

## Interview with Jonathan VanDyke / December 2023

Da sempre affascinato dall'arte e della cultura italiana, l'artista statunitense JonathanVanDyke, dopo aver esposto in diverse occasioni le sue opere presso la galleria 1/9unosunove a Roma, si presenta questa volta in veste di curatore con la mostra collettiva *“One wall a web through which the moment walks”*: una rete, appunto, nella quale si intrecciano e si confrontano opere di artisti italiani del XX secolo (Carla Accardi, Gino De Dominicis, Carol Rama, Piero Gilardi e Carol Rama) con opere realizzate dal 2010 ad oggi da artisti che operano negli Stati Uniti.

In questa chiacchierata con VanDyke esploriamo l'attenta ricerca e la riflessione sulla deriva dell' *“ultra categorizzazione”* dell'arte che hanno dato vita a *“One wall a web through which the moment walks”*, visitabile presso la galleria 1/9unosunove a Roma dal 13 Ottobre 2023 al 13 Gennaio 2024.

*Jonathan, nel tuo testo - scritto in occasione della mostra - dici che l'intero progetto vuole essere un antidoto alla pressione posta sugli artisti contemporanei per definire sé stessi e le proprie opere iscrivendosi in una particolare categoria ben identificabile. Da dove nasce, secondo te, questa pressione? Credi che il lento scomparire della critica d'arte del secolo scorso sia determinante in questa *“domanda pubblica”* agli artisti?*

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*Questa stessa forzata richiesta di identificazione spesso porta gli addetti al settore a vedere come incompatibili nella stessa persona il ruolo dell'artista e del curatore. Con questa mostra magistralmente organizzata ci dimostri il contrario; come scardinare nella società questa visione di mutua esclusione dei due ruoli?*

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*Tornando alle opere in mostra, il dialogo tra la generazione italiana del XX secolo e quella degli artisti statunitensi del XXI appare quasi come una consecutio naturale: penso alle opere di Dadamaino accanto a quelle di Linn Meyers, ai disegni di Ellie Krakow se paragonati con i primi acquerelli di Carol Rama; che ruolo ha avuto la storia dell'arte italiana dello scorso secolo nella formazione artistica statunitense rispetto ad altre influenze provenienti dall'Europa?*

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*Le opere in mostra sono realizzate con i materiali più disparati, dal sicofoil di Carla Accardi alle bandiere di Carla Edwards, passando per i fili magnetici e le registrazioni interstellari di Julianne Swartz e la schiuma isolante di Kenji Fujita. In che modo la scelta del materiale determina l'intento delle opere e del loro dialogo?*

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*Per concludere, cosa ti auguri che cambi nel prossimo futuro dell'arte? Ci sono altre visioni che sarebbe bene scardinare per liberare la creazione e la fruizione dell'arte?*

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Always fascinated by Italian art and culture, U.S. artist JonathanVanDyke, after having exhibited his works on several occasions at 1/9unosunove gallery in Rome, returns as curator with the group exhibition "One wall a web through which the moment walks." A web, indeed, in which works by 20th-century Italian artists (Carla Accardi, Gino De Dominicis, Carol Rama, and Piero Gilardi) are intertwined and confront each other with works created from 2010 to the present by artists working in the United States.

In this chat with VanDyke we explore the careful research and consideration of the drift towards "ultra-categorization" of art that has resulted in his concept for "One wall a web through which the moment walks," on view at the 1/9unosunove gallery in Rome from Oct. 13, 2023 to Jan. 20, 2024.

***Jonathan, in your text-written for the exhibition, you note that the whole project is meant to be an antidote to the pressure placed on contemporary artists to define themselves and their works by assigning their work to a particular, clearly identifiable category. Where do you think this pressure comes from? Do you think the slow disappearance of art criticism in the last century is determinant in this "public demand" on artists?***

**JVD:** Humans manage the chaos of the world by creating classifications and categories. In just a few seconds of scrolling, we are flooded with information and imagery, much of it disconnected. Add to this the "atmosphere of overwhelm" we collectively face with intersecting global conflicts and climate catastrophe. Placing ourselves in camps and asserting our identifications can temper a sense of randomness and a lack of control. Authoritarians like Trump in the US produce further anxiety through constant, alarming pronouncements; and then take advantage of our sense of powerlessness by claiming "I alone can fix this."

But humans are not superheroes, and categories are not, per se, truths. When power holders start wielding categories in an oversimplified manner, unhinged from lived experience and without clear evidence, we risk dehumanization and cultural fracture. The tactical militarization of language by the former US President – who refers to those who oppose him as anarchists, Marxists, losers, vermin – is even more dangerous because it is presented by his spokespeople as casual and harmless. It echoes the way I've heard homosexuals and trans people described since I was a child. Most especially, many religious fundamentalists in the US will speak in inflammatory terms about my community, using language that is laughably far from our lived experience. When you are a target, it is difficult not to retreat even more into your own camp.

Amid such brinkmanship, finding commonality and fighting for our shared humanity is critical. It requires us to examine our own complexity and that of others, and to disentangle ourselves from all the noise, to "hold still" long enough to sense what is under the surface. The goal is to resist being reactionary. But this takes practice; and both making art and looking at art is good practice. This exhibition provides a place to pause and meditate on connection and complexity. It provides a low-stakes space where we can work through ideas and notions.

I think you are correct to say that the art world, at least in its major power centers, is no longer consolidated around a handful of critical voices. But there are many structural factors that still

influence how we categorize ourselves, and it is worth noticing these categories, especially when they become pervasive enough that we forget they are there. Museums, art schools, and auction houses divide themselves into departments: a "Department of Painting," for example. Of course, in an art academy, a ceramics studio has different equipment needs than a photography studio; and in an art museum, the storage and conservation requirements of a sculpture might be different from those of a video. I'm not arguing *against* specialization. But we need to notice where specializations enforce biases. For example, if a museum's painting department begins to define painting through narrower and narrower terms, and subsequently devote funds to collecting and exhibiting works based on these narrow terms, then they might begin to convince themselves, and their audience, that their point of view is entirely representative of what artists are making and doing. As so-called "blue chip" galleries amass a greater share of financial resources, with smaller galleries closing shop – these giants project a false image that the work they sell, though quite limited within the wide realm of contemporary artistic production, is the most valuable; in a city like New York, monetary value is associated with qualitative value.

And we are all – I include myself – affected by social media and its algorithms, which reward us for declaring our surface identifications, and reward us again for speed and accumulation. Wealthy corporate entities will say that social media is entirely about expanding creativity and promoting free expression, when simultaneously we are being confined by templates and algorithms that make money by stealing our time and mining our data; all while these companies are not being transparent about the biases built into the stream of images we receive.

I realize my own language risks oversimplifying matters. I do think artists have the capacity to stand aside from the noise and ask pointed questions. The artists' studio – even if that "studio" is a tabletop with a few pencils and sheets of paper – is a very powerful place of contemplation and self-determination. I don't want my students to have their futures determined by an outsized pressure to "brand" themselves. We all have undiscovered parts of ourselves, and we can begin to imagine and realize our full complexity through being "in the process" of creative making. This is different than adhering to an expectation or outlining a category and then filling it in. The artists in this show insist on being inconsistent, and on making works that barely conform to marketplace expectations. Julianne Swartz's large hanging wire sculpture and Gino de Dominicis' work (I want to call it a drawing, but I don't think this term really holds), are almost impossible to document through photographs – they refuse to "adhere."

The week that we were installing the show in Rome was quite extraordinary because of the interactions among the artists, the gallery staff, and the gallery's patrons. We started to build a little community around each other. We all noticed how good it felt to be together in the process of creating and supporting a show. Many of the connections in the show predate its inception. Kenji was my teacher, back in 2003, at Bard College; Rit was also my peer at Bard, where he made ephemeral works that continue to inspire me; I first met Julianne when I curated her into an exhibition in 2000; Carla's very piece in this show appeared in a group show with one of my sculptures back in 2009; Nadia and I once worked together at an antiquities gallery; Ellie and I met at an intensive artist residency in 2008; and one of linn's large-scale wall murals was in eyeshot for me during my 2018 performance at The Columbus Museum. Only Hwi was new to me. I had been looking at and thinking about his work for a while, and when I visited his studio, I discovered that we shared a love for old Italian painting.

I feel the exhibition has a sort of "ease" running through it – everything feels connected but the connections do not feel forced. In my studio I'm in wordless conversation with these artists – "wordless" because I have a difficult time describing, through words, why their work is so resonant for me. I wish to champion art making as a contemplative, even sensual process that happens through both making and thinking, and as a process that cannot be "explained." I wonder how I would have begun cutting up and sewing my paintings (in 2012) without having first seen Carla's Edwards' work, or, for that matter, Carla Accardi's? Artists give each other permission: the "wall" on which we are displayed is actually a "web" through which we walk.

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***This same force that demands categories and identifications often leads insiders to see the roles of artist and curator as incompatible in the same person. With this masterfully organized exhibition you show us the opposite; how can this vision of mutual exclusion of the two roles be unhinged in society?***

My Dad was an art teacher and I started making art, under his influence, as a small child; from a young age I felt being an artist was my life's work. But shortly after college I took on a job as a curator at The Susquehanna Art Museum, my hometown art museum in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. In this position I had a great deal of curatorial freedom to develop exhibition themes. Because we had a small staff, I often arranged the logistics for shipping the artwork, sometimes even driving a large shipping truck through chaotic New York City streets. In addition to choosing artworks, I designed the layout of the exhibitions. This hands-on work had a tremendous impact on my thinking about how art moves out of the studio of the artist and into the wider world. I learned to see works of art as complex objects that change and evolve as they come into varying points of contact. I began to think of material culture and art-making through a "systems approach," trying to understand how artworks resonate with one another – materially, visually, conceptually, sensorially, culturally – and in an effort to demonstrate connections rather than to reify an idea of the artist as an isolated, individual genius. Where we depend on the myth of the individual genius, we lose sight of the structures and supports – the communities – without which art-making would not be possible.

My position as a curator gave me access to museums, galleries, and collectors, and put me in a position of influence, even though I was very young. When I left this job and moved to New York City in 2001 – determined to focus on my art practice – I felt my access and clout diminish almost immediately. Once I re-presented myself as an artist, it seemed like those same dealers and art world professionals saw me as a person with needs rather than a person with resources. When I entered graduate school to pursue a Master of Fine Arts degree, I found I needed to "play down" or even hide my history as a curator, so that I would be taken seriously as an artist. I'm grateful that Fabio had the idea for me to curate an exhibition for the gallery, as it gave me an opportunity to reacquaint myself with this skill from my past.

Historically there are countless examples of artists multi-tasking: Michelangelo designing buildings, Rubens working in political diplomacy, Joseph Beuys founding the Green Party, Marcel Duchamp buying and selling art as a "private dealer," Donald Judd writing criticism; and here in Rome, Sergio Lombardo's work in the psychology of aesthetics. And, it cannot be overstated, countless artists who are women have done the work of raising children and maintaining a household while making art. In each case, we understand the work of these artists better when we realize the fullness of their lives and labors.

The fast-moving, high-revenue art market, as it has gained force and scale since the 1980's, focusses on the art object as a commodity, even referring to art objects as "portable assets." In recent months the art market has attempted to punish – by way of cancelling sales and exhibits – artists who speak out politically. The market doesn't easily tolerate artists who stray from the categories we have been assigned. And this pressure to "stay in a lane" runs in all directions. Art academics, curators, and critics are often quite underpaid and under-resourced, and it can take years of patience and passion to build a specialization, and years of networking to secure work. A lack of opportunities can cause us to become quite territorial: everyone reduced to a role. Inequitable systems lead to inequitable outcomes.

I'm very encouraged that younger generations are breaking down categorizations and social roles, especially around gender. I don't think this is entirely tangential to the conversation about art. Breaking down binaries around gender can contribute to an atmosphere in which we break down other "singularities." How might we apply a non-binary spirit to how we perform as artists?

I would hope we could create an atmosphere in which non-artists are also given opportunities to make art. However, a more democratic approach to art-making should not simply lead to further commodification in an attempt to produce more *products*; rather, if we are to make a difference, we must work to engage in an open way, without pre-judging identifications or limiting ourselves for the sake of commodifiable results.

I do want to be clear about one thing: resisting the "codification of roles" must not negate the significant work of honing a craft and refining a technique; for example, the myriad ways a painter handles paint and develops compositions, or the accumulation of expertise a curator might bring to their area of research and scholarship. This is extremely necessary. Depth and commitment are essential and urgent tools of specialization. But depth and commitment in one area is often transferable to another area, in ways that are fabulously inventive.

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***Going back to the works in the exhibition, the dialogue between the Italian generation of the 20th century and that of the U.S. artists of the 21st seems almost like a natural consequence: I think of Dadamaino's works next to Linn Meyers', Ellie Krakow's drawings when compared with Carol Rama's early watercolors; what role did the Italian history of art of the last century play in U.S. art education compared to other influences from Europe?***

It is very difficult to generalize about what exposure artists in the US have to 20th-century Italian art, but I think it tends to be limited to key names. And it depends on what the larger galleries and museums have the resources to feature. For example, we've seen comprehensive shows of Morandi, Fontana, and Manzoni at New York City galleries in the last decade. Carol Rama became better known after her retrospective appeared at The New Museum.

My starting point for *One wall a web...* was a long-term interest in Italian artists who have lacked visibility in the US. In 2009, I began showing in NYC with Scaramouche, a gallery founded by a Florentine dealer. Frequent visits to Italy followed. During a visit to MAMbo in 2012 I first saw works by dadamaino and Piero Gilardi – I was blown away – in fact I still keep

images of these pieces on my phone! I can remember returning to Daniele (Ugolini, the owner of Scaramouche) and saying, "Who are these artists? Why aren't we seeing them internationally?"

I can be obsessive about looking at artworks that interest me (you may know that, among several "long looking" works, I stared at a Jackson Pollock painting for 40 hours as a live performance in 2011). When I began working in Rome with Fabio (Ianniello) and Danilo (Ruggiero) in 2013, they would take me to the homes of some incredible collectors, people who shared my obsessive interests, and I'd get to see artworks close up. And in 2014 I visited the collection vault of The Herning Museum in Denmark to examine the backs of some Lucio Fontana "slash" paintings: Fontana's cuts on the front appear almost casual, but you can see on the back how carefully they are "sutured" so that they maintain their shape. I think what fascinates me is those Italian modernists who used materials and surfaces in unconventional ways. Yet, their work can appear almost *quiet* at first glance: there's an ease in the way the work is presented, underpinned by a level of precision that is not fussy. Dadamaino's and Accardi's works in this show are both examples of this non-fussy precision.

As I began organizing this show, I meditated carefully on different Italian artists. Slowly the work of one of my contemporaries would emerge in clear relation to the work of an Italian artist. I wanted this emergence to feel intuitive and poetic. We sometimes characterize intuition as an almost random or magical notion, and intuition *is* mysterious, but it is clarified through years of looking, thinking, and experiencing. Luckily, Fabio and I were able to secure exceptional works for the show. It was incredible to accompany linn meyers in person as she looked at her work next to dadamaino's: it was as if the two artists had been in conversation for years, even though they knew nothing of one another. It's really gratifying to start to create these threads of resonance. I use the word "threads" very specifically: a *thread* winds in and around other threads in order to contribute to a bigger fabric.

One of the highlights of installing this show in October was speaking to American students (from Tyler School of Art and Cornell University) studying in Rome for the semester. They were so excited about the exhibit, and they spent a long time looking at different artworks and comparing them. Despite its extraordinary racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, the US carries a tendency towards isolationism, even an indifference to global cultural movements. If we are to undo any of the damage caused by the US's solipsistic bend, we need to constantly expose students to art made all over the globe. That should include art not only from Europe and Asia, but also from Africa and across the global South.

Social media can broaden our exposure to global art movements, but it can also create an illusion of exposure, at the expense of depth and substance. I give art students the assignment of visiting the art library on campus, checking out art books, and keeping a few books in the studio as companions. A big, old art book with stained pages and a patina of use has a way of slowing you down – art history becomes tactile and palpable. Social media might be just a stepping stone into curiosity rather than a distraction/reaction machine. Constant distraction overpowers the imagination.

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***The works in the exhibition are made from a wide variety of materials, from Carla Accardi's sicofoil to Carla Edwards' flags, passing through Julianne Swartz's magnetic***

***wires and interstellar recordings and Kenji Fujita's insulating foam. How does the choice of material determine the intent of the works and their dialogue?***

We are being pulled away from a full sensorial experience of the world, and we are entering an era where we are being constantly surveilled, judged, and rated, all at a distance. Material practices are extraordinarily important as a counterweight to these trends.

To work directly with materials is to play, to think by way of doing, rather than by *saying*. I often tell my students to "ask content to go and wait outside the door for a while." Content will always show up, but if you start judging what something *is* or determining what it should be, before your hands are dirty with materials, you're limiting your creative capacity, obscuring what sort of content might rise to the surface along the way.

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***In conclusion, what do you hope will change in the near future of art? Are there any other visions that would be good to unhinge, in order to liberate the creation and fruition of art?***

I would ask the biggest power holders in the art world – the individuals and institutions with the most money – to imagine what the art world could look like if we celebrated complexity and nuance, rather than depending on categories, monetary valuations, digital interfaces, and brands. I would ask art world power holders to examine how they are contributing to an unequal system. Are they investing in art education for people at all income levels? Are they creating opportunities that will enrich the entire art world, including medium-sized galleries, or are they concentrating wealth on the secondary market? Are their real estate habits also contributing to a trend in which artists can no longer afford to live and work in cultural centers?

Art fair culture also leave us with the impression of excess and surface, preferencing trends and quick identifications, but leaves all of us exhausted. Better yet, find something that "speaks" to you in a way you can't quite explain, and visit that artists' studios and get to know them and their processes, preferably over time. Sometimes the work of an artist looks and feels differently than the person of the artist. And the opinions and politics of artists often are different than those of the board members of large art museums. These things should be something to embrace rather than restrain, in contribution to a more democratic dialogue. Exchanges run both ways: I've met many collectors and culture workers driven by curiosity and love of art and artists, including in Italy, and they've given me more confidence to take risks. I'm grateful for them.

And for all of us – and I am speaking to myself as much as to everyone else – if we can train ourselves to put our devices aside as much as possible, and take the time to pause and sense and see and feel what is around us, we'll begin to notice that the world will open up to us, that there is so much we are losing the ability to see, sense, feel, and hold: so much of what we need to know is already here, lingering as subtext, a web just under the surface.