

Paint, Gesture, Code: Thoughts on Jonathan VanDyke
Allison Unruh

How can the language and meaning of gesture be re-thought through the practice of painting today? This is one of the questions that Jonathan VanDyke raises in his art, which melds the expressive force of gesture as presence with a sense of the contingency of bodies moving together and against one another. His practice, an expansion of painting that embraces space, gesture and multilayered visual codings, pivots around the extended dialogue between artist and his collaborators, David Rafael Botana and Bradley Teal Ellis. Looking at gesture not simply as a sign of personal agency, but as a trace of energy between deeply engaged partners, his work charts a new territory for the relevance of gestural painting in contemporary art, guided not just by innovative forms of mark-making but by deep and extended looking.

The specter of Abstract Expressionism, often seen as the apex of painterly gesture in the modern era, is something that VanDyke confronts head on in his work. No matter that the mythology of the direct transcription of unbridled feeling, poured and lashed upon canvases by individualist geniuses, has been dismantled by subsequent generations of artists and critics. Aside from its frequent ideological associations with promoting images of triumphal American capitalist individualism amidst Cold War panic, another lingering association of Abstract Expressionism is the sense of hyper-masculinist glory, as encapsulated in both the brawls of the Cedar Bar and the bravado wrangling with paint in the studio. Rather than simply rebuff or reduce this mythology through ironic distance or parody (as exemplified in Warhol's many biting critiques of Abstract Expressionist hegemony in works ranging from *Dance Steps* to *Piss* paintings, although his practice certainly relates to those, too), VanDyke engaged with this heavily loaded legacy through an act of extended looking. In his durational performance *The Long Glance* (2011), VanDyke spent forty hours over the course of a week standing in front of Jackson Pollock's *Convergence* (1952) at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery.¹ While the performance pointed to issues of labor and standardization in being keyed to the 40-hour workweek, it also opened up a space for engaging queer desire in the act of looking at Pollock. The title's reference to the practice (often associated with gay male culture in particular) of signaling desire through the direct and extended gaze aligned various levels of aesthetic, sensory and sexual pleasure. In an attentive pose in front of the painting, VanDyke's figure at once doubled and challenged the notion of the artist as the center of the work, while the stillness of his pose represented an affecting counterpoint to the action of the painting. His performance in turn solicited not only the gaze of audience upon his staging of this scene, but also by example encouraged a prolonged immersion in the painting alongside him. This act of looking, rapt and engaged, in a sense productively obfuscated the dualities between active and passive positions.

VanDyke's pose in *The Long Glance* also reverberated with an engaged, activist point of view that is important in much of his work. Through the performance, he literalized and

¹ For further discussion, see Jonathan VanDyke, "The Long Glance," [http://www.thepowerplant.org/SwitchOn/Features/August-2011-\(1\)/The-Long-Glance.aspx](http://www.thepowerplant.org/SwitchOn/Features/August-2011-(1)/The-Long-Glance.aspx) (accessed 1 October 2015).

played with the idea of “standing up” for a cause, which in this case had particular resonance in terms of aligning the terms of deep, thoughtful looking, unfiltered experience and recognizing the multivalent symbolism of a look associated with queer desire. The specificities of the posture he took had a formal expressiveness that was striking, and he trained for the performance with both a dancer and Alexander Technique specialist for six months in preparation. VanDyke stood tall and attentive in front of the work, setting forth a visual counterpoint with the horizontal sweep of the canvas, while also exploring the full expressive potential of standing still.

The Long Glance can be thought of as a kind of still dance with Pollock. In many ways, this performance set the stage for much of VanDyke’s subsequent practice. Like many other artists of earlier generations, ranging from Lynda Benglis to Carolee Scheneemann to members of the Gutai group, VanDyke engaged in productive dialogue not only with Pollock’s complex and dynamic compositions, but even more so with the conceptual framework of his performance as a choreographer of and within his practice of painting. At the same time, VanDyke’s form of movement generated mark-making is profoundly shaped by a sense of his own role as part of a community radically altered by the AIDS crisis, one where the body’s artistic and erotic power cannot be separated from a sense of risk, loss and commemoration.²

The same year as *The Long Glance*, VanDyke staged his first in an ongoing series of public performances with collaborators Ellis and Botana, titled *Cordoned Area*. In these sessions, as well as in private ones, VanDyke participates as a director (or coach) who engages with Botana and Ellis as performers, orchestrating a choreographed sequence of full-body gesture and paint on the horizontal surface of a canvas, an echo of Pollock astride his canvases unfurled on his barn floor. Ellis and Botana, both trained dancers who are also a couple, explore through VanDyke’s direction a variety of improvised physical actions, while the results are captured on canvas through his strategic placement of different types of paint that transfer the indexical mark of their movements onto their bodies, clothes and canvas. Prompting the couple with varied forms of direction, ranging from specifying a certain type of movement to suggesting a particular emotional scenario for them to play out, the trio explores a gamut of physical expression that articulates forces of attraction and tension, desire and struggle, among many others.

Botana and Ellis bring a distinct range and intensity to the collaborative practice with VanDyke.³ Each has developed as a dancer and choreographer from a particular perspective – Ellis from the world of contact improvisation that was initiated by Steve Paxton in the 1970s before extending to different forms worldwide, and Botana from a background informed by Merce Cunningham’s approach. Both of their creative lineages, not incidentally, are connected to practices of dance that were deeply engaged with the

² A deeper analysis of this topic is addressed in the catalogue for the exhibition curated by John Davies titled *Coming After: queer time, arriving too late and the spectre of the recent past* (Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2012).

³ For further background on their individual practices and collaboration, see "Jonathan VanDyke, Bradley Teal Ellis, and David Rafael Botana in Conversation with J. Louise Makary," *Critical Correspondence* (April 2014).

visual arts. While not wanting to oversimplify the dynamic between the two, there is a certain correlation to the visual codes that VanDyke contrasts – the free-form painterly gesture finds a correlate in Paxton’s looser improvisatory approach, while the structured geometries of the grids he employs evokes a more structured experience of form aligned with certain types of scored and timed modern dances – while at the same time these codes are melded on the surfaces and obfuscated by the back and forth between Ellis and Botana’s bodies in motion. VanDyke has acknowledged that the expressive complexity of their performance and mark making is related to their different approaches to movement, and the divergent interpretations that both bring further enrich the work. Since their first collaboration with VanDyke took place not long after they had become a couple, the trajectory of their continued performances and experimentations together has explored the deepening of their relationship and allowed for further risk-taking.

The materials that result from these performative collaborations are further transformed by VanDyke into paintings that stand as individual works in their own right, while also forming elements within a larger multi-layered practice that encompasses photographs, video and installation. One of the most significant processes that he employs to transform his paintings is that of cutting and sewing, in which he cuts portions of the paint-soaked fabrics that result from his collaborations with Ellis and Botana, re-configuring them (with the assistance of an expert seamstress) in geometric patterns that evoke a wide range of sources, from Amish quilts to Anni Albers’s textiles to patterned floors. In this re-configuring of the gestural traces of the performers’ physical engagements, he doubles the intertwining of their bodies with the visual patterns of warp and weft. The gestural marks are made discontinuous, estranged yet with elements of connections, signaled in pattern and color. While the patterns reference analogue sources, they nevertheless bring to mind the pixellation of digital imagery, and the re-mixing and fluidity of visual streams that are omnipresent elements of contemporary culture. In tension with the rationalizing geometric order, a sense of the body and physical sensuality prevails in these paintings, an element further enhanced by VanDyke’s treatment of the backs of the canvas, where the pieces of carefully stitched canvases are exposed, suggesting a vulnerability that alludes to the body.

VanDyke’s recent exhibition at unosunove gallery in Rome unfolds around the hanging of an impressive group of these sewn paintings. The frontal surfaces of the paintings are replete with the gestures and stains of richly colored paint that result from a collaborative performance, but instead of using fragments of canvas on which the performance took place, VanDyke has instead utilized in six of these works the t-shirts and dress shirts worn by Botana and Ellis during their painting sessions. The gestures and bodily indices registered in this way form an even more intimate connection to the body, almost a second skin. Arranged on a wooden fence-like structure composed of a gridded pattern, these paintings are suspended in a manner that invites the viewer to walk around them, looking at both the front and the back, each given equal visual weight. In this way, VanDyke plays with the notion of orientation, both spatial and sexual, making a gesture of protest against the typical way in which only one side of a painting is valued. This targets perceived notions of different forms of value, including what he describes as the oversimplification, commodification and objectification that characterizes the way art is

so often consumed today in a context shaped by the ultra-commodification of the art fair and market.

Yet it can also be noted that in the process of gaining proximity to the backs of some of these works, the viewer is prompted to move into a more restricted space, the fence narrowing the space between painting and wall, so that one must take in the view at closer range. The closer range of looking at the backs of these works suggests yet another level of intimacy and layered personal histories, as VanDyke has re-purposed scraps of his mother's suits from the 1980s, as well as linens embroidered by his grandmother. The care with which they support the painted fabric again destabilizes the notion of active and passive roles, as that which is normally concealed is exposed, the two sides having a mutual signifying power. The formal structure of fragmentation and re-assembling, as well as these hints of personal history, suggest elements of personal coding in the works. This is indeed furthered by their titles, initials that remain enigmatic – such as *N.H.* and *L.D.* – even as we are told by the artist that they represent encoded initials of friends/lovers. This gesture ties together many elements of his studio practice that explore the dynamics of varying forms of intimate engagement.

These formal systems, both the grids and the assigned initials, thus begins to suggest a certain logic that is kept out of view, a system that is present even while obscured. The t-shirt paintings are enmeshed in the larger installation that amplifies their gridded patterning, echoed in both the fence structure as well as the floor of the gallery itself. This relates to the way that VanDyke selected the specific patterns for the sewn paintings, inspired by floors of the Capitoline Museum in Rome. The transposition of the horizontal surface of the floor into the vertical hanging of the canvas is yet another creative re-thinking of Pollock's practice of creating his poured canvases on the floor, while also suggesting the condition of the body itself as supine, as intimately connected to the ground.

As a counterpoint to the t-shirt paintings, there are also two examples of canvases whose surfaces are not fractured by the sewn grid. The continuity of gesture in these works measures a certain distance from the fractured constructs of the t-shirt paintings, while also displaying a rich formal variation of their own. The marks across the surface of these works are constructed through the use of scraps of fabric and trimmings knotted together, which are engaged in different ways over the course of the collaborative performance. There is suggestion of viscera, veins, or nerves in the knotted and branched forms of these painterly marks, underlining a raw corporeality. Their patterns, like some of those in the gridded paintings, are created through a process of applying bodily pressure upon these scraps, so that this varying force is expressively registered in the imprint of the various colors and patterns. There is also a different expressive quality of surface in these paintings, which are created on rough linen surfaces, whose coarseness is pointedly contrasted to the supple quality of the t-shirt material in the sewn paintings. These two linen canvases also act as doubles, or mirrors within the installation, as they are shown across from the paintings that were made from fragments of the t-shirts that Ellis and Botana wore while creating the marks on these linen canvases.

That each of these abstracted elements has a direct relation and bearing on the body is articulated in the dialogue that VanDyke sets up between gestural abstraction and the figurative photographs that are interspersed throughout the installation. Even without prior knowledge of his practice, the viewer is given clues through these images about the relation of the body to the paintings – whether in the gestural twisting forms that intersect with t-shirts and bodies in *Kevin* and *Mouth*, or in the sensual contrast of the geometric cut-out shape and the nude torso in *Rhymes with Measure*. Rather than didactic, they are poetic and suggestive, images in silver-toned hues that revel in the sensuality of the bodies pictured, while their fragmentary arrangements and formal obfuscations also suggests certain flashes of memory held in reserve. These photographs were specifically created by analog techniques, using film and printing them himself in the darkroom, connecting to the processes of the hand and body. Their production in the enclosed, solitary, space of the darkroom is thus poignantly contrasted with the collaborative processes of the paintings.

With each of these rich and evocative elements, arranged in a way that emphasizes both structure as well as interstitial space, VanDyke has woven together an installation that suggests the presence of the body as much as its loss. The title of the exhibition, *L blue N black I green M orange K violet*, connects to this theme in yet another way, referring to the poem *Voyelles* by Arthur Rimbaud, which was later the basis for a poem by Frank O'Hara (an important insider in both Abstract Expressionist and Neo-Dada circles). Rimbaud's poem is a daring masterwork of Symbolist synesthesia, its imagery appealing to a wide array of senses, mingling ideas of both ecstasy and menace. Its structure is based on a seemingly arbitrary assignment of colors to each of the vowels, which VanDyke plays upon by assigning colors to each of the initials that evokes a friend and/or lover. While this personal coding remains opaque to all but the artist, it nevertheless signals that something is withheld, that even with the profusion of these alluring surfaces, colors, and corporeal traces, there is something that will remain absent.

Coding, however, plays a somewhat paradoxical role in VanDyke's work – there is a sense of freedom and openness that pervades his work, even as certain specific meanings are signaled and withheld. While the work bears some relationships to the ways queer desire could be articulated through poetic, coded forms, as a result of the pressures of the closet as in the work of Johns and Rauschenberg (as investigated most incisively in the work of Jonathan Katz)⁴, there are also very distinct affective differences in VanDyke's work. For one, there is a sensual frankness in the handling of paint and the traces of the body that are revealed to the viewer in the dialogue between painting, performance and photographs. Moreover, VanDyke's works and the vantage points he creates within his installation seem to draw in the viewer, creating a visual experience that is marked by a sense of intimacy. This operates on multiple levels, including the spatial, where the viewer is brought close within the framework of the fenced structure, and the normally hidden backs of the canvases are revealed. While the gestural traces that animate the work speak of intimacy as well, the traces of such actions are presented as both palpable and out of reach. In this and other ways, VanDyke's works offer a rich visual lexicon that

⁴ For an example of his discussion about the dialogue between these two artists, see Jonathan Katz, *HIDE/SEEK: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Smithsonian Books, 2010).

encodes bodily experience in multifarious ways, while rewarding extended experiences of looking.

© Allison Unruh 2015