

The artist will see you now: Jonathan VanDyke's *Patient/s, Practice, and Cur(e)ation*



Front cover and above:
Jonathan VanDyke
In the Month of June 2016
2017
Acrylic paint and ink on cotton fabrics, backed in
linen, with embroidery and photographs printed on
verso; 82.75 x 66.75 inches
Private collection, New York
Appears in the exhibition in Leebern Gallery



Figure 1
Alma Thomas (1891–1978)
Sketch for March on Washington, c. 1964
Acrylic on canvas board, 18 x 24 in.
The Columbus Museum, Gift of Miss John Maurice Thomas
G.1994.20.28



Figure 2
Alma Thomas (1891–1978)
Sketch for March on Washington, c. 1964
Acrylic on canvas board, 20 x 24 in.
The Columbus Museum, Gift of Miss John Maurice Thomas
G.1994.20.29



Figure 3
Fred Wilson (b. 1954)
Installation view of *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore,
April 3, 1992–February 28, 1993

Curtain up: Sometime in 1964, months after she had attended the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom held at the National Mall on August 28, 1963, Columbus-born Alma Thomas grappled conceptually and materially with how to meaningfully address ongoing national social issues in her studio production. We know of only two preliminary works in this vein, both in the collections of The Columbus Museum (figures 1 and 2); Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, currently owns the larger, more-finished final version.¹ Though tentative and unconvincing, nevertheless these paintings record Thomas's attempt to come to terms with what shape her activism might take—as an African American, as a woman, as an artist—during the tumultuous Civil Rights era. In this regard her soul-searching paralleled the efforts of the loosely networked New York-based artists—among them, Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, and Emma Amos—who founded the short-lived collective Spiral around the same time. The Columbus Museum's sketches were important enough to Thomas that they remained in her possession until her death in 1978 (that is, she didn't destroy them). Though her studio practice after this brief detour focused almost exclusively on nature-based abstractions—in 1970 she explained, “Through color, I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather than on man's inhumanity to man”—these explorations weren't made in vain.

In fact, art critic Blake Gopnik sees the wordless placards, overlapping in the shallow cubist space near the picture plane, as the antecedents of Thomas's later vocabulary of small, flat patches of color organized across the surface of her compositions.² Whether one believes Gopnik's hypothesis, what is apparent in these three colorful acrylics is that Thomas is visualizing visibility. Like the marchers in these images, she is *taking a stand*, she is *standing up* for what she believes—but pictorially, rather than textually.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the Irish-American diplomat Samantha Power originated the term *upstander* in 2002. In distinction to *bystander*—that is, a witness who does nothing—the term means “A person who speaks or acts in support of an individual or cause, particularly someone who intervenes on behalf of a person being attacked or bullied.”³ (In recent years the coffee conglomerate Starbucks has further popularized this term through their eponymous online series of short videos meant to draw attention to “ordinary people doing extraordinary things to create positive change in their communities.”⁴) Like Alma Thomas, Jonathan VanDyke is an artist and an activist and an upstander. And like Alma Thomas, VanDyke enacts his deeply felt beliefs in subtle, sincere, and beautiful ways. In *The Patient Eye* he rejects a fatalistic passivity; instead he makes himself physically and politically vulnerable, literally *taking a stand*, while simultaneously *standing* on his principles and refusing to *stand down*. In *The Patient Eye*, the museum—what former Metropolitan Museum of Art director Philippe de Montebello has called “the memory of mankind”—and its processes and procedures are the artist's topic of investigation and object of critique. Through the recontextualization of collection items and the reframing of visitor experience, VanDyke draws attention to invisible (forgotten, suppressed) power structures and their effects on the institution and the communities that it (ostensibly) serves.

Although this way of working may seem foreign or even absurd to some visitors (*The Patient Eye* might, in fact, be the first instantiation of performance art ever held on the premises of The Columbus Museum), the project and its methodologies fall firmly within an established art historical tradition. Over a quarter of a century ago, artist Fred Wilson mounted *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore. In his reorganization of the institution's permanent collection (figure 3)—wherein he recuperated long-lost objects from storage, provided new labels for (thought-to-be) well-known items, and drew attention to exclusionary customs—Wilson aimed (in his own words) to make patently apparent “the power of objects to speak when the ‘laws’ governing museum practices are expanded and the artificial boundaries museums build are removed.”⁵ In 1999 legendary curator Kynaston McShine at the Museum of Modern Art drew attention to (as well as codified and institutionalized) this aesthetic *modus operandi* in the well regarded show *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*. McShine included a range of makers in the exhibition, from the early American renaissance man Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827) to then emerging contemporary artist Mark Dion (b. 1961). At present it is not uncommon for a major museum to ask a living artist to curate a project from its holdings, for example, *Ways of Seeing: John Baldessari Explores the Collection*, held at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, July 26, 2006–September 23, 2007.

Jonathan VanDyke, as well as many of the artists whose work appeared in *The Museum as Muse*, blurs whatever distinctions traditionally characterized the jobs of studio artists and museum curators (Exhibit A: his site-specific installation of selected

items from the Museum's vault and two of his own paintings, on view in the Leebern Gallery, April 5–June 12, 2018). In 2009 art critic and philosopher Boris Groys remarked upon the ongoing confusion of these two (previously separate) roles, stating that “contemporary art can be understood primarily as an exhibition practice.” (And given the proliferation of the verb “to curate” in everyday decision-making, from wardrobes to wine lists, it seems that contemporary life itself can be understood as an exhibition practice, too). Following Groys’ line of thinking to its logical conclusion means that now all artists are *de facto* curators. Noting the same etymological origins of the verbs *to curate* and *to cure* (from the Latin, “to take care of”), Groys envisions the museum as a kind of sanatorium and the work of art as an object in need of care (and visitation) to become whole. Indeed, “[c]urating cures the powerlessness of the image, its inability to show itself by itself,” he asserts. “Exhibition practice is thus the cure that heals the originally ailing image, that gives it presence, visibility; it brings it to the public view and turns it into the object of the public’s judgment.”⁶ In this sense, artists and curators practice their respective vocations in the same way that doctors practice medicine (which itself is not a science, but an *art*). Is it coincidence (or synchronicity) that VanDyke has named his project at The Columbus Museum *The Patient Eye*—?

By locating museum “patients” in the subject, rather than object, position, Groys aligns his insights on art commodities, as well as on exhibition practice itself, with the proponents of “thing theory.” This branch of critical inquiry challenges the Renaissance view of “man as the measure of all things”; instead it posits that non-human, non-sentient objects (like paintings and sculpture) also possess the power and the will to act. Instigated by University of Chicago professor Bill Brown in 2001, thing theory imagines the world as a web of relationships and performances—but from the point of view of the object, which is now a subject (though without the ability to move on its own or to speak an easily decipherable language). The art historical variety of thing theory reached a high-water mark when fellow University of Chicago professor W. J. T. Mitchell published his (now classic) book *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* in 2005.

In turn, artist Jonathan VanDyke has a question for The Columbus Museum’s visitors and the wider communities of the Chattahoochee Valley: *What do museum objects want?* As a kind of embodied response, he will silently contemplate 16 quilts from the rich and varied collections of The Columbus Museum, three hours at a time over the period of seven days. (*Nota bene*: Slow Art Day, an annual international phenomenon, wherein the public is encouraged to attend a participating museum and look at five works on view *slowly*, takes place April 14, 2018.) *What do museum objects want?* In *The Patient Eye* VanDyke publicly practices cur(e)ation as he performs his “longstanding” conviction that what museum objects want—what they demand—is *to be seen*.

(And scene.)

— Jonathan Frederick Walz, Ph.D.

Director of Curatorial Affairs & Curator of American Art

Notes

1. See <http://www.michaelrosenfeldart.com/artists/alma-thomas-1891-1978/selected-works/2>
2. <http://blakegopnik.com/post/151157288457/amp>. After my recent lunch bag presentation, “Alma Thomas: Lost and Found,” at the Archives of American Art in Washington, DC, art historian and recent Smithsonian American Art Pre-Doctoral Fellow Joe Madura drew my attention to the slogan-less posters in these images, interpreting the “blank” signage as a symbol of radical openness (that is, consonant with protests of all sorts, rather than with a specific event or issue). I am grateful for his willingness to share this observation during the question and answer session following my talk.
3. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/upstander>
4. <https://starbuckschannel.com/originals/upstanders-season-1/>
5. Fred Wilson as quoted in *Mining the Museum: an installation*, ed. Lisa G. Corrin, with contributions by Leslie King-Hammond and Ira Berlin (Baltimore: Contemporary, New York: New Press; dist. W.W. Norton, 1994), 8.
6. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68504/politics-of-installation/>



Figure 4
John Baldessari (b. 1931)
Installation view of *Ways of Seeing: John Baldessari Explores the Collection at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden*, Washington, DC, July 26, 2006–September 23, 2007

Items in the Exhibition



Angeline Pitts
Lone Star Quilt, 1875-1910
Cotton, plain feedsacks
82.5 inches x 75 inches
Gift of Mrs. Melvyn Ann Pitts Williams
G.2000.14



Unknown Maker
Dollhouse Kitchen Frame, ca. 1925
Wood and Metal
Contents re-arranged by Jonathan VanDyke
10.5 x 23.5 x 11 inches
Gift of Mrs. Ernst Rust
G.1967.65



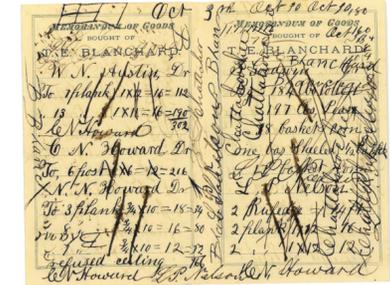
Unknown Maker
Ladies' Hands, not dated
Sepia Toned and Hand Tinted Silver Gelatin Print on board
4.75 x 9.5 inches
Gift of George W. Dudley, Jr.
G.1991.17.198



Postcard from Columbus Museum of Arts and Crafts, ca. 1960
3.5 x 5.5 inches
Gift of Kristen Miller Zohn
G.2006.87



Pomo Tribe
Twined Wedding Bowl, 19th century
7.75 x 10 x 10 inches
Gift of a Friend of the Museum
G.2012.97



Unknown
Memorandum Of Goods, 1880
Printed and Written Paper (in double-sided frame)
4.5 x 3 inches
Gift of Bradley W. Harp.
G.1997.15.12



R. Bliss Manufacturing Company
Building Blocks and Wagon, ca. 1910
Wood
Blocks arranged by Jonathan VanDyke
Wagon: 12 x 15.25 x 4.25 inches
Gift of Miss Edwina Holt
G.1972.126.1-2



International Telephone and Telegraph Company
Principal's telephone, 1978
plastic with handwritten note on paper
8.75 x 8.75 x 4.75 inches
Gift of William Henry Shaw High School
G.2015.30.3



Unknown Maker
Photo of Alma Thomas and Photo of Miss John Maurice Thomas, ca. 1920s
Two Silver Gelatin Prints on Paper (in double-sided frame)
5.6 x 3.5 inches
Gift of Miss John Maurice Thomas in memory of her parents John H. and Amelia W. Canteay Thomas and her sister Alma Woodsey Thomas
G.1994.20.215 A-B