard-artschwager-whitney.html](http://www.vulture.com/2012/11/saltz-on-richard-artschwager-whitney.html), as of December 27, 2013.



**Richard Artschwager, *Yes/No*, 1968–74**, plastic, ea.  
8½ in. diam. (21.6 cm). Walker Art Center, T. B. Walker  
Acquisition Fund, 1991.59 (artwork © 2014 Richard  
Artschwager/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)



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