

# TEXTE ZUR KUNST

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**MORGAN LANCASTER**

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



Young Joon Kwak, Hermaphroditus's Reveal I, 2017

**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 deformed 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.



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

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 Getsy 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 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).



Kiyon Williams, “Between Starshine and Clay”, 2022

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 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.



Kiyon Williams, “Between Starshine and Clay”, 2022

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  
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 there is the possibility for recreation in new material terms.



Young Joon Kwak, "Sleeping Muse", 2020

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 recreation 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. Brâncusi’s passive muse is exploded here, uncontained, leaking primordial ooze, transed, and crippled



Young Joon Kwak, “Sleeping Muse”, 2020

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.

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Lex Morgan Lancaster is a scholar, professor, and curator who focuses on queer, feminist, trans, antiracist, and crip visual and theoretical contributions to the field of contemporary art. Their book, *Dragging Away: Queer Abstraction in Contemporary Art* (Duke University Press, 2022), forges a queer formalist and materialist approach to contemporary abstraction. They are working on a second book about trans approaches to abstraction. Lancaster is currently an assistant professor of art history and the gallery director at the University of South Carolina Upstate.

Image credit: 1+2. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, photos Ruben Diaz; 3+4. Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King, New York; 5+6. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles, photos Ruben Diaz

## 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,”

(<https://temporaryartreview.com/seeing-commitments-jonah-groeneboers-ethic-sof-discernment/>) *Temporary Art Review*, March 8, 2016; 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-Peter-  
son, 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.

[10] Louis Bury and Kiyon Williams, “Forms That Don’t Yet Exist: Kiyon Williams Interviewed by Louis Bury,” (<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/formsthat-dont-yet-exist-kiyan-williamsinterviewed/>) *Bomb*, November 10, 2021.

[11] Che Gossett and Eva Hayward, “Kiyon Williams, an Interview,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (November 2020): 609.

[12] Jessica A. Cooley, “Crip Materiality: The Art Institution after the Americans with Disabilities Act” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin – Madison, 2021), 11.

[13] Cooley, “Crip Materiality,” 124. Williams’s work was featured in “Indisposable: Structures of Support after the ADA,” 2022, commissioned by the Ford Foundation Gallery. See Jessica A. Cooley and Ann M. Fox, “Becoming Indisposable: Curating Disability in a Time of Pandemic,” in *Curating Access: Disability Art Activism and Creative Accommodation*, ed. Amanda Cachia (London: Routledge, 2023), 32–44.

[14] See Marquis Bey, “Black Fugitivity

Un/Gendered,” *The Black Scholar* 49, no. 1 (2019): 55–62; C. Riley Snorton, “Trans Capable: Fungibility, Fugitivity, and the Matter of Being,” in *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 55–97; and Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 64–81.

[15] Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto*, trans. Kevin Gerry Dunn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 27.

[16] *Ibid.*, *Countersexual Manifesto*, 20.

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