Seeing Commitments: 
Jonah Groeneboer’s Ethics of Discernment

David Getsy

What does it mean for an artist to make works that are hard to see? As viewers, we cannot help but feel that decision’s effects. One asks if one is looking at or for the right thing. Incriminations emerge. Some viewers ask why the work cannot just reveal itself better, while others search themselves for ways to look more intently, scrutinizing every detail for incident, event, and evidence. Such frustrations and compensations arise because of our faith in seeing. It is hard to realize that your ability to see cannot fathom all that appears. But that does not mean one should not work to see. Rather, such visual art and its refusals ask us to consider the ethics of sight — sight that we are reminded is limited rather than imperious.

Jonah Groeneboer’s work takes as a central theme the ethical contours and political ramifications of attempting to see as a way of attempting to know. His works are hard to see. They are impossible to photograph. They make demands on the viewer. At first appearing straightforward in their geometric simplicity, they reveal their formal complexity slowly, partially, and successively.

Groeneboer adopted the look of 1960s American Minimalism, extending its activation of perception as a means to address the body. Minimalism, to offer a hopelessly brief formula, emphasized formal reduction to geometric units as a means of creating more unified, direct objects that — in their simplicity and regularity — compelled the viewer to attend to their processes of perceiving. Minimalism’s long-lasting impact has been due to the ways in which it activated the space of the gallery and the viewer’s place in it, and artists have subsequently expanded on its terms and tactics to similarly engage the viewer’s relational co-presence with the object in space. Groeneboer’s work draws on but does not replay Minimalism, even though his sculptures and paintings might at first look like those of Fred Sandback, Ad Reinhart, Jo Baer, Brice Marden, or James Bishop. His work departs from these precedents, however, through its flirtation with invisibility, through its requirements for the viewer to see, and through its quiet insistence that vision’s highest stakes are revealed when one attempts to regard another person.

In its particular activation of the struggle to see, the other key comparison to Groeneboer’s practice is that of the Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti, whose post-World War II works took the impossibility of fully seeing a person (even one as close to him as his own brother) as their recurring theme. Giacometti’s attenuated statues and portraits teach us about the difficulty of encountering the opacity of another person, and they remind how external features allow only a partial view of another’s subjectivity.

I like to think of Groeneboer’s work as inhabiting the formal terms of Minimalism but animating them through questions related to those that drove Giacometti’s struggle with facing persons. Groeneboer’s work, I want to argue, uses formal reduction as a means to address the complexity and variability of the ethical encounter between people. His high degree of abstraction creates a situation that avoids the representation of the figure but that nevertheless calls for an unforeclosed account of personhood and its relations. (1)
Groenboer's earlier thread works, for instance, evoke bodies and persons despite their extreme abstraction. With delicate threads suspended from the ceiling and made taut by hanging rectangular brass rods, Groenboer's sculptures exhibit an animated stillness as they almost imperceptibly vibrate in response to microclimatic changes of the room. The rods lend width to the shape made by the threads that pass through them. Some of these rectangular brass tubes hover just above the ground while others are planted on it. Like Robert Barry's similarly suspended works, the existence of the nonvisible but bodily pressing force of gravity is distilled as a reminder to the viewer. While the hovering rods of Groenboer's works make their regular geometries through responding to gravity, their complex and non-regular planes are made possible when the rods sitting on the ground are placed at angles to that plumb. With titles that evoke bodies and actions such as bent hip and the step, the works invoke but do not image the human form and its capacities. Some of these works take on the proportions of humans when their hanging rectangular planes approach the dimensions of full-length mirrors, and in this way they face us with a verticality historically associated with statue. They are astonishingly complex, however, in their refusal to let their contours define mass or solidity, and the works appear distinct and different from every angle of approach as their faintly outlined geometries multiply and interpenetrate. It takes time to visually disentangle the taut lines from each other and to see a form that one thought one had seen as simply geometric come to transform into complex, torqued planes. This multiplicity demands circumambulation rather than visual circumscription, and Groenboer's works stage visual transitions at every turn.

It is hopeless to try and capture this experience in a photograph. This is the intentional effect of Groenboer's activation of visual discernment. Unlike, say, Sandback's thicker, colored string that often created the illusion of architectural elements or blockades, there is an intimacy to Groenboer's thread as it escapes being seen from a comfortable distance. It requires work for the viewer to view, and the act of seeing becomes muscular in its intensity and resistance. Because of the almost immaterial and invisible presence of the thread-lines, one simply cannot focus on the work as a whole. The thinness of the thread suspended in our space dissolves into its environment. The background of the room competes with the taut thread for our vision's attention. The threads oscillate in and out of focus, and the viewer must constantly strain to recapture these slight lines that subtly vibrate in space. Like Giacometti's receding faces and attenuated statues, the form's expected wholeness sweeps away with the intense focus demanded in order for us to see what is directly in front of us. In this way Groenboer offers the viewer a proposition: walk away with nothing or do the on-going work to see that which is in front of you on its own terms and in its full complexity. That complexity frustrates the presumption that recognition is simple, immediate, and in the viewer's control. Instead, the work's material form requires vigilance in order to be seen. There is sophistication in its refusal to be easily legible while nevertheless being, in its form and concept, open and transparent. Remember, unlike Sandback's barriers and walls, these are human scale, and the geometries and twists of the outlined forms in space evoke bodies and actions. Like the mirrors with which they share proportions and verticality, Groenboer's thread works face us when we look at and through them. They confront us, however, with a form that is not easily apprehended visually and that takes on-going commitment in order to see.

Groenboer's recent Blue Shift paintings extend this engagement with discernment and the ethics of seeing. In these new works, the inability to see has been shifted from the real-time space of the encounter with thread to the conceptual articulation of a time and place elsewhere than the immediacy of the gallery. Groenboer has made paintings that appear, first, as a portrait-oriented rectangle that has been divided into two distinct colors. When viewed under the specific conditions of moonlight, however, these works appear unified as a monochrome.

Such work draws on legacies of conceptual art in which the idea, rather than a visual encounter, defined the work. While it was not a reference for Groenboer, I think of other impossible-to-see works like Sandback's 1969 Eight-Part Sculpture for Dwan Gallery (Conceptual Construction) in which the artist declared that there were volumes of gasses such as helium and xenon just above the gallery's floor or, more directly, Robert Barry's inert gas sculptures in the desert. Groenboer's Blue Shift paintings similarly remind us of what we are not able to see here.

Importantly, however, Groenboer does not leave the moonlight conditions of viewing completely out of sight. Instead, he has organized the works as diptychs of two portrait-oriented rectangles. The diptych format has powerful consequences. It is used by artists to establish parallels and comparisons, compelling the viewer to stitch together both similarities and differences across the central divide. For Groenboer, this meant placing the initial painting on the right, paired with a photographic print of the works under the conditions of moonlight. The mode of compare-and-contrast that we take from this pair, then, is between seeing something in front of us and seeing a representation of how it could otherwise be. As with the simplicity of Groenboer's thread works, this proposition for thinking about how we look poses deeper questions about sight as a way of knowing.

These diptychs show us one thing and tell us how, if we saw it elsewhere and at another time, the same thing would appear to us differently. The disjunction we see in the bisected panel becomes singular under the right conditions. We could see that if only we walked into the moonlight.

On the eve of writing this essay, I was having dinner with a painter I respect who had turned away from abstraction. One question that was raised in our
conversation was the problems faced by reductive abstraction in particular. He saw it as questionable when a work's politics relied on external explanations and on knowledge of the intentions or biography of the artist. It should, he argued, be made visible and immediate in the work (either through its formal or its representational array). I understood his point (which was sympathetic rather than antagonistic), and he was expressing concern that politics became illegible in abstraction. He worried how very divergent works started to look alike to the point where message or conviction would be hopelessly bracketed and subjective.

One might at first assume that one could make this claim about Groeneboer's practice, and it would not be hard to list works by other artists with which we might confuse his at first glance. This pseudomorphism (as the art historian Erwin Panofsky called resemblances produced from divergent priorities and contexts) could lead one to believe that Groeneboer's works are interchangeable with those of such different artists as the Minimalists mentioned above (or others such as Byron Kim, for instance). (2) Nevertheless, Groeneboer's work is not like these other examples that it merely resembles. He arrived at geometric abstraction because it allowed him to address bodies and persons without imaging them, and he does not aim for the pragmatically verifiable geometric object, as many Minimalists did. Rather, he uses the ostensibly simple form to complicate the presumed equation of seeing and knowing.

A resource for Groeneboer's work has been the politics and history of transgender experience, and it is from this perspective that one can see how such formal and descriptive terms as resemblance and identity can be understood to be politically urgent. For Groeneboer, the questions of the viewer's share and the process of perceiving are not simply neutral arenas for the artist to activate. They are also the terms of interpersonal negotiation and sociality, and from these Groeneboer distills visual discernment into formal relations. In his work, there is an account of personhood and its ethics proposed by simple forms that nevertheless escape being apprehended comprehensively through sight. Whereas the Minimalists used formal reduction to achieve clarity and universality, Groeneboer leans on those same formal traits to resist and to question the presumption that things are only as they first appear.

A central theme in transgender history has been the question of appearance in the visual field — that is, how quickly appearance is used to ascribe assumptions about gender onto persons. Groeneboer's work is aligned with other artists working today who are pursuing abstraction as a means to address transgender experience and to resist the taxonomies through which bodies are read and personhood is assumed. (3) Abstraction becomes a way to discuss social relations and bodily politics without producing an image of a body. In this way, there is a refusal of the voyeurism and scrutiny that so often hounds the representation of the transgender body.

As a mode of resistance, Groeneboer's work offers an account of intersubjectivity that, like Giacometti, upholds the inscrutability of another person. The concision of Groeneboer's work is poetic and political, for it addresses sight as the matrix in which arbitrations of personhood are performed. The thread works stand up to the viewer's vision and remind how limited and inconclusive it can be. This performance of partial seeing draws its urgency and energy from the experience of the daily confrontation with others' sight and with resisting the compulsion to read and to decipher. Similarly, the seeming straightforwardness of the Blue Shift panels quickly dissolves as we realize that we are not seeing under the right conditions. What is in front of us can only be seen incompletely.

Similarly the Blue Shift works stage their own nonvisibility, despite the ostensibly straightforward geometric form. This is enacted through the format of the works as a whole. Paired with each painting is the photographic print representing its moonlight state. We take on the diptych format's solicitous urging to compare and contrast. But, crucially, this process always pushes us off-stage and off-site to the elsewhere moonlight place where this painting appears differently.

The Blue Shift works are not made up of two equal halves, but rather two states of the same work. The "original" (just because initial) bisected painting is obdurately present on the wall next to a successive image of it. We are confronted with an image of transformation, with one side of the diptych being the ground from which the other's image was subsequently made. The representation of the painting — in the monochrome side — thus encodes distance and duration. We see what the divided painting can be under different conditions and at a different time, but we only see it in the form of a photographic approximation of what that experience would be like. It should also be remembered, however, that were we able to see the painting under the moonlight, our view would again be partial (since we would lose the variability within the painted panel). There is no comprehensive or total viewing experience: only a work that appears differently in its possible conditions of being seen. The diptych format emphasizes this potentiality and partiality in its staging of the relationship between the daylight and the moonlight, between the here and the there, and between the now and the when. That is the odd nature of the monochrome prints in these works. They represent another state and remind the viewer of how their vision is inadequate and partial under these (and, indeed, all) conditions. They point to how we might and must see otherwise.

All of this is to say that viewing the Blue Shift works in a white box gallery is intentionally an experience of incompleteness, since we are reminded how everyday looking fails to show us what lies within. Groeneboer could have just told us that the moonlight would work, but he generously went further by pairing the paintings with these monochrome prints, showing us the mere representation of the ways in which we could actually see if we were to make the effort to see his paintings in
their proper light. Moonlight is, after all, associated with transformation, as we are told from Shakespeare to popular culture. We see just an image of what this might be like (in the photograph of the painting in the moonlight), but even this is incomplete since the camera’s eye captures more than our own can. Because of this, these are not the complete monochromes we would see if we were in the moonlight, but rather something just close to it. The photographic panels, that is, do not offer finality but rather, like the diptych as a whole, perform the distance between our looking at the works and the conditions in which they could be seen otherwise. Perhaps the variety among the monochrome representations can also be understood to indicate the slow visual transformations that would occur if we were in the moonlight with them and watched the shifts in light’s intensity from moonrise to moonfall. In this way, the relationship between the diptych panels comes to evoke the optical shift possible in the works’ constitutions. Like the thread works, the onus is on the viewer to do the work in order to see properly. As we look back and forth between the panels, we realize how much is lost when we compare and contrast one state to another. No way of looking is comprehensive — even for such a simple thing as rectangles on a wall.

With Groeneboer’s works in mind, I would now respond to my friend’s challenge to reductive abstraction that there is a politics — a specific politics — in resemblance and in the refusal to make difference easily legible and, consequently, open to surveillance and scrutiny. The belief that artworks should play out their politics as visibility must be interrogated for the ways in which that belief relies on a compulsory self-disclosure. This is different from saying that the experience or politics on which an artist draws should be camouflaged, hidden, or suppressed. Rather, Groeneboer’s works remind us that there is an ethical and political basis for the refusal to self-disclose and to be made simply and readily visible. This account of interpersonal relations is thematized in Groeneboer’s works themselves, which complicate our belief that merely seeing is fully knowing. Instead, he compels us to commit to regarding things on their own terms. It is the viewer’s responsibility to try to see in ways they have not thought to see before. Into the moonlight.

David Getsy is the Goldabelle McComb Finn Distinguished Professor of Art History at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He writes about art’s histories of the human form and its alternatives. His recent books include Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender (Yale University Press, 2015), Scott Burton: Complete Writings on Art and Performance, 1965–1975 (Soberscove Press, 2012), Rodin: Sex and the Making of Modern Sculpture (Yale University Press, 2010), and, forthcoming from MIT Press in 2016, the anthology Queer for the Whitechapel Gallery’s “Documents of Contemporary Art” book series.

Jonah Groeneboer studied at Simon Fraser University in BC, received a BFA in Intermedia at PNCA and an MFA in Studio Art at NYU. He has had solo shows at Bellwether Gallery and The Galveston Artist Residency. His work has been included in group shows at Bellwether, Andrew Edlin, and Museum 52 in New York, Shoshawna Wayne Gallery in LA, IdeoBox Artspace in Miami, Roots and Culture in Chicago, Exile Arts in Berlin, Brown Gallery in London, and Torpedo Kunstbokhandelen in Oslo. This fall his work will include a group show at the Contemporary Art Museum Houston. His work has been reviewed and written about in publications such as The NY Times, the New Yorker, New York Arts, Art 21, and most recently in Art Journal in a conversation between Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy on Queer Formalism. He has taught studio, art history and theory classes to both undergrad and graduate students. Jonah Groeneboer was born in 1978 in Chiliwack, BC. He is based in New York City.

Blue Shift | 27 November - 16 January, 2016

EXHIBITION | Jonah Groeneboer
CURATOR | Derek Dunlop
GUEST WRITER | David Getsy

IMAGE | Guard, 2014, thread and five brass bars, 8ft x 4ft x 7ft (total height dependant on ceiling)