

Jonathan VanDyke  
*Traunitz*  
Loock Galerie, Berlin

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Essay by **Caitlin Berrigan**

The diamond of the Harlequin is a flattened facet. His fashion is at once costume of the -devilish trickster and uniform of the aristocracy's entertainer. He wears all dimensions one next to the other in a field of vision that suggests depth—and yet always slips into a smooth plane of illusory pattern.

For his first solo exhibition in Berlin at Loock Galerie, Jonathan VanDyke has produced a new series that furthers his formal play with the diamond, choreographies of netted bodies, performers leaking paint, and traces of their labored stains left on the surface of the canvas. VanDyke works with dancers in his studio, whose bodies move with and against each other, dripping and interlocking to smear trajectories of color and *Freudenfluss* across the plane of the canvas.

These material remnants of performance VanDyke cuts, quilts, irons and sews in a feminized act of labor to fashion a costume/uniform for the shoulders of the painting stretchers to wear: a dizzying Harlequin jacket of abject pleasure and work (e.g., *Skin; Costume; Uniform; Men's Shirt*). Echoing and distorting the diamond pattern are the large-scale canvases *Rubber Sheet; Vers; Body Pressure*, which bear imprints of dye-soaked nets worn by performers as they entangle and press into space. The dimensions of VanDyke's work with dancers (and couple) David Rafael Botana and Bradley Teal Ellis cannot be encompassed within the medium of painting. Photographs hold frozen glimpses into this process (e.g., *Darkroom (Berlin) #1-6*). The paradox of photographic capture only emphasizes the impossibility of delimiting the shapes of VanDyke's choreographies, and they glint like ever proliferating facets of touch, form and time. The video (*Traunitz*) sequences this inquiry into shapeshifting solids and surfaces. The very paintings in the gallery serve as sets in the video, constituting spatial scenes and ocular cutouts for voyeurism into an imaginative theater where diamonds morph into gesture.

VanDyke, like the Harlequin, is an artist between worlds of labor and play as much as his work exists between painting and performance. It is in this gap where the instability of the Harlequin's geometry takes hold. The hidden dimension in VanDyke's paintings is not the third dimension of Renaissance perspective and representational illusions of solid space, but rather the fourth dimension of time. Through the labor of producing painting, VanDyke gives glimpses and material evidence of the concealed dimensions of performance, intimacy and queer couplings. In *Commedia dell'arte*, the characters of Harlequin and the earnest yet melancholic Pierrot vie for the love of the beautiful Colombina in endless variations since the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. But locked in the absence of Colombina inside VanDyke's studio, it is quite possible that Harlequin and Pierrot seduce each other in an excess of slurred color. As viewers

we are left with the charged palimpsests of this motion and energy. For while artists may be coerced under capitalism to play the role of entertainer within rarified markets of intellect and aesthetics, there are some pleasures and intimacies of practice that resist possession. That is the trick.

And we are willingly duped—as VanDyke’s paintings continue to seduce and perform within the space of the exhibition. The provisional armatures of paintings-as-walls are revealingly bare, as if a film set for a new choreography of contact. They display two facets of vision: one side of the canvas made for show and the backside, pinched and haggard with loose threads. Overflowing the rectilinearity of modernity, VanDyke’s paintings sometimes include integrated orifices that leak and sweat streams of color, soiling the floor (*Beards*). It is an unstable threat of the incomplete—the artwork that will not be contained within space or time.

VanDyke is a devilish servant of Modernism. The diamond is a romantic perversion of the square, which is the favored form of modernist abstraction’s sober rationality. In the making of *Rubber Sheet*, *Vers*, and *Body Pressure*, VanDyke wraps performers in nets saturated with dye. With the eroticism of bondage, the nets serve at once as armor delimiting the borders of each performer, at the same time as they capture, hold and conform to the contours of the body. Pressed onto the plane of the painting, the diamond’s rigid geometry is loosened, perverted and multiplied. This practice shares affinities with Lygia Clark’s participatory net improvisations, such as *Baba Antropofagica* (1973). Her work evolved from Neoconcrete abstractions to relational objects that facilitated therapeutic encounters under the social isolation of military dictatorship in Brazil. The nets entangle—pulling one person to another in a movement that draws and remakes the empty and the full, space and body, the flat and the faceted. The paintings share this anthropophagic drive: the irreconcilable violence and tenderness of contact.

### *Traunitz*

Among the many layers of VanDyke’s work are its cinematic correspondences. *Traunitz* is the title of VanDyke’s ensemble of work, whose namesake is a character in Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s film *Chinesische Roulette* (1976). Traunitz is the mute governess of an autocratic twelve-year-old girl whose disability demands she walk in crutches. Suspecting her own disfigurement is at the origin of her parents’ infidelity and lovelessness, the girl exposes them through a manipulative foil that assembles her unsuspecting parents, their secret lovers, two household caretakers, herself and Traunitz at the family’s countryside manor—also called Traunitz. Like VanDyke’s leaking scaffolds, the house itself becomes a porous puzzle box for the dynamics of contained love, rage, resentment and resistance to spill over and poison the family from the inside out.

Although the film was not shot there, Trausnitz is a castle in Bavaria whose main staircase boasts life-sized fresco scenes of Harlequin, Pierrot and the *Commedia dell’arte* characters. Traunitz, the governess, is herself a bit of a Harlequin. The coy woman is both servant and confidante, subordinate to the little girl yet charged with her physical well-being and

entertainment. In one of the few moments that date the film, the housemaid's son overhears the electronic beats of Kraftwerk's *Radioactivity* seething from behind a closed door. Gingerly opening it, he finds the girl lost in adolescent brooding by the window overlooking Bavarian rooftops, while Traunitz takes the whole room in a diagonal dance, buoyed by the girl's crutches in a radical reversal of disability into prosthetic play. It is this tiny moment that resonates most clearly with VanDyke's work: when the nets of bondage prove to be an illusory foil for subversive performance. The radioactive twinning of the Harlequin and her master precedes the dismantling of societal repressions.

There is a hierarchy between the girl and Traunitz. And yet the speechless intelligence of Traunitz completes and complements the girl. In the film's denouement, the girl undermines her mother in a psychological game of 'Chinese Roulette.' The girl and Traunitz are two facets of a single trap. The girl speaks her cruelty aloud, while translating the signed gestures of Traunitz, whose disarmingly mute expression belies a blunt emotional honesty of disdain. Insults accumulate to the climactic affront that the mother's character matches that of an officer under the Third Reich. It is difficult to discern whether Traunitz is the girl's puppet, or if Traunitz directs the girl with pantomime hands. For this Traunitz must be shot by the enraged mother—taking the bullet that might have been reserved for the daughter. It results only in a minor flesh wound and flustered embarrassment. But the film ends with an exterior view of the Traunitz manor and the sound of a second shot, whose execution is left to the imagination.

*Traunitz*, the exhibition, is a coy threat to splinter the space of self-imposed modernist containment. It is a set within a theater, composed of provisional architectures and diamond puzzle boxes through which we are compelled to spy, dance and seethe. It beckons with pantomime hands to lead out of the exhibition and into a hidden dimension of flamboyant perversion and corporeal invention. Just out of reach of our voyeuristic gaze, the untidy ends of VanDyke's work continue to make a mess of our imaginations.

*Caitlin Berrigan is a visual artist living in Berlin who works between sculpture, video and performance. She is currently a Chancellor Fellow with the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, and is producing an upcoming artist's publication with Archive Books.*

In 2013 Jonathan VanDyke presented solo exhibitions at Scaramouche and Court Square Project Space, both in New York, and at 1/9 unosunove in Rome, where he also took part in the Qwatz Artist Residency and presented a live performance. Recent solo projects include major works at the Albright Knox Art Gallery and as part of Performa 11 in New York City. He has presented live performance, including a piece featuring dancers Botana and Ellis, at the National Academy Museum, New York; Socrates Sculpture Park, New York; Vox Populi, Philadelphia; and The Power Plant, Toronto. His work has been reviewed in *Art Forum*, *TimeOut New York*, *artforum.com*, *Modern Painters*, *Art Papers*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Buffalo News*, *ArtSlant*, *White Hot*, and *Drone Magazine*. He has received grants from the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation and the Joan Mitchell Foundation, has served as a resident at Yaddo, as an Emerging Artist Fellow at Socrates Sculpture Park, and as a Visiting Artist Fellow at The University of Chicago, Illinois State University, and Krabbesholm Art

Academy, Denmark. He attended the graduate program at Bard College and the Skowhegan School.