

**"Virtual Materiality/Material Virtuality
Gender Intelligibility and the Space of the Art Object"**

R.E.H. Gordon
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What forces determine what we consider to be possible? How do we develop a sense of intelligibility and unintelligibility, a system of sense-making that governs who we can imagine ourselves and one another to become? I wish to explore these questions in regard to the relationship between creative productions and the formation of non-normative gender. My aim is to elaborate the potential for art-viewership to expand the realm of the possible—to discuss art-objects as capable of transforming the nonsensical into previously unthinkable coherencies, reshaping the contradictory into the newly co-extensive. I believe that the relationships we have with objects can operate to unhinge and reform the narrow conceptual frameworks that govern gendered subjectivity. This discussion is based on the premise that successful works of art can produce modes of perception that live on past the encounter with the work itself. Just as theory has the capacity to profoundly change the systems of sense-making that define our experiences of the world, works of art can produce ways of seeing as well as subjects who see.

Art viewership need not be a passive spectatorship and can instead function as a relationship with the potential to conjure previously un-thought modes of vision, what Jacques Rancière refers to as art's capacity to create "modifications in the fabric of the sensible," a mode of resistance as perceptual transformation that he calls "dissensus,"--"a way of reconstructing the relationships between places and identities, spectacles and gazes, proximities and distances."

In this paper, my goal is to rethink one active conceptual opposition: namely, the opposition between materiality and virtuality in relation to our understandings of the gendered body. Through an intertextual reading of two seemingly disparate artistic practices, the web-based works of John Michael Boling and the minimalist sculptures of Fred Sandback, I aim to describe an instance in which materiality and virtuality are non-oppositionally interrelated—and the implications of this reformulation for our understanding of the gendered body. When I speak about virtuality in relation to the body, I aim to describe the ways in which bodies are always defined by the invisible work of ideologies, norms, imagination, and projection, in ways that are both constraining and generative.

Theorizing the body in its virtuality involves seeing it as a material space of interpretation that is both more flexible and more socially determined than we may have believed. When I speak of materiality in relation to bodies, I am referring to an understanding of the subject as fundamentally embodied, dispelling with any theory of subjectivity that does not see the political, the ideological, and the emotional to play out on the level of the materiality of the lived body in the milieu of everyday objects, a theory so well articulated by feminist philosophers such as Elizabeth Grosz. Given these understandings of the terms, I hope to articulate what I might call a dual-commitment to both the embodiment of subjectivity and the virtuality of this embodiment. Is it possible to make intelligible a dedication to both the real and the imaginary as non-oppositional? My hope is that a discussion of artworks in which materiality and virtuality can be shown to be mutually definitive can, potentially, create a mode of intelligibility that reformulates the opposition between these terms. This alternative intelligibility could then turn back

onto the body itself to be used as a conceptual tool for understanding ourselves and one another differently. In other words, I approach artworks as theoretical propositions that create new perceptual modes which structure our understandings, and hence experiences of, our own and one another's bodies and genders.

I am motivated by the belief that the reformulation of this binary between the virtual and the material is crucial to the project of building a livable world for the non-normatively gendered. Beginning with the work of Donna Haraway and Sandy Stone and extending through much queer theoretical and feminist scholarship, there exists an urgent call for a non-oppositional interrelatedness between the material and the virtual, the real and the imaginary, the organic and the technologic. Judith Butler, in her recent writing about the necessity of the creation of new modes of gender intelligibility, discusses the gendered and sexualized body in terms of a paradoxical relationship between materiality and immateriality. The body is, for Butler, fundamentally material, yet, this materiality is always also an ideological formation of that body—whether in the form of the constraints of norms or the possibilities implicit in the essential role that fantasy plays in the experience of one's own gendered body. This understanding of the immateriality of the material is key to the creation of queer intelligibilities and the formation of a world more open to the infinite possibilities inherent in each body.

(Email rehgordon@gmail.com for complete text.)