

Il sguardo lungo (The long glance)

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Amongst Jonathan VanDyke's past exhibitions and performances, one encounters such titles as *The Painter of the Hole*, *The Hole in the Palm of Your Hand*, *With One Hand Between Us*, *Obstructed View*, and *The Long Glance*. Recurring throughout are references and allusions to the hand, the eye, and the "hole." *The Painter of the Hole* refers to an eponymous series of works by George Grosz in which the artist depicts a figure at his easel, painting holes. To the viewer, it is unclear whether these perforations are illusionistic or actual cutouts in the canvas (and even body) through which the "real" world is seen beyond. Rather than a conventional painterly representation, the canvas reveals an abstract void, an imponderable emptiness rendered by and through the hand, body, and eye—the enigmatic space of seeing and making.



The Painter of the Hole, 1948



The Painter of the Hole II, 1950

Borrowing the title of a lost 1948 documentary short by Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni, VanDyke's current exhibition, *Oltre l'Oblivio (Over the Oblivion)*, circles back to the idea of the void or hole. Like Grosz's paintings, Antonioni's films repeatedly invoke the gaze into emptiness, into "*spazi amorfi, sconnessi, vuoti*" (amorphous, disconnected, empty spaces), which gradually and with effort become full of understanding and significance.¹ "*Il personaggio*," Antonioni instructs us, "*deve guardare altrove per capire, nel vuoto*" (The character...must look elsewhere to understand, into emptiness).² But the character is never alone in his or her gaze: we the viewers, as well as the artist/director, participate in the transformative process of looking, searching, or venturing "into the hole" or "over the oblivion," a condition that VanDyke engages both as subject and process in his performance-based paintings, sculptures, photographs, and videos.

Elaborating on the transformative potential of vision, author Furio Colombo describes Antonioni's films as involving "*uno sguardo lungo su un paesaggio lungo, uno sguardo che non finisce mai di guardare su un realtà che non finisce mai di rivelarsi*" (a long gaze over a long landscape, a gaze that never stops watching a self-revealing reality).³ We find the "long gaze" into emptiness in so many of Antonioni's scenes: Vittoria in *L'Eclisse* and Giuliana in *Deserto Rosso*, peering over natural or industrial expanses before them or outside their windows; David Locke in *The Passenger*, surveying the vast remoteness of the Sahara Desert; or the

¹ Pascal Bonitzer, "Il concetto di scomparsa," in *Michelangelo Antonioni: Identificazione di un autore* (Parma: Pratiche editrice, 1985), 148.

² Michelangelo Antonioni, *A volte si fissa un punto* (Catania: Il Girasole, 1992), 26.

³ *Dear Antonioni*, directed by Gianni Massironi (1977). Accessed on October 15, 2013.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1JmStA7dQ>.

Director in *Beyond the Clouds*, staring into the obscurity of clouds outside the airplane window, and later, through the fog-laden streets of Ferrara. The solitary viewer inevitably conjures up Caspar David Friedrich's expression of the sublime in his circa 1818 painting, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. Unlike the romanticism of Friedrich's *Wanderer*, however, Grosz and Antonioni's "voids" are firmly entrenched in a modernist zeitgeist of tension, ambiguity, and transformation.



L'Eclisse, 1962



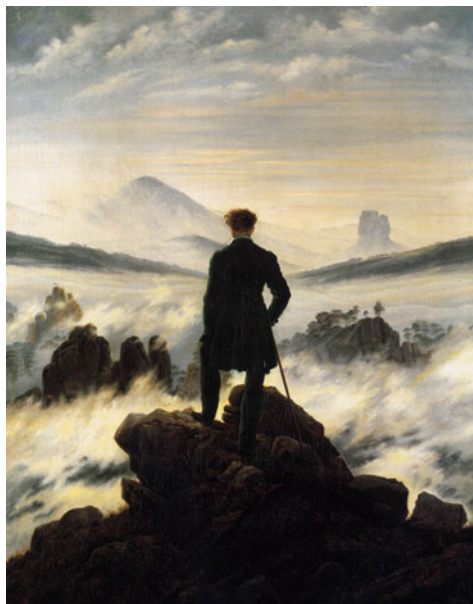
Deserto Rosso, 1964



The Passenger, 1975

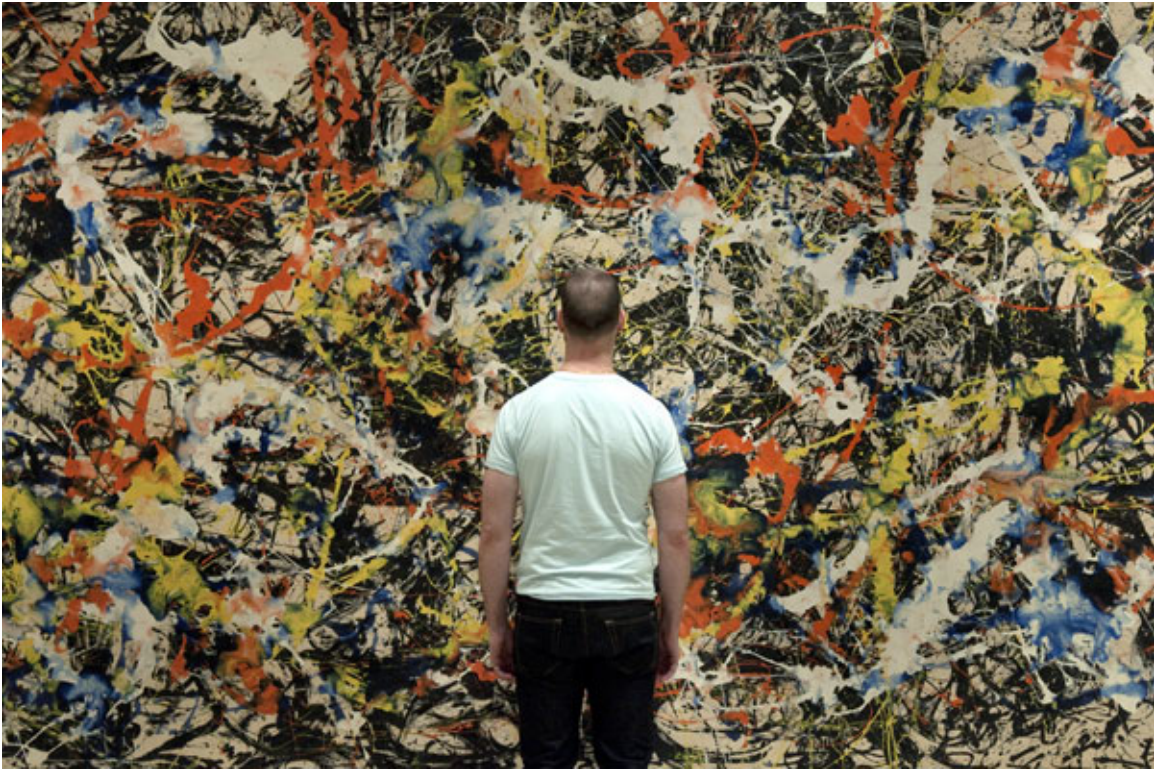


Beyond the Clouds, 1995



Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, c. 1818

The evocation of the sublime, the solitary viewer observed from behind, the *sguardo lungo* culminate in VanDyke's 2011 work, *The Long Glimce*. Performed at Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo, NY, the artist spent 40 hours over five days—the duration of a standard work week—staring at Jackson Pollock's iconic "drip" painting, *Convergence: Number 10*, (1952). In contrast to Pollock's work, an emblem of "process, action, motion, and physicality," VanDyke's "action" was instead to hold his gaze on the painting while remaining meditative and still. "I chose Pollock," VanDyke explains, "because a lot of the language about Abstract Expressionism was about how this art might reach a universal sensibility, that...this type of non-compositional abstraction would be a gateway into a different mindset, into a transcendent experience. Of course, whether that was ever achieved is a matter of debate, but I thought that for the course of this performance, I would take that at face value..."⁴ In *The Long Glimce*, Pollock's dense and colorful drips, splashes, and puddles of paint define the field of vision, the "oblivion" over and through which the gaze might traverse, the "gateway into a different mindset, into a transcendent experience."



Jonathan VanDyke, *The Long Glimce*, The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, May-June 2011

With its emphasis upon the extended gaze, *The Long Glimce* moreover alludes to discourses on control and desire. Michel Foucault defines the gaze not as something one has or uses, but rather as a power relationship into which someone enters: "the gaze that sees is the gaze that dominates."⁵ Similarly, Jacques Lacan describes the scopic drive, the eyes and the gaze, as a function of sexual desire.⁶ VanDyke remarks that *The Long Glimce* evolved from his encounter with *Convergence: Number 10*, when "what started as a glance became a very long glance," after which he began "thinking about how, within gay culture, there is a sort of gaze that two men might have in a public space at one another—two strangers—and if you look just a second too long, that's an acknowledgement of your attraction."⁷ Historically, Abstract Expressionism, and Pollock's work in particular, has been associated with the masculine domain, aggressive virility, and spontaneous, "authentic" expressions of energy and action. Formally, "Ab Ex" is characterized by an "all-

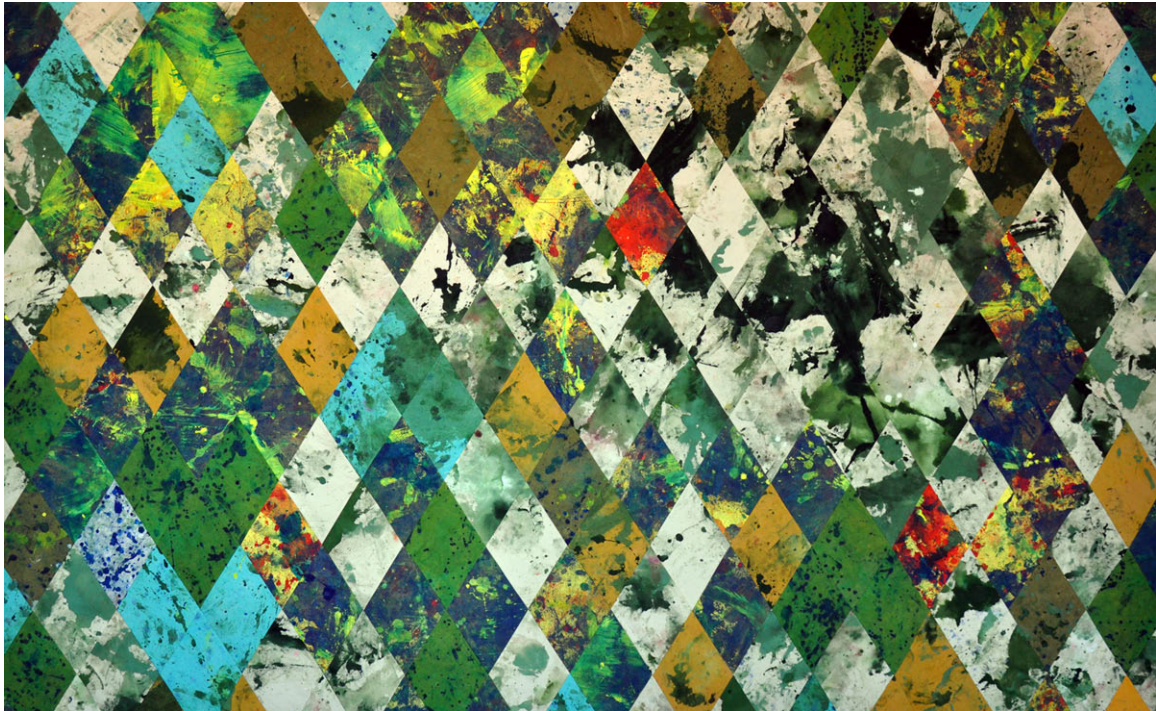
⁴ Jonathan VanDyke on *The Long Glimce* (May 13, 2011). Accessed October 15, 2013. <http://www.albrightknox.org/news-and-features/features/article:05-13-2011-jonathan-vandyke-on-the-long-glimce-video-/>.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 1963).

⁶ Jacques Lacan, "The Split between the Eye and the Gaze," in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978).

⁷ VanDyke on *The Long Glimce*.

over” approach in which the whole canvas is treated with equal importance. Like the intricate network of tree branches upon and through which Vittoria gazes in the film *L’Eclisse*, such “all-over” painting reads as an expansive field, a space at once empty and full.



Jonathan VanDyke, *L’Eclisse*, 2013

Engaging this modernist legacy, VanDyke describes that during graduate school, he “began using dripping paint to activate the highly controlled forms that I was building as a sculptor. I was trying to understand how two aspects that drive my practice (as well as my psyche) – the desire, on the one hand, for complete control, and, on the other, to make a mess – were manifesting themselves in my work. I wanted to charge each of these aspects so that they would play off of one another.”⁸ Here, themes of domination and desire clearly emerge: splicing the gestural, non-compositional abstraction of action painting with modern art’s equally iconic motif—the geometric grid—VanDyke pictorializes the conflicting impulses towards control and disorder.

“Surfacing in pre-War cubist painting and subsequently becoming ever more stringent and manifest,” art historian Rosalind Krauss remarks, the grid has proliferated in 20th and 21st century art as “an emblem but also as myth,” a “matrix of knowledge,” a “transparent vehicle,” a reference to the window that “admits light – or spirit – into the initial darkness of a room,” as well as a structure that “extends, in all directions, to infinity,” and on.⁹ Incorporating the grid, VanDyke’s works reference not only “high” art, but also craft, textiles, architectural design, as well as basic organizational structures and networks. Recalling the diamond-patterned garb of Picasso’s harlequin saltimbanques, the migrant acrobats, clowns, and musicians ever-poised to entertain passing spectators, VanDyke’s checkered and stained canvases evoke the decorative backdrops and theatrical costumes of modernism’s melancholy performers. In *Oltre l’Oblio*, the irregular, gestural paint splash and the regulated grid are cast over and throughout VanDyke’s sculptures, paintings, video, and photographs like a web or connective tissue. Echoing the gallery’s checkered floor tiles, the patterning conspires to create a dimensional expanse over and through which we might gaze and travel.

⁸ Mariann Smith, *Interview with Jonathan VanDyke*. Accessed on October 15, 2013.

http://www.albrightknox.org/uploads/documents/news/VanDyke_Interview_Transcript.pdf.

⁹ Rosalind Krauss, “Grids,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985).



Installation View, *Oltre l'Oblivio*. unonosunove, Rome, October, 2013

In the opening sequence of Antonioni's 1995 film, *Beyond the Clouds*, the movie's protagonist, The Director, peers over a dense expanse of clouds from an airplane window, and later through foggy city streets—enacting a *sguardo lungo* of sorts—while describing his process as a filmmaker:

When I'm very tired after finishing a film, I start thinking of the next one. That's the only thing left for me to do and which I know how to do. I begin trying to define the film which I'll make after the one I've just finished. The most difficult thing is to refrain from taking an interest in anything, not to read, not to allow myself any distraction, to reach silence and darkness. It is in the darkness that reality lights up and in the silence that the voices arrive from the outside.

Reprising the idea and act of going into a void of darkness, VanDyke presents a series of black and white photographs entitled *Darkroom*, in which two performers, dancers Bradley Teal Ellis and David Rafael Botana, are depicted cloaked and masked. Blinded by their head coverings, the two, who are also a couple, are pictured reaching out in search for the other, grappling, uncertain, and eventually making contact. Permeating the dancers' actions and gestures is a mood of desire, longing, loss, as well as the revelation of discovery. Cropped at times to include only fragments of the performers' bodies, the photographs offer the same game or challenge to the viewer: we search outside the edge of the photograph to find the body that escapes our sight. Indeed, the closer we are drawn to the figures, the more indefinite they become. Like the checkered pattern of the figures' cloaks, the bodies transform into abstractions: the reaching hand, the bent elbow, a thigh flecked with white paint whose origin remains undisclosed, intermix with the cloak's crisscross checker pattern, a harlequinesque habit or monastic cloak-cum-modernist grid, the sheath beneath and into which the desiring body disappears and then reemerges.

Mirroring these acts of "going into the dark" is VanDyke's use of a now-anachronistic photographic process, in which the photographic image emerges upon an empty page only after entering the darkroom. Even VanDyke's gestural paintings receive similar treatment: initially serving as grounds for performances by Ellis and Botana, who are instructed by VanDyke "not to look at the canvas" while paint drips from their clothing,

the canvases amass stains, drips, and smears that index the actions and interactions of bodies and materials made while sight is averted elsewhere.



Jonathan VanDyke, *Darkroom (5)*, 2013



Jonathan VanDyke, *Émigré*, 2013

Oltre l'oblio presents a spatial and temporal experience in which VanDyke's works, and one's engagement with them, gradually but continuously change. Within the first gallery, VanDyke has constructed an apparatus that shifts from sculptural, to architectural, to painterly armature, an open wooden enclosure that simultaneously obstructs and reveals its interior and exterior to the viewer, as if through apertures. Circling outside the enclosure, one can see the front and back of paintings installed within, and photographs hanging without. Geometric patterns and grids circulate throughout the second gallery in photographs, sculptures, and video. VanDyke's sculptures, which possess a bodily relationality in size, scale, and materiality, emit drips of viscous paint that harden and accumulate upon the floor in chromatic pools. The same paint reappears on fabric, canvas, and bodies in VanDyke's video, *Saints*, a sensual and mesmerizing culmination of painterly, sculptural, performative, and cinematic encounters set against the sound of the whirring fan that marks the opening of Antonioni's *L'Eclisse*. Central to VanDyke's photographic and video works is an interest in degrees of control, choreography, or chance within direction and performance, and the relationship between documentary (i.e. "real life") and the cinematic ("performed life"). How might the threshold or void between the real and the performed be articulated or materialized? Like Grosz's holes, and like Antonioni's *cinema vérité*, VanDyke draws on the complex relationship between artifice and reality.

Describing the title *Oltre l'Oblio* as "resonating through the works," VanDyke explains: "I imagine one goes "over the oblivion" through blindness (wearing masks in the photo shoot), by scaling a wall (the "walls" created by the paintings), through the rigors and mysteries of the body (sexuality, sex, disease, spiritual awakening), through art (Abstract Expressionist painting and the idea of the transformative or sublime), through the disruption of patterns (especially those patterns that surround us so much that we don't even see them). And there's the paint dripping endlessly out of the sculptures and into the void."¹⁰ Materially, conceptually, and metaphorically, VanDyke reflects upon oblivion, an emptiness or void, which through thought, vision, and action might ultimately become full. Indeed, *il campo vuoto non è vuoto ma pieno* (the empty field is not empty but full).¹¹

¹⁰ Jonathan VanDyke, email message to the author, September 25, 2013.

¹¹ P. Bonitzer, 150.