

## Hold, Still

### Jonathan VanDyke



Jonathan VanDyke. *Seven Artists Holding Still in a Forest* (2008), still, 20-minute video, J

1.

I want to argue in favor of *holding still* as dynamic engagement. Pausing, gathering one's thoughts, and doing less are characterized as weaknesses in the U.S. of recent history, not least by a former President who bludgeoned his way through our lives for four years. And in the art world I've inhabited my entire adult life, holding still or holding back might be associated with a stance of "cool"—that Warholian position of performed disinterest and laconic distancing. This performance of coolness is often caught up in signaling through surfaces as a way to both project and protect the radiating ego.

How can we create a different model for holding still, one that enacts warmth, reserve, attentiveness, maintenance,

thoughtfulness, and receptivity? And one that counters the quick reactions built into social media platforms, and gives preference to positions of sustained listening, checking in, and making sense, while also noting where sense cannot be made. I value action and movement; I'm *not* arguing that we preference mind over body, or prize academic theorizing over practice. Rather, let's regard pauses as intrinsic to processes.

Nor am I arguing for the forms of holding back that happen as the result of enculturated repression. I was a flamboyant kid, bullied for dressing too loudly and talking too "girly." I learned to dam up my exuberance out of fear of repudiation. I came out as gay well into my twenties—one might say I came out late—and I did



Gene VanDyke. *plaster sculpture of young Jonathan VanDyke* (early 1980's), acrylic on plaster and cloth.

so gradually. Slowness can be a matter of assessing safety and gathering strength. I had to learn to accept that my process wouldn't neatly fit a binary of before and after, or meet the social expectations of some grand announcement, like those pre-birth "gender reveals" that explosively announce the biology of a child. The privileging of demonstrative acts outshines measured action. Why not imagine and enact ways to explore and unfix, forever and continuously?

2.

As a child, I loved staring into space. It was said that I was so frequently found in the corners and margins of rooms, reading or pondering, that my father, enamored with the work of George Segal, made a full plaster version of me—a second Jonathan forever holding

still. My Dad also asked me to sit for painted portraits, and it was in those long periods of pause that I began to understand the power dynamics of being looked at and of looking back. Staring at my parent began to feel like a practice of defiance, an inversion of hierarchies.

In his 2011 text *The Right to Look*, Nicholas Mirzoeff describes how looking reflects and creates structures of power: "You, or your group, allow another to find you, and, in so doing, you find both the other and yourself. It means requiring the recognition of the other in order to have a place from which to claim rights and to determine what is right."<sup>1</sup>

Gay cruising enacts methods of looking and acknowledging. The act of cruising—a term that implies meandering rather than barreling ahead—is a sort of flirtation by gradient that may or may not lead to a hook up. It typically involves a play of looks, extended glances, and performative poses with strangers. Cruising relies on complex strategies of assessment, because getting it wrong—looking too long at an unwelcoming recipient—can be dangerous. Of course, a *just* erotics acknowledges another's humanity. In these complicated dynamics of looking, not being seen at all can serve to exclude, but being seen too much can be a form of fetishization, making one a representation rather than a living, changing being.

Before I figured out how to pass a long glance at a living person, I grew to love staring at centuries-old paintings of bodies. The museum galleries of historic paintings were usually quiet and empty, so I didn't feel self-conscious about how much I enjoyed staring at flesh. Having modeled for paintings, I identified with

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.



Lucas Cranach, *Lucretia* (detail), (c. 1510–1512). Siena, Italy, Pinacoteca Nazionale. Author photo.

the figures holding still. I became enamored with those who stoically held their suffering or showed off their leaking bodies—the nearly-naked saints and Christs who are enduring and holding; who are immobile, erotic and wounded.

The European painting galleries present a whitened fantasy of religious history, where the painted saints wear garments that only the patron paying for the painting could afford. But can we claim for ourselves the ways these figures depict pain? Can we hold these representations as scenes of vulnerability, cracking a door open to let out the too-durable, aggressive patriarchy? Could we therefore re-imagine modes of bodily endurance *not* as passivity, and foreground positions of resting, healing, receiving, opting out, staring blankly, holding back, and managing awkwardness—as successful methods of engagement?

These painted figures, at least to the extent that they are cared for by museum registrars, guards and conservators, have all the time in the world to look out. Looking back at them, our meandering contemplation opens a space of imagining. What if we perform *time* as lingering and *un-full*?

Sarah Ahmed notes in *Queer Phenomenology*, "If orientation is a matter of how we reside, or how we clear up space that is familiar, then orientations also take time and require giving up time..." She goes on to say "...risking departure from the straight and narrow makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer..."<sup>2</sup>



Diego de la Cruz (attributed), *The Mass of St. Gregory* (detail) (c. 1490). Philadelphia Museum of Art. Author photo.

When we stand when we are told to sit, or we sit or lie down where we are told we are not supposed to sit or lie down, we enact other forms of power, in part by disrupting movement and taking time. *ACT UP*, for example, staged dies-in on busy city streets. Embodied stillness can serve as an interruption to

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 20–21.



*ACT UP* Protest, Philadelphia, September 12, 1991. *Au Courant* magazine. Photographer unknown.

momentum-driven monoliths that are going and doing wrong.

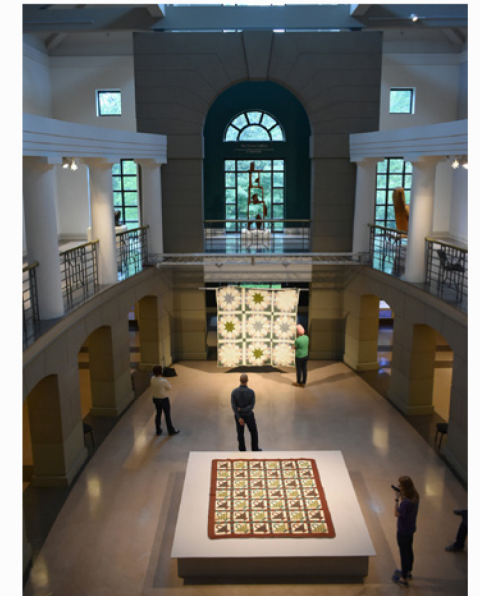
For years I've led workshops and made artworks in which I ask participants to hold still and re-orient their bodies and their time. For one video project, I asked seven men to sleep in the same bed, to fit themselves together horizontally and share the space of dreaming, to gather in peace under blankets.

For a public performance at The Columbus Museum, I asked the institution to re-orient itself around a collection of quilts made by women a century or more ago. Many of their makers remain anonymous, unnamed, and most of the quilts had never been on public view. I found them in museum storage, carefully folded and waiting in the dark. These artworks, sometimes called craft, were formed slowly, pieced, stitched,



Jonathan VanDyke, still from *7 Men Sleeping* (2008), 20-minute video.

made by those who would have to wait, because of their gender, for access to the art academy, and for acknowledgment that their work is art at all. So, too, someone enacted the unrecognized labor of noticing, sparing, saving, and preserving these objects. We unfolded them and installed them in the museum's central rotunda, and I asked the community to join me as I stood silently and studied these objects for 48 hours.



Jonathan VanDyke, still from *The Patient Eye* (2018), 48-hour performance with collection of quilts. Commission, The Columbus Museum, Georgia, organized by Jonathan Frederick Walz. Curator.

3.

Both of my parents suffered through chronic critical illnesses for decades. From a young age I was surrounded by acts of holding still and waiting: for the next blood test, lab result, or diagnostic. And from a young age I heard that gay men would all die from a plague that conservatives claimed was made just

for us. We would mark time by getting tested.

As an adult, I spent long periods with my father in hospitals, sitting next to him in the dark, saying very little, and I found—in those moments in which doing very little was enough, was everything—not pleasure, exactly, but presence, the pleasure of being present. If you pulled back and saw these two family members on film, sharing a darkened room in a clinic, amidst the sounds of machines humming, one in a bed, one on a chair, you might think, they aren't doing anything. But actually, one was, beneath the skin, getting better; while the other was witnessing that act.



Jonathan VanDyke in the hospital (2017). Photo: Andy Schlesinger

In 2017, after a bad accident in which I broke both wrists at once, I too became a patient. Wearing casts and braces in public, I was strangely at ease. All those paintings of wounded bodies had trained me for the public endurance of pain. I re-oriented my movements around my legs. I felt inverted.

It was early summer and I stayed with my parents while recovering from surgeries that pieced me back together. I wandered through the grass slowly, locating obstacles and placing my steps with care because I could not afford to fall. Healing is a practice. Pausing in my walk to look back at my parents' house, I noticed that the space behind their house felt like a stage. I imagined a new artwork: I would film myself standing from dusk to dawn in my parents' yard, looking at their house, holding vigil, a guard, but also, a sort of suburban Peeping Tom, an outcast to the nuclear family. This would be a long video: the camera would be placed in the position of the waiting parent, looking out the window, as if for someone to come in rather than "come out." But I couldn't do it. I was too busy getting better, and my father's health concurrently became worse. The performance's politics were too localized.

A few years later, and at the beginning of 2020, my father, Gene VanDyke, left us. In grief, in the pandemic, we all learned to hold still. In the full bursting forth of the Black Lives Matter movement, in the more public recognition of the sustained violence and killing and imprisonment that underlines American history and wealth, and over a summer when more fireworks were purchased than at any time in recent history, I decided to finally enact this performance in my parents' yard, on July 4, standing my ground amidst the militaristic popping off of firecrackers.

I held still in the dark amidst jarring and explosive suburban noise, waiting for the eventual silence once the humans were passed out, asleep, dreaming, getting worse, getting better. And just finally, maintaining my attention amidst an orchestra of birds at pre-dawn, witnessing them growing louder, tuning up the sun.



still from *The Night of the Longest Day*, July 4, 2020. 7-hour video.