



## critical correspondence

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### Jonathan VanDyke, Bradley Teal Ellis, and David Rafael Botana in Conversation with J. Louise Makary



Although his practice incorporates performance, sculpture, and video, artist **Jonathan VanDyke** is often labelled a painter. He works outward from the medium of painting to explore how personal relationships affect the form and creation of works of art. Mark-making is executed upon canvases by two dancers, Bradley Teal Ellis and David Rafael Botana in an ongoing live performance, *Cordoned Area*, and in non-public studio sessions during which they make canvases that are later cut to pieces and sewn back together. Earlier this year, I sat in on a studio session with VanDyke and his dancers and then conducted interviews with the three of them. As a dancemaker and film director, I was interested in discussing VanDyke's directorial role as an artist outside of the dance field and the impact of this difference of experience on the dancers, the psychology of mark-making, and the definition of this work as a process, a document of process, and also a physical piece of art.

In the painting studio, a large canvas is laid on the floor. VanDyke prepares packets of paint that are inserted into the dancers' costumes or thrown on the canvas to be popped and smeared during the course of the dancers' improvised movement work. Alternately, VanDyke provides a device, such as a long pole held horizontally between the two performers; paint packets are hung from the pole and punctured, releasing a spray. As Ellis and Botana move, VanDyke provides direction: "Move as if one is taking care of the other, giving and receiving — low to high, fast to slow, use the pole as a way to 'find' each other."

The first session in the studio was an adaptation of the performance that the collaborators mount live; now VanDyke is seeing potential for different kinds of mark-making. Ellis and Botana are life partners, and their relationship outside of the studio comes to bear on this work. The long-term nature of their collaboration with VanDyke lends itself to developing a movement and directorial vocabulary through which VanDyke intends to create a safe space to go to more extreme emotional and physical territory.

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**J. Louise Makary:** Jonathan, how and when did you start working with actors and dancers?

**Jonathan VanDyke:** As a child, I was always writing plays and creating dance routines for kids in the neighborhood. We would present our work and put out a coffee can for donations. By high school I was a little more self-conscious about this part of my personality, and I was closeted. After college, I was director and curator of the Susquehanna Art Museum in Harrisburg (Pennsylvania) for several years. I moved to New York in 2001 to pursue my artistic practice full time and undo all of the closeting. I wanted to move away from directorial responsibility. I went deeply into a solitary artistic practice. But I realized, eventually, that I had set up a false dichotomy between the private and the public. I don't think that solitary work is totally possible. I started exploring my own history more, and dance and performance came right back into the forefront.

**JLM:** How about your durational pieces? Would you consider them a predecessor to this work?

**JVD:** In grad school I was setting up room-size installations that I would alter each day. I was performing with materials. I had a professor who came to crit my work, and as I was moving through this space operating the work, he started asking me about how I was "performing." I said, "I'm not performing." Of course, I was. This conversation sparked a huge transition in my work, and began a sensibility of performance that runs through both my sculptural and live performances. The dripping sculptures that I make go on dripping for months at a time, so duration was very natural for me when I started working with David and Bradley.

**JLM:** What made you want to be the "outside eye" versus a participant? Did you feel there were limitations in what you yourself could bring to performance — not necessarily a negative self-judgment, but wanting more from the expression? Or did you want to feel more in control by getting into a director's role?

**JVD:** Dancers and actors do things that I can't. I love watching these guys move, and I get a lot out of the conversation we have, which is often nonverbal. As a director I feel I can use paint in a way that opens up new possibilities for performance. It's crucial to me that the paintings I make are the result of a conversation, a direction, rather than a direct mark from my hand. This leads me to ask how David and Bradley see me as a "participant" in *Cordoned Area*, because I definitely feel like a third. I am very aware of where and whether I should pull back or come forward in terms of giving direction.

**David Rafael Botana:** He's the coach. I am totally aware of his presence. During the performance, the only thing Jonathan is available for is time-oriented. He tells us where we are.

**JLM:** This piece has a defined duration, and he tells you where you are in that time?

**DRB:** Yes, inside what has been consistently a 3-hour performance.

**JLM:** And this is a scored dance, or freely improvised?

**DRB:** It's scored, but inside of that scored space, it's improvised.

**JLM:** So it's easy to get lost in time, and have your idea of time swallowed up by the performance.

**Bradley Ellis:** Because David and I live life together, it doesn't feel to me that this is simply 3 hours. It feels more like training a "light" on who we are as a unit during that 3 hours. *Cordoned Area* is an inclusive title; I almost feel like any relationship is a "cordoned area."



**JVD:** We move through all of this intensive content in the studio. I suggest ways of moving that both mirror their dynamics and are metaphors for the dynamics of a couple, things like walking side by side or being submissive or dominant. When we get to the live performance, I am a silent viewer, and through their movements they tell me what is working and what is not. But in public I also feel very protective of them — that there is a place where they could be too exposed. The relationship between "performing" as a couple and the reality of being there as a couple — this is the essence of the piece. And it is also why it could never be choreographed in a strict way. They are still always a couple in this piece. You can't choreograph that.

**DRB:** I'd say it's difficult to interact with one another and still compartmentalize a space for acting as a caretaker. We are being physically aggressive with each other and, yet, in that same moment...let's say I can see that paint is getting in his eye. I can throw him to the ground and pin him. But, next, I'm going to get a wet cloth and wipe his eye.

*Jonathan VanDyke,  
Cordoned Area (v. 1), 2011. 3-hour  
performance created for and performed by  
Bradley Teal Ellis and David Rafael Botana.  
Socrates Sculpture Park, New York. Courtesy  
the artist and Scaramouche, NY.*

**JLM:** Jonathan, your presence helps the dancers know that there is also someone else there looking out for those things, as well as gauging the audience?

**JVD:** The piece is about finding a safe container for the fullest and most challenging content. I add new elements in each version. I ask them to try

things that bring up difficult issues for them, as a couple and as dancers. In one performance, I asked them to "enact" what looked like a fight. Brad seemed okay with it, but it was very hard for David. There was a moment when he said, "When I do this, I am actually enraged at Brad. It's not performing." There is also an eroticism that I think has the same real/performed element.

**DRB:** There are times that we work with Jonathan, whether in rehearsals or performance, when we have been arguing a lot with each other, and after working with Jonathan, we go home and it's already been worked out on a different level.

**BE:** When David and I began working with Jonathan we were maybe 6 months into our relationship. Now it's been over 2 years. This project has been a constant and consistent element to our relationship. Jonathan recognizes this, I think, and adjusts to the boundaries that have evolved over that period of time.

**JVD:** I watch and listen for clues that they put out to me, and find a way to put that into the piece.

**BE:** For me, that is where the improvisational element lies. Who knows what is to come? But you are there with your partner to face it. Early in the process of working together, when David and I were alone, we would discuss the power behind this process, asking each other if we were okay.



*Jonathan VanDyke, Cordoned Area (v. 3),  
2013. 3-hour performance created for  
and performed by Bradley Teal Ellis and  
David Rafael Botana. National Academy  
Museum, New York. Courtesy the artist  
and Scaramouche, NY*

**DRB:** Once the paintings have been cut, with the aid of the colors and the particular markings I can still feel the body texture it was associated with. Let's say we used red paint and Brad was dominating me and dragging me around. The texture of my body while that is happening is different than the texture of my body if we were grappling, for instance. The markings and the color sometimes will denote a quality of movement which then will translate into our bodies as a particular texture to achieve that.

**JLM:** And you retain a memory of that, so when you see the painting, you can reconnect with that?

**DRB:** Yes. It's similar to muscle memory. I can see a particular marking and say, "That was when Brad was..." or "I was..." An essence remains there, captured.

**JLM:** Right after the painting is finished, you have a chance to see it on the floor. Then it gets hung. Does that change your perception of it?

**DRB:** That perception is always changing because these pieces have gone through different shifts and stages. Hung, cut, sewn. It's hard because ultimately I have to give up my work. That can be hard to say or hear.

Once it reaches that stage of being hung, it's almost not mine.

**JLM:** With a time-based, ephemeral performance, there is nothing to "own" except your experience. But when you do create an object, it's something you have to give up.

**DRB:** Precisely. They are his paintings.

*After my interview with all three, I touched base with Jonathan to address a few more questions from his perspective.*

**JLM:** The pieces I got to see being made explore mark-making through the body – how do you like to define it: a process, a document of process, a piece of art?

**JVD:** In the live performances, the traces of paint build through the duration of the piece. Literally from clean to dirty. This affects the psychology of the dancers and of the audience, too. In the studio, I was very interested in taking the parts of the choreography and seeing how different forms of movement – and, perhaps even more importantly, different moods – create different types of marks. But ultimately, the most interesting thing to me is that their relationship, the way they move and touch each other, the specificity of their intimacy – this is all embedded in the surface of the painting.

There is a significance to the types of marks they make, and how these reference the history of “expressive” abstract painting – works that are meant to reveal the emotional life and inner state of the artist. I am actively playing with all of those notions.

**JLM:** I wonder what judgments are aroused by the revelation that it is bodies, and not a brush, that are making the marks. And not *your* body, but those of “third parties.” I think it goes up against a couple of prejudices. One being “the artist as sole creator” and the other being that visceral, messy experience of the body – versus the brush or other mark-making device that can be held at a remove, and wielded.

**JVD:** The works hover around notions we have of the autonomous, painted canvas object. The work is deeply connected to the bodies of the dancers and to the labor of the person sewing them back together. My labor involves choosing patterns, colors, cutting. I explore the subconscious of the art object, how that object has its own history and memories. The lack of an identifiable painterly authorship – you can’t point easily to the maker – is still a major challenge for the marketplace, even in a post-Warhol era. For me, this disorientation of authorship is very exciting ... so to answer your question, the works are process, object, document, all of these things at once.

**JLM:** One of the things I really like about your work, and the way it makes me think about process, is that you take a directorial role and apply it to object-making. Working with actors and dancers in your live pieces and object-based work – what was it like the first time you did it, and how have you adjusted and changed your approach to directing?

**JVD:** When I started working with actors and dancers, I wanted to bring to the table all of the idiosyncrasies of my own history that I tried to hide when I was closeted and working in institutions. I could bounce my own moods and experiences against that of my collaborators. The place of directing that is always in flux for me is where to be really vocal about what I want from a performer, and where to pull back and watch things evolve. That proportion is often changing. But as you are a director, I would love to know how you experience these things, and where you see the difference in our practices?

**JLM:** I don’t see much difference! It is about communication and trust, and also about being a leader, which can take many forms. The fear I have is that if I get the proportion (that you speak of) just a little bit off, how will the work suffer for that? You always wonder about how effective you are being as the outside eye, and how many ways the work can change. That’s something that was very interesting for me to watch when I was in your studio. It was really a privilege to see your working process – all three of you, plus your videographer – because the end concept is an object, and I got to see the piece being made, but at the same time, I recognized and understood the level of interaction, direction, interplay, collaboration, and discussion that is also a part of rehearsing and creating live arts.

**JVD:** Visual artists who move into a performative practice can bring new insights to these forms, just as we gain from performers who come into the studio. Post-war art institutions made a habit of separating disciplines.

In terms of getting the proportion right, I work best when I can work with the same people over and over again. I demand a lot, physically and emotionally, from performers, and it is through the building of a relationship and the building of trust that we all push beyond our own boundaries. You may be able to do this differently with strangers. But at this point, this is what works for me, and what gives me the most pleasure.

**JLM:** It seems like people might think the title of “director” comes with a lot of control and power when, in fact, the need for openness, flexibility, and comfort with a lack of control is closer to the truth.



Jonathan VanDyke, *Cordoned Area (v. 3)*, 2013. 3-hour performance created for and performed by Bradley Teal Ellis and David Rafael Botana. National Academy Museum, New York. Courtesy the artist and Scaramouche, NY.

**JVD:** I want to advocate for *intensity* of involvement, for works that address the discomforts and barriers of trying to work together in powerful, uncomfortable ways. By working with a couple, I am not putting forward an agenda about coupledness or more specifically about same-sex coupledness. I do want to re-orient notions of relationship: the live performance demonstrates relationship in its extremes. At times they walk in perfect unison, at times they are violent with each other. We have a new segment where one “opts out” by walking to the edge of the performance area and watching the other perform for him. The piece uses the possibilities inherent in intimacy to push to the far edges of performing “a relationship,” while simultaneously *being* that relationship.

But I must add that queer men have a legacy of engaging with strangers, especially sexually, in ways that are entirely against the grain of the American marriage ideal. I want to bring forward a queer way of relating that is neither clean nor traditional.

**JLM:** The paint becomes a metaphor for this. Do you mean that you have a strong desire to re-orient notions of relationship, generally? Is there a particular long-held belief that you felt moved to react against?

**JVD:** American culture points to coupledness, and especially marriage, as a perfect ideal. We all know by now how much hypocrisy is built into this notion, but it still receives a lot of currency in the media, and every political candidate, left or right, talks over and over about “American families.” I’d like to make work that is really honest about the full range of relationships and non-relationships that we might want to engage in, and that celebrates how queer, gender non-conforming, and single people have actively redefined these notions.

**JLM:** The “liveness” of these works with David and Bradley also creates a certain form of visibility for the counter-narrative you propose. So that in itself has currency — “performing the relationship” and putting it on display in a proactive sense.

Mark-making with the body isn’t a densely explored field, but artists like Yves Klein, Jackson Pollock, and Carolee Schneemann come to mind as important predecessors. When I consider what their work means, broadly, in the art historical context, some actual labels come up for me. Their works have been labeled, I think, as “misogynist,” “macho” and “feminist,” respectively. How did your choices about your work in this vein answer to the public perception of past works, if at all?

**JVD:** In the last 15 years, documents of visual art performance have been digitized and made accessible to a broad audience. So we have a fuller sense of Klein, for example, now that we can access his performance footage online. This has invigorated process and performance for me because the work doesn’t so easily stop with the object. I would also include Lynda Benglis in that list. Quite specifically, I wanted to engage with these artists’ legacies in a way that addresses the era after AIDS: the post-1980’s queer body.



Studio visit with Jonathan VanDyke, Bradley Teal Ellis, and David Raphael Botana. Photo: J. Louise Makary.

**JLM:** In terms of “using bodies,” your work takes meaning from Bradley and David and their real relationship, and the way they identify. So the piece would mean something else if your studio neighbor was performing it. I’ve had a strong interest in the idea of casting, casting against type, and miscasting in films and theater. I think a lot about how the “who” influences just about everything in the piece.

**JVD:** That’s super interesting to me.

**JLM:** There is trepidation around discussing this real fact: Casting is highly political. *Casting makes meaning*, so in that sense I consider that you have “cast” Bradley and David and there is an intertwining of their real lives/real bodies/real experiences around race/gender/sexuality and the performative version of

this. That’s what I mean by “using,” that there’s an element of exploiting or incorporating the given characteristics of performers because their bodies have socially constructed meaning.

When you go into uncomfortable territory with Brad and David, is there a specific dark, truthful exploration you are seeking? Are you attempting to create a visceral, difficult experience in the studio so you can see what traces it leaves?

**JVD:** I spoke earlier about addressing the Pollock/Klein/Schneeman legacy through the post-AIDS legacy. I don’t mean “post” as in “over,” but that I was a child during the worst days of the crisis, and as a gay man this has informed all of my work. My work comes after AIDS emerged. So much of my adolescence was formed around notions of fear and the invisibility of this viral contact, a transmission that could not be seen and that occurred, paradoxically, in acts of pleasure. I don’t want to literalize that through the use of paint, but there is a transmission and a staining in my work that serves as an exhibiting of “dark content.” It’s like my piece in which a woman enters a gallery with paint dripping from her purse. She looks gorgeous, she’s having a nice time, and she’s staining the sidewalk.



Jonathan VanDyke, George Platt Lynes, 2013. *Paint on canvas and overdyed canvas [Brad and David performance canvases: sessions 2, 3, and 5/ gravity drop, push pull, and submission domination sequences.]* 58.5" x 90.5". Courtesy the artist and 1/gunosunove, Rome