



The historiographic legacy of Smith's statement was determined by Gray's flawed (or even falsified) transcription that expunged O'Hara's playful irony and his questioning of the leap from sculptural personage to human body. The actual ambiguity of Smith's sculptures (not to mention the resistance to Smith's joke offered by O'Hara) has been simplified through the recurring reliance on this epigram as sincere and self-explanatory. It is the compulsion to repeat this quotation in the literature that I find interesting. It offers little insight into the formal or semantic complexity of Smith's work and is, blatantly, inaccurate as a sweeping generalization about it. Nevertheless, it has proven reassuring to many, and it has been used to stabilize and domesticate the wildness of Smith's abstract figures.

David J. Getsy
**"The Unrecognizability of
 Abstract Bodies"**

excerpt from
**"On Not Making Boys: David
 Smith, Frank O'Hara, and
 Gender Assignment,"** chapter 1
 of David J. Getsy, *Abstract
 Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in
 the Expanded Field of Gender*
 (New Haven and London: Yale
 University Press, 2015), 43-95.

For a further excerpt from
 chapter's opening pages
 (with background on the 1964
 exchange), see
[https://tinyurl.com/Gettsy-
 Chap1intro](https://tinyurl.com/Gettsy-Chap1intro)



OPPOSITE
 35 David Smith,
*The Hero (Eyehead of
 a Hero)*, 1951-2.
 Painted steel, 187.2
 × 64.8 × 29.8 cm
 (73³/₄ × 25¹/₂ ×
 11³/₄ in.). Photograph
 by the artist,
 Bolton Landing,
 New York, c. 1952.

RIGHT 36 Detail
 of David Smith,
*The Hero (Eyehead
 of a Hero)*.

THE UNRECOGNIZABILITY OF ABSTRACT BODIES

The art-historical elevation and dissemination of Smith's declaration that he did not make "boy sculptures" demands critical assessment, for its post-humous legacy has insured that it became no longer just a joke. Beyond the recovery of this history and the restoration of instability and humor to the epigram, an analysis of this case offers further lessons about the importance of attending to the resistances by works of art to the gendered words used to describe them. That is, the awkwardness of Smith's and O'Hara's interchange points to fundamental questions with regard to the abstract body: namely, how gender assignment predicates the nomination of an abstract or unorthodox morphology as "human" and how that morphology exceeds and calls into question that very nomination. Smith's work is decisive in the dissolution of the statuary tradition via abstraction and its



37 David Smith,
Tanktotem IV,
1953. Steel, 237.5 ×
86.4 × 73.7 cm
(93½ × 34 × 29 in.).
Photograph by
the artist, Bolton
Landing, New
York, c. 1953.

reconstitution (by his successors) as the “expanded field” of objects, spaces, situations, and places. His sculptures represent the final attack on the coherence of the statue (as Krauss has decisively proven in her many writings on the artist). He created new constructions, previously unseen and unimagined, that nevertheless purported to refer, even in the most oblique or incomplete manner, to the human figure. He banished the mimetic human form while nevertheless invoking its palimpsest as the foil for his practice. This has generated great richness and complexity in his work. In turn, that push and pull with the human form has proven a compelling issue in the criticism and history of Smith’s work – and it is this issue that the epigram “I don’t make boy sculptures” seems to address and to mollify.

Perhaps the central concern for the history of sculpture has been the rendering of the human figure, and Smith’s attack on that tradition created,



38 David Smith with Voltri-Boltions outside of his studio, n.d. Photographer unknown.

more than any of his contemporaries, unorthodox and novel configurations that demanded to be legible within and yet expansive of that lineage. The sculptures are, as Smith would have it, new images previously unimagined. Rather than see Smith’s sculptures for what they are, writings that rely on the joke-turned-epigram instead assign a conventional gender as the means to remake these inhuman forms as human.

As Judith Butler has cogently argued, “Gender figures as a precondition for the production and maintenance of legible humanity.”¹²⁴ In writing this, Butler was making an argument, in part, about transgender lives and their exclusions from the category of “human.” New configurations of genders, bodies, and sexes with multiple and previously unimagined terms challenge



39 David Smith, *Tanktotem IX*, 1960. Steel, painted, 228.6 × 83.8 × 61.3 cm (90 × 33 × 24 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.). Photograph by the artist, Bolton Landing, New York, c. 1961.

the order of dimorphism that determines categories of personhood and of humanity. As she argues,

To posit possibilities beyond the norm or, indeed, a different future for the norm itself, is part of the work of fantasy when we understand fantasy as taking the body as a point of departure for an articulation that is not always constrained by the body as it is. If we accept that altering these norms that decide normative human morphology give differential “reality” to different kinds of humans as a result, then we are compelled to affirm that transgendered lives have a potential and



40 David Smith, *Ninety Son*, 1961 (unfinished state). Steel, painted, 188 × 50.8 × 33 cm (74 × 20 × 13 in.). Photograph by the artist, Bolton Landing, New York.

actual impact on political life at its most fundamental level, that is, who counts as human, and what norms govern the appearance of “real” humanness.¹²⁵

In its reference to and utter departure from the human form, the abstract statue does nothing less than offer an analogous visualization of the challenge to the norms that govern humanness. Standing at the crux of modern sculpture’s abandonment of the human form and the dissolution of the traditions of the freestanding statue, Smith’s sculptures – in all of their contradictions – offer the most cogent and generative case of this. It



41 David Smith in his Bolton Landing Shop, with sculptures from 1953 and works in progress. Photograph by the artist, c. 1953.

is no surprise that the assignment of gender to these abstract bodies has proven so seductive since Smith made his awkward joke. That assignment forecloses the more open and unprecedented possibility that Smith's sculptures present.

Rather than accept Smith's joke as sincere, it is my claim that the very unruliness of his and O'Hara's exchange (and of Smith's sculpture generally) demonstrates that the unorthodox body – in its unrecognizability – can disrupt the finality of that assignment of gender and of humanity. When the abstract body is reduced to normative linguistic assignments of personhood via dimorphic gender, the results are unsatisfying, aphasic, and scotomatous. I see both the alteration of Smith's joke and the compulsion to propagate it as epigram as symptomatic of an anxiety about the unorthodox body's capacity to resist the assignments laid onto it. The abstract body prompts different and divergent nominations depending on who is doing the assigning and for what reasons. In short, it is not really gender *ambiguity* that the Smith–O'Hara episode reveals. The sculptures' genderings occur after they are made. It happens each time the viewer (even if this viewer is Smith himself) nominates these abstract bodies as human figures. Here, gender is *successively and differently* assigned to these same bodies as the condition for them to be legible as persons or humans – a condition that is nevertheless exceeded and resisted by the abstraction of the works themselves. The posthumous canonization (and sanitization) of the Smith–O'Hara exchange attempted to arrest the capacity for successive and divergent gender assignments for Smith's abstract personages. It was singled out from the interview – and from Smith's voluminous writings and statements – as a means to block the possibility of unforeclosed gendering and to normalize the abstract body. As such, its use as a shorthand answer to the problems of personification and anthropomorphism has served to lock Smith's sculpture to a reductive caricature of his intentions, obscuring the complexity that he more often desired for his sculptures.

Smith's aims were shortcircuited at the moment when they were confronted with O'Hara's own interests in personification (and identification) and in his own version of openness as a means of making works of art "live" for him (both in his criticism and his poetry). In neither case does one learn much about the character or psyche of Smith or O'Hara. Rather, it is the repeated patterns in their public statements about art and in their works themselves that address and privilege a kind of abstract personification or figuration leading to this symptomatic moment of confronting the abstract statue as an abstract human. What one can learn from this episode is not just that Smith's sculptures appear ambiguous. That much has been

evident to critics and viewers from the start. Indeed, ambiguity is a long-running and pervasive – yet unacknowledged – condition of any rendering of the human body. What Smith shows us differently, however, is how the furthest reaches of the rendering of abstract bodies results in moments of unintelligibility and retrenchment in which accounts of what makes a body human are brought to light and questioned, even if momentarily.

Again, Butler's later account of intelligibility can serve to highlight the stakes of this struggle to recognize:

Sometimes the very unrecognizability of the other brings about a crisis in the norms that govern recognition. If and when, in an effort to confer or to receive a recognition that fails again and again, I call into question the normative horizon within which recognition takes place, this questioning is part of the desire for recognition, a desire that can find no satisfaction, and whose unsatisfiability establishes a critical point of departure for the interrogation of available norms.¹²⁶

In short, the unrecognizability of Smith's statues resulted from the dissonance caused by his pursuit of non-mimetic and abstract forms that nevertheless retained the statue format and aspired to invoke the "human," the figure, and personhood. It is this, highly traditional, authority of the free-standing statue – to evoke ideal personhood – that Smith wished to redepoly, especially in the pivotal works of the late 1950s and early 1960s that were the context of O'Hara's writings and of the interview. When confronted with multiplicity through O'Hara's playful and neutered question, however, Smith rushed to fix gender and unrecognizability and to block the perceived threat of O'Hara's having or being his sculptures. The security of the category of "human" had been opened to interrogation, in Butler's sense. Smith had ardently pursued a departure from nature in his work only to face, at this moment, that his more open vision of nature and of the figure got away from him. Presciently, he wrote in a sketchbook in 1962 or 1963 about this vision: "nature is not the same – it varies for everyone by what is seen – rejected by what eyes refuse to see[,] censored[,] blocked out – by what privilege sometimes grants – by what fantasy projects."¹²⁷

Ultimately, the 1964 anecdote is useful because it encapsulates a larger trend in modern sculpture, one that is characterized by a recurring engagement with the human figure combined with increasing degrees of abstraction. More and more, sculptors created abstract bodies that they, their critics, and their publics struggled to see in relation to the category of "human." Gender became the primary question in these negotiations, often – like



42 David Smith, *Cubi* and other sculptures from 1961 to 1963. Photograph by the artist, Bolton Landing, New York, c. 1963.

Smith in the context of O'Hara – shifting and being agreed on differently depending on the situation and the participants in it. In sum, what one can learn from these negotiations is how the position of abstract sculpture offered the possibility of seeing gendered bodies successively otherwise and anew. Smith may have wanted to see only girls or, even, just wanted to make a joke about wanting only girls as a result of the intersubjective back-and-forth of the public forum of the televised interview. Nevertheless, the fact that this needed to be asserted and could then be called into question points to the capacity of his sculptures to begin to visualize differently, and more variably, the category of the "human."

99 Paraphrased in Joan Marter, “Arcadian Nightmares: The Evolution of David Smith and Dorothy Dehner’s Work at Bolton Landing,” in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen Landau (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 637.

100 Smith said, “Did I tell you I just made 130 or 140 paintings this year from models, all nude models. I don’t use drapery. When there’s pussy, I put pussy in. And when there’s a crack – on some of these girls who are so young you can’t even see a definition – I put it in because I think it will be there, sooner or later.” A more complete version of this 1964 interview was published as David Smith and Thomas Hess, “The Secret Letter,” in McCoy, *David Smith*, 180–81. Smith expressed reservation at this interview’s frankness, writing to the collector Lois Orswell, “Here is the catalog. A bit embarrassed about this tape [sic] revelations and bad English”; David Smith to Lois Orswell, n.d., in Marjorie Cohn, *Lois Orswell, David Smith, and Modern Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with Harvard University Art Museums, 2002), 289.

101 David Smith, radio interview with Marian Horosko, 25 October 1964, WNCN, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, transcript, p. 8.

102 Krauss, *Passages*, 148.

103 Smith, “Perception and Reality,” 78. Emphases original.

104 This was a general tactic for O’Hara. See Jim Elledge, “The Lack of Gender in Frank O’Hara’s Love Poems to Vincent Warren,” in *Fictions of Masculinity: Crossing Cultures, Crossing Sexualities*, ed. Peter F. Murphy (New York University Press, 1994), 226–37.

105 Cleve Gray, ed., *David Smith by David Smith: Sculpture and Writings* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 137.

106 David Smith quoted in Belle Krasne, “A David Smith Profile,” *Art Digest* 26, no. 13 (1952): 13.

107 David Smith, “Second Thoughts on Sculpture,” *Art Journal* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1954): 205.

108 Smith, “Language Is Image,” 81.

109 Gene Baro, “Some Late Words from David Smith,” *Art International* 9, no. 7 (20 October 1965): 51.

110 Humor was, after all, a key tool for O’Hara in his poetry and his criticism. As Perloff has remarked, “But as so often in O’Hara’s writings, the jocular tone masks an underlying seriousness”; Perloff, “O’Hara and the Aesthetics of Attention,” 798. On laughter and affect in O’Hara’s work, see Josh Robinson, “‘A Gasp of Laughter at Desire’: Frank O’Hara’s Poetics of Breath,” in Hampson and Montgomery, *Frank O’Hara Now*, 144–59.

111 Gray, *David Smith by David Smith*. For one of many examples of Gray’s rewriting of Smith’s words, compare p. 71 to Smith, “The Language Is Image,” 81.

112 Cleve Gray, ed. (memorial portfolio for David Smith), *Art in America* 54, no. 1 (January–February 1966): 47.

113 Gray, *David Smith by David Smith*, 87.

114 The only significant voice of skepticism about this statement has been Potts, who followed the literature in accepting the epigram as sincere but rightly notes that “ambiguities are apparent in Smith’s own commentary when he feels compelled to envisage his works as gendered presences and yet refuses any fixed associations between them and the viewer”; Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 176. At the time of writing his book (it was published in 2000), the only part of the Smith–O’Hara exchange that would have been readily available to Potts continued to be Gray’s altered version published more than three decades before and repeated throughout the Smith literature. (The only other variant I have found is not in the Smith literature but in the writing on O’Hara. An entirely idiosyncratic version can be found in Perloff, *Frank O’Hara*, 211 n. 22, which provides another instance of the desire to stabilize

gender ambiguity, decontextualize Smith’s joke, and remove O’Hara’s agency in the exchange by casting him as “self-effacing.” In Perloff’s version, Smith’s lines have been rewritten as the assertions “I don’t do males. I like the presence of these females.”) No full transcript was attempted until the 2006 Guggenheim exhibition, when the recording of the fully televised program was restored and transcribed. The availability of the original program was extremely limited before this. The Guggenheim’s full transcript has recently been published in Sarah Hamill, ed., *David Smith: Works, Writings and Interview* (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafia, 2011). See further discussion in n. 1 above.

115 Karen Wilkin, “A Sculptor Draws,” *Master Drawings* 40, no. 1 (2002): 54. My emphasis.

116 This is also the core argument of Krauss’s earlier “Essential David Smith 1,” 43–9 and later *Passages*, 147–81.

117 Sigmund Freud and James Strachey, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989).

118 Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works*, 93.

119 Anne Applebaum, “David Smith: Whitechapel Gallery,” *Artforum* 25, no. 8 (April 1987): 143.

120 In Krauss’s defense, it should be noted that she conveyed her anxiety about such simplifications, however obliquely, at the close of her chapter: “merely to scan his work for the brute recurrence of certain thematic material is to be left with nothing but an endless litany of characterological difficulties and irrelevant private preoccupations”; Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works*, 114.

121 David Smith as quoted in *ibid.*, 93: “the subject is me / the hero is the eye function / the image doesn’t lead / the morality is above / the work, or below / but never with.”

122 Tucker, “David Smith,” 29.

123 Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works*, 114.

124 Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 11. See further discussion in the Introduction.

125 *Ibid.*, 28. Such a stance is an expansion of earlier statements such as “the matrix of gender relations is prior to the emergence of the ‘human’”; Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 7.

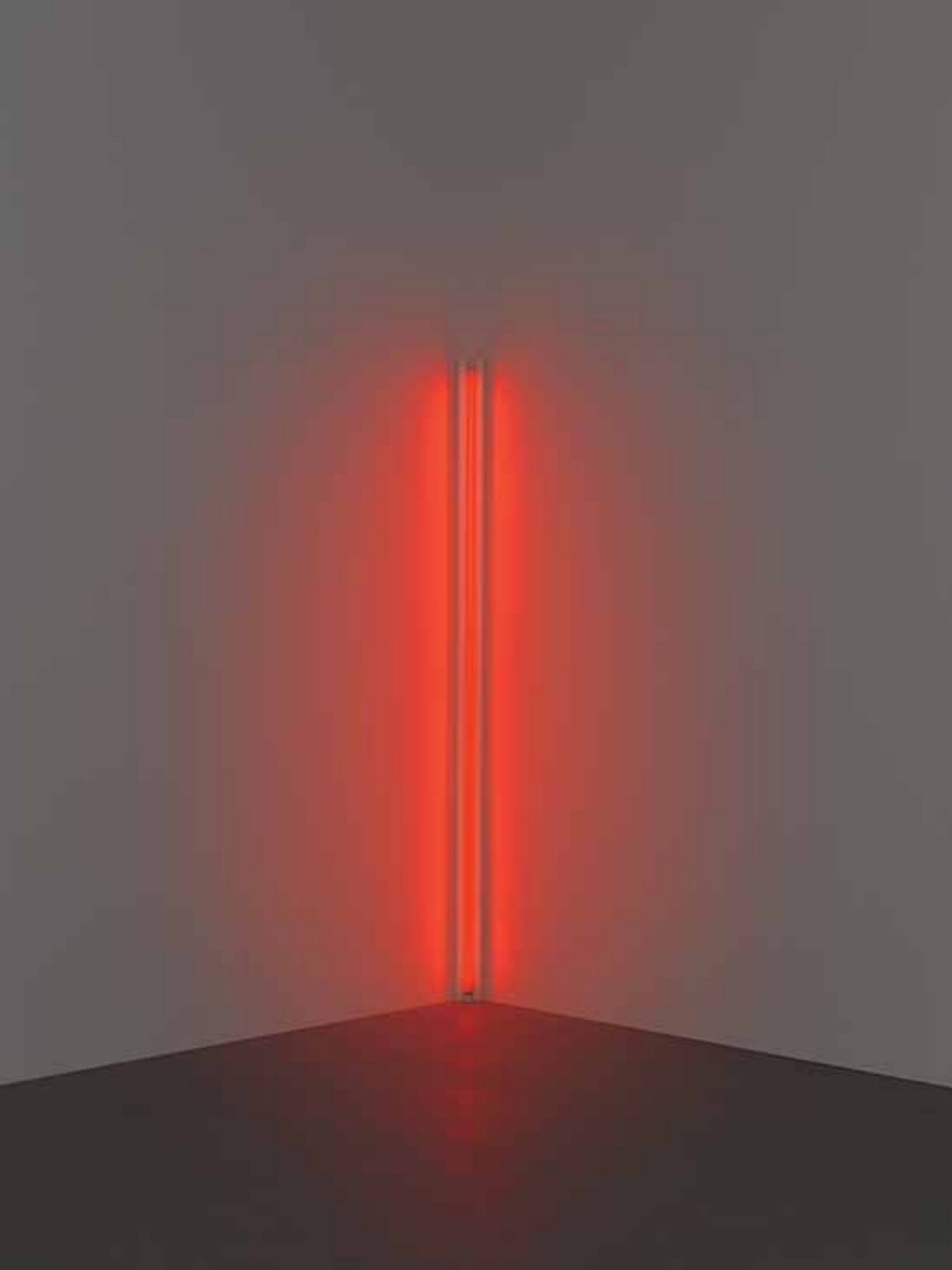
126 Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 24. Importantly, however, Butler’s use of the term “recognition” goes far beyond the discernment of familiar forms or formats. Instead, it is used with reference to her long-running account of subjectivity (and intersubjectivity) developed from her engagement with the writings of G. W. F. Hegel. See the foundational arguments for these ideas in Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections on Twentieth-century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

127 David Smith, Sketchbook no. 49, dated 1962–3, Estate of David Smith. Similarly, he said in 1952, “No artist ever finishes a picture. It’s up to the person who looks at it to finish it”; quoted in Krasne, “David Smith Profile,” 26.

2 IMMODERATE COUPLINGS: TRANSFORMATIONS AND GENDERS IN JOHN CHAMBERLAIN’S WORK

1 This is the foil for an early defense of Chamberlain, e.g., in Barbara Rose, “How to Look at John Chamberlain’s Sculpture,” *Art International* 12, no. 10 (January 1964): 36–8. Within critical, though not popular, opinion, the denial of reference has remained the dominant position. For a spirited, but ultimately unconvincing, rejoinder, see Duncan Smith, “In the Heart of the Tinman: John Chamberlain,” *Artforum* 22, no. 5 (January 1984): 39–43.

2 Elizabeth Baker, “The Chamberlain



ABSTRACT BODIES

SIXTIES SCULPTURE IN THE
EXPANDED FIELD OF GENDER

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Frontispiece: Dan Flavin, *red out of a corner (to Annina)*, 1963/70 (detail of fig. 116).
Page vi: Detail of Nancy Grossman, *For David Smith*, 1965 (fig. 82).

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