

## Substance, Difference, and the Queer Bodies of Anne Truitt and Robert Smithson

Ernesto Renda

What can the processes of transubstantiation and sublimation teach us about gender? More specifically, can works of art that seem so removed from a practice of writing or gendered inscription reify or dismantle masculinist hierarchy and gender essentialism? In this essay, I would like to look at some works that are on display at Dia:Beacon by Anne Truitt and Robert Smithson. Jarrett Earnest of the Brooklyn Rail problematizes David Getsy's *Abstract Bodies* for re-framing already canonical through a trans perspective while ignoring both artistic intent and other less studied artists. (Earnest). While I think his critique of Getsy's text is valid, I also think that minimalist works, as they often become public objects, lend themselves to discussions of some of the more inaccessible queer theories that beg for a material demonstration. I would like to queer these two objects formalistically, observing the ways they accrue content by taking and losing body. Further, I argue that these two pieces both do work to resolve the stark disconnect between the gallery and the art-object. In Smithson's *Leaning Mirror* (1969), the process of transubstantiation charts a linear progression from the crude to the refined point where the spectator's look is returned to the space of the gallery. In Truitt's *Landfall* (1970), it is a process of sublimation through color and shape that allows the sculpture to lose its bodily necessity in space. Perhaps, because the queer can only be visible as that which is not straight, the arts of transubstantiation and sublimation primarily operate in queer directions as functions of the artists' generally accepted gender identities. For a male artist like Smithson, an art of trans-ness, of becoming other and the "looked-at" through a *change* in substance (body), is a queer gesture. For a femme artist like Truitt, who is made to bear the burden of womanhood in the gallery, a work that *disappears*, that becomes the walls, the floor, and ceiling, also reverses that convention of the sculpture—as an extension of Truitt—as a body to be looked-at.



The sculptures are both installed in the Dia:Beacon center in New York, and the analytical conceit of this essay will be to acknowledge the curatorial choices made by the Dia foundation, particularly with regards to the use of exclusively natural light in the space. In the room where *Landfall* is exhibited, a visitor becomes aware of Truitt's diverse use of color, ranging from solidity (as in *North*, 1963) to sublimation. The slight changes in color in *Landfall* condition the viewer into a consciousness of subtle change, anti-contrast. In fact, the contrast between the floorboards and the wall is far more immediate to our vision than the work itself. The cold blues and the gray-whites of the walls are not as clearly distinct, and the rectangular prism form of the monolith is made of lines parallel to those that make up white cube's dimension. Sublimation is the process in which solid matter skips the liquid state and transforms to gas—disappearing “into thin air.” By returning a vision of wood and paint to the gallery itself, this piece hovers between a presence and a sublimation and emphasizes the receptive space of the gallery. The monolith, commonly thought as phallus, in Truitt's condition begets the receptive space as opposed to a place where the phallus is staged. If it is not the phallus, then it is the Venus, the erotic spectacle of sculpture. I would speculate that sublimation has the potential to do the same work on both of these possible sculptural bodies.



If Truitt's piece demonstrates a dissolution of substance (or, of figure into ground) that troubles the discrete bodied object of sculpture, Smithson's *Leaning Mirror* demonstrates a process of transubstantiation from sand to glass, questioning the very notion of different bodies. The aesthetic of a will to essence, which Minimalism constantly re-stages, is troubled by the material properties and optical behavior of the mirror. Because the piece is comprised of the beginning and end-products of sand and glass (and not matter that is actually in flux), we read it as a transubstantiation, and not simply a change of state. The crudeness and earthiness of the sand versus the perfection of the glass plane is read as a difference as opposed to a sameness. In response to the Levi-Straussian conception of

a village that lives in peaceful diversity through the zero-institution of “village”, Slavoj Žižek proposes the idea of sexual difference as a zero- institution that precedes all further social difference. (Žižek, 222-223). If we transpose the differentiation of sexed bodies upon all other binary relationships, we are always left with a mystification of the other’s substance. Continuing on a psychoanalytical line of inquiry, Smithson’s sand (crude, masculine, and belonging to a natural reality) stands in stark contrast to the fetishized ideal of the mirror (pure, feminine, surreal.) Interestingly, transubstantiation is also the term for the transformation of the bread and wine of the Roman Catholic Eucharist into the virtual and divine body and blood of Christ. The same differentiation could be made where the feminine is the crude and marked substance and the male is the disembodied, unmarked, and virtual glass product. The two substances, which are actually one, stage a process of trans-ness that ultimately poses the question of substance to the viewer: “And what are you?”. Beyond the body itself, the viewer’s look is directed back at the space of the gallery, and in a similar way to Truitt’s *Landfall*, the space of the gallery is re-implicated in the definition and staging of the work.

Both of these pieces challenge vision with substance. While this may seem like a generality that could be applied to all the plastic arts, a play of substance for sculpture in particular cannot operate outside of a reference to the body. Vision then enters the gallery to demand difference between bodies and spaces. Truitt allows her sculpture to sublimate avoiding the risk of its objectification in the space as female ideal object (Venus) or staging of the phallus. Smithson presents a scene of transubstantiation as an allegory of our misbegotten notion of sexual difference, itself a vessel for Difference, as such.

## **Bibliography**

Earnest, Jarrett. "Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender." The Brooklyn Rail. The Brooklyn Rail, 3 Feb. 2016. Web. 20 Apr. 2017. <[http://brooklynrail.org/2016/02/art\\_books/abstract-bodies-sixties-sculpture-in-the-expanded-field-of-gender](http://brooklynrail.org/2016/02/art_books/abstract-bodies-sixties-sculpture-in-the-expanded-field-of-gender)>.

Smithson, Robert. *Leaning Mirror*. 1969. Mirrors, sand. Dia:Beacon, Beacon, NY. Truitt, Anne. *Landfall*. 1970. Acrylic on wood. Dia:Beacon, Beacon, NY.

Truitt, Anne. *North*. 1963. Acrylic on wood. Dia:Beacon, Beacon, NY.

Slavoj Žižek. "Why Is Reality Always Multiple?" *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. New York: Routledge, 2001. 222-23.