WHO CLAIMS ABSTRACTION (WITH A DIFFERENCE)?

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What Queer Corner Am I In?[1]

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August 2019–April 2020
Dear F-F:

We first dialogued without words. In 2011 you performed in *Obstructed View*, a series of three-hour, silent works I presented at The Power Plant in Toronto.[2] You interpreted my score — sometimes nude, and marked with colour — embodying notions about painting, gay sex, kinship, viral transmission, and the way queer bodies are marked in the wake of the AIDS crisis. Neither of us are particularly reticent about signaling our politics or revealing our identifications, but these disclosures tend to be subtext in the artworks we make, rather than appearing directly or literally on the surface.

Recently I met a curator in Berlin to tell him about my work. Verbal description is hard for me: I love studio visits where the tactile, sensorial presence of materials, and the evidence of process buffers me from the tangle of my words. He bristled at the mention of abstract painting. I wanted to get into it. He was in a hurry. With some impatience he advised me to be more literally political in my work.

I'm sensitive to the notion that *abstraction is apolitical* and to curatorial demands for topical signifiers of one's identity and politics. I'm reminded that generations of artists in the US have met similar

1 The title is taken from the poem "In the Deep Museum" by Anne Sexton. In *Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems.* New York: Mariner Books, 1999: p. 64

2 VanDyke's "Obstructed View" was performed at The Power Plant, Toronto, in 2011 and 2012. Commissioned for the exhibition *Coming After*, curated by Jon Davies. 3-hour durational performance, featuring Francisco-Fernando Granados and Tyler Gledhill.

resistance — Howardena Pindell and Alma Thomas, to name just two inventive abstractionists, were dismissed at times for not offering clear aesthetic markers of identity.[3]

I regularly say that "abstraction is not forgetting" — in other words, it's not a means to turn away from the world, but to embody *where painting hits the ground* — where abstract painting is considered as a form of constantly evolving contact between sticky materials and receptive surfaces: a resonance between oneself and the world. I want to fight for complexity, multiplicity, and doubt. I wish that curator had given me room to fumble, to be uncertain, oblique: to be more abstract.

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In a 1995 interview[4] between Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Robert Storr, Gonzalez-Torres says:

> All art and all cultural production is political.[...] When you raise the question of political art, people immediately jump and say, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, those are political artists. Then who are the non-political artists, as if that was possible at this point in history? Let's look at abstraction, and let's consider the most successful of those political artists, Helen Frankenthaler. Why are they the most successful political artists, even more than Kosuth, much more than Hans Haacke, much more than Nancy and Leon or Barbara Kruger? Because they don't look political! And as we know it's all about looking natural, it's all about being the normative aspect of whatever segment of culture we're dealing with, of life. That's where someone like Frankenthaler is the most politically successful artist when it comes to the political agenda that those works entail, because she serves a very clear agenda of the Right.

3 See Sarah Louise, Cowan. *Howardena Pindell: Reclaiming Abstraction*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022 and Walz, Jonathan Frederick, and Feman, Seth, eds. *Alma Thomas: Everything is Beautiful*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021

4 Robert Storr. "Interview with Felix Gonzalez-Torres," *ArtPress*, January 1995. pp 24 -32

In her 2015 exhibition and book *"The heroine Paint" After Frankenthaler*, the critic and art historian Katy Siegel proposes a feminist and Frankenthaler-centric reading of the history of post-War abstract painting.[5] What happens when we apply *both* of these lenses upon Frankenthaler: imagining her as a stealthily political, culturally conservative artist-agent, *and* simultaneously as a heroine of radical form?

Frankenthaler served on the Advisory Board of The National Endowment for the Arts, which into the 1980s was giving individual grants to American artists. In 1989, the last of the Reagan era, in the midst of great losses due to the AIDS crisis, the U.S. Congress was embroiled in hearings over artist grants to Robert Mapplethorpe, Karen Finley, and Andres Serrano, among others. Senator Jesse Helms famously held up a Mapplethorpe photograph on the floor of Congress and described it as obscene. Even as a young, public school student living in the countryside in Pennsylvania, I heard about this 'obscenity.'

In a July 1989 editorial in *The New York Times*, Frankenthaler wrote, "I, for one, would not want to support the two artists mentioned [Serrano and Mapplethorpe], but once supported, we must allow them to be shown." She bemoans censorship but pivots into a discussion of *quality*: "I see more and more non-deserving recipients. I feel there was a time when I experienced loftier minds, relatively unloaded with politics, fashion, and chic." She concludes, "Quality control is the issue: raise the level. We need more connoisseurs of culture."[6]

Frankenthaler seems to posit her role in a Greenbergian manner: as a judge of form, *as if* form can be (mostly) divorced from context.

5 Katy Siegel, ed. *"The heroine Paint" After Frankenthaler*. New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2015

6 Helen Frankenthaler. "Did We Spawn an Arts Monster?" *The New York Times*, July 17, 1989

She plays a connoisseur's game, separate from and lacking the consequences of explicit "political" content, even while she is diving into — and yet simultaneously sidestepping — the politicization of works of art by American lawmakers. Living within a fantasy of "quality" alone is like living within the clean confines of the white cube gallery space: a performative fantasy of disassociation. It's not so much forgetting as it is *refusing*: refusing to see the connection between taste and privilege, refusing to acknowledge barriers to entry, to recognize the systemic and structural factors that hinder one's access, visibility, wealth, and health. Such denials are so embedded in American life that we find in Frankenthaler an extraordinarily adept feeler and arbiter of colours and forms — a sort of cultural blindness.

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I began writing this text before the advent of the global Covid-19 pandemic, and I arrive at this sentence while sequestered in New York City in quarantine. It brings me back to where we started: the complexity of bodies making contact with other bodies, with all the underlying desire and agency we navigate together. *So, how are you, and where do my words find you?*

– JVD

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May 2020

Dear Jonathan,

Thank you for asking. Kurt and I are as well as we can be: leaning on one another as we go into the seventh week of quarantine isolation here in Toronto. The mandated conditions of physical distancing feel like an action score that we are collectively asked to perform. The initial

shock of the state of emergency has settled into a heightened spatio-temporal awareness. One of the things that becomes more visible within this contraction of everyday city-life is the stark socio-economic inequities that create precarious conditions for many folks, which makes it impossible to follow the advice to ramp up hygienic measures and stay away from one another.

The charge of negative space between bodies and architectures feels like an important aspect shared by our practices: building situations where performers make marks in space, sometimes solo, often in pairs or triads. Distance feels like a condition of possibility for desire, even as we now find that it has also become a necessary condition for survival.

Performing in *Obstructed View* (2011) clarified and validated the practice of making physical and conceptual structures for actions that allow an artist to *remove* themselves. I think holding back the temptation to always make the artist the focus of a performance is a kind of abstraction. I still remember the level of poetic detail within your score. I experienced *Obstructed View* at a time when I needed to abstract *myself* from the centre of my own work. Through the performance, I experienced moments that made palpable the queer erotics that remain consistently present for me in abstraction.

I began practicing performance art within the context of artist-run spaces in Vancouver while I was still studying as a drawing and painting student at a community college program with a strong formalist focus. What attracted me to performance at the time was image-making in a way that feels so radically different from painting. As I look back at that early body of work now, particularly a work with a continuing history like *spatial profiling* (2011-2017)... I realize that I have always approached my actions in the same way I learned to approach any picture plane: through contrasting figure/ground relations, rhythm and repetition, and systems of mark-making.

I don't know what a curator means when they say they want you to make work that *they* can read as political. It's not an instinct that I could trust. Before I stopped trusting her instincts as an artist, Tania Bruguera said that "political art should stop using references and start creating references." Her own shift from making brilliant work that constructed situations that questioned the staging of politics into sloganeering that supports North American interventionist impulses shows that the idea of doing away with references is practically impossible for any of us. In spite of this, I like the proposition as a definition of political art since it goes against the demand for politics to be already packaged as something resolved, that a curator can readily 'hang' in the gallery.

My work in performance began soon after my family was granted Convention refugee status in Canada. We fled Guatemala due to violence in 2001. A lot of my early artistic actions were visible as performances of political resistance by a young queer body that had managed to not get deported. I felt that there was no space within the 'serious' art discourse of Vancouver art galleries or institutions for me to bring up issues of identity through the work. I did not want to be dismissed. Once I was granted the possibility of becoming a citizen, I wanted to do something other than re-stage my trauma in my practice, especially as legibly "political" work became fashionable.

I am interested in sabotaging Frankenthaler's conservative logic around who is granted entry into a society and what it means in terms of pushing the limits of what art can be. Once artists like Mapplethorpe, Ana Mendieta, and Lorraine O'Grady became a part of the discourse, anything they did, within the arena of the aesthetic, constituted an expansion of its frame.

I truly love Frankenthaler as a painter. I deeply admire how she learned from Cubist compositional techniques, approaching a picture plane as series of interrelated formal decisions in search of an image. These

artworks can move me to tears. As you bring up Gonzalez-Torres' assessment of her political efficacy as a cultural gatekeeper, I am reminded of the fact that her seminal work *Mountains and Sea* (1952) was painted two years before the CIA-backed coup of a democratically elected socialist government in Guatemala. There must be a way to acknowledge Frankenthaler's contribution while not simply reinscribing its Modernist approach. The explicit claim to abstraction in my work is rooted in a desire to reroute the assertions of autonomy made on behalf of these aesthetic strategies.

–F-F

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May 2020

Dear F-F:

We're in the midst of pause here in New York. If I tried to fully assess the strangeness and depth of this situation — the effulgent beauty of the spring here, the sharp interruption of sirens, the tractor trailer trucks used as temporary morgues, parked on the street a block from my studio — and if I tried to tell you everything I'm feeling, I don't know where I'd start or finish. I lost my father in January. My mom is alone in Pennsylvania, one of countless older adults confined to their living spaces in order to stay alive. I just attended a Zoom memorial for a friend's father lost to Covid. Payments and jobs, including mine for the foreseeable future, are postponed indefinitely. Conversations with friends are longer, more meandering, luxuriously vulnerable. Can I return to abstraction?

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In *Obstructed View*, you and the other performer, Tyler Gledhill, wore and exchanged the items of exactly *one* outfit: one pair of pants, one pair of briefs, one shirt. At some point you might each have one foot

socked and one bare, in symmetry; you could choose to entirely clothe the other through your own nakedness. High above you a sculpture dripped paint onto your bodies and clothes, so that as you touched and traded garments, bits of colour passed between you. A photo shows one of you wearing a blue button-down, its fabric smeared with orange and yellow paint; the other is bare-chested, but with the same imprint of orange and yellow on his chest. I like to think that the audience would look from body to body and, in the mind's eye, reanimate the contact that made this possible.

At the time of that performance, I had been working in my Brooklyn studio with two professional dancers, Bradley Teal Ellis and David Rafael Botana, while you and Tyler acted as their Toronto surrogates. Brad and David were also a romantic couple, and I worked with them very actively for about five years. Our first project was a three-hour live performance in 2011, titled *Cordoned Area* (2011-ongoing), in which they operated atop a rectangular piece of heavyweight canvas laid out on the ground. Paint was embedded in their costumes — modified wrestling singlets —and their movements transitioned from playful to tender, from sexually-loaded to athletic, from competitive to manipulative choreographies. We sourced some of the inspiration for their movements from recordings of high school wrestling matches and homecoming dances.

After the first iteration of *Cordoned Area*, Brad and David asked if we could continue our collaboration. Through our process they told me they "worked things out": issues that hadn't surfaced in language could be actively resolved by physical and creative interaction. They were describing abstraction. Working with abstract visual form is for me an activation of all the senses. It is an active field of immersion, an "area" of feeling and sensing outside of verbal articulation. To work with abstraction is to create visual markers of inarticulable experiences. I intend for my works to hover in this space of emergent meaning.

I want to preface discussions around abstraction by countering a notion that it emerged *sui generis* in the twentieth century, invented by (male) painters. For example, you see abstract patterning in visually opulent weavings made by Indigenous Peoples in the Americas and by those, especially women, who made quilts and blankets in the US during the nineteenth century. How might we re-orient histories of abstraction around the works of quilters and weavers piecing forms over time, around shamans and spiritual guides making marks in blood and sand, around tile layers placing durable patterns beneath our feet?

I would argue that those that held power and capital during the post-Enlightenment in the West enacted a mind-body split, which separated us from the rhythms of nature and split us from the rituals through which to process the inexplicable — especially those rituals practiced by the people that they colonized, enslaved, and disempowered. Today (in an echo of the first decade of the AIDS crisis) corrupt power-holders refuse to acknowledge the extraordinary gravity of bodily illness and loss, and the physical violence wrought by state-sanctioned power authorities and mechanized systems of power structures. Artists can bring light to these losses, by speaking about them, picturing them, making symbols, and enacting rituals of repair. But also by actively dwelling in and sharing the liminal spaces of sensing and feeling, where we have no words.

In my own practice, I hope the display of "formation" is continuous, such that the viewer is a witness to something merging into view. One of the reasons I employ high school motifs in works such as *Cordoned Area* (2011-ongoing) is that the teenage period is so rich with feelings and fascinations: with identity formation, rebellion, and disruption of self-ideation within constructs of a social milieu.

We often speak about being "closeted" as if it is intentional, but as a teenager I couldn't have articulated that I was isolated in rejecting my own body. Having a conflicted sexuality left me within a richly

torturous space of constant becoming. As I learned to resolve the split between mind and body, I found the zone just before words are articulated is rife with "abstract" energy. I wonder where the inarticulable is energetic and active for you?

The work that I'm doing, that you're doing, is also a way of claiming and reclaiming abstraction as an art form that can give agency to queer bodies, queer actions, queer feelings, queer points of view. Does the "embedding" of content in my work run parallel to the manner in which my sexuality is within my body? Is my accompanying white male privilege a form of tacit self-permission (a cover, so to speak) to *not* also *forefront* the literal representation of bodies in painted depictions? History lies like a festering trauma, in the social body, and, by extension, in the "body" of art history, as a story that hasn't been told. If most of what I make hovers around the place of the wordless, these are phrases I want to ask and say out loud.

–JVD

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February 2021

Dear JVD:

So much of what is at stake in our exchange has felt so present and raw in the rarified reality of a world that is mostly accessible through news images as the pandemic has raged on. I fear that efforts made by art and art history to recalibrate its established white supremacy remain dangerously fragile, weakened as images of the January 6th storming of the US Capitol flood our eyes and imaginations.

As you say, history lies as a festering trauma that continues to haunt us. Nights before my family fled Guatemala, *American History X* played on

television.[7] I still remember the Nazi imagery, the brutality of the racist murder that happens in the middle of the film, and the scene where Edward Norton's character is brutally raped in a prison shower. I was sixteen. In some ways, I am glad I arrived here with a sense of what racial difference meant in North America. That said, the distant image I had of the US always included more than just white Americans. As a child my earliest exposure to the English language was watching Whitney Houston's music video for "I Will Always Love You."

Guatemala did not make its own pop culture. This is a result of the US-backed Civil War that raged on until 1996 and continues to have repercussions until today. The vast majority of images from my childhood were foreign. Being able to see myself reflected in cultural representations was not a possibility. I understood that I was on the sidelines, and felt that I had no access to making images that could matter.

The historical event that shaped me, after I settled in a suburb of Vancouver in April 2001 and as I became accustomed to an English-speaking culture, was September 11, 2001. On that day —during my second week of high school in Canada — I was walking to the public library after class. As I passed a hardware store parking lot, a man in a pick-up truck rolled down his window and shouted at me. He called me a terrorist and asked why "my people" had flown the planes into the buildings. I froze. I couldn't understand what he meant. I knew he was talking to me because there was nobody else around. I ran to the library. I was beside myself, caught in something inarticulable... abstracted. The man saw a figure: my nerdy, already-queer teenage body, racially ambiguous enough to pass, but also to be mistaken, and constituted it as an allegory for terrorism. This is where my suspicion of figuration began, perhaps where my instinct to resist the representations of bodies as allegories originated.

7 Tony Kaye, dir. *American History X*. New Line Cinema, 1998.

A few years later, images from Abu Ghraib, printed uncensored on the front page of the local newspaper, prompted a desire to understand what it takes to construct an image. I was simultaneously horrified by the violence of the photographs and fascinated on a sensual level by their carefully staged eroticism. Much like when I watched the character from *American History X* get fucked against his will, there was an unsurmountable asymmetry in the vulnerability of the bodies depicted and documented during state-sanctioned torture. This mixture of sex and violence being mapped on the body for careful framing was a convention that had transcended artistic licence in the film, and had landed in a piece of evidence for a war crime that was never properly prosecuted.

I could not identify with either party in both sets of images: not the perpetrator nor victim, neither dom nor sub, I was a witness. Is refusing the lure of a dominator/dominated binary a kind of queer positioning? What would it mean to triangulate this binary by serving as a witness? The triangulation yielded an incomprehensible feeling that I can understand as scopophilia, the pleasure in looking.

Working in abstraction gives form to my scopophilic drive away from dynamics of domination and submission. It allows me to commit to a sensual compulsion for composition, arranging and rearranging elements to different effects in the hope of finding new pleasures. My body of work titled *letters* consists of a series of more than 500 8.5 x 11inch abstract drawings, which function as illegible epistles that encounter the viewer in various forms: as wall works and sometimes as publications. They aim to elicit an intimate, untranslatable sense that is shared between a promiscuously scattered public expression and my own body. Abstraction allows me an opacity that pushes back against allegory. It allows for a more symmetrical vulnerability, not between figures represented, but through the bodies present for the work at the moments of making and viewing.

My experience of making *letters* (2020) was very physical. I used my fingers (rather than a stylus) directly on the surface of a tablet and I coloured everything by hand. There's a queer sensuousness to the smooth feel of the tablet and a refreshingly non-phallic relationship between my body and my tools. I caress and range over my picture plane, attempting to trace a new possibility for line, shape, and colour, allowing my training in drawing and painting to come forward with both attentiveness and subtlety.

Abstracting is as political as picturing, and the question of putting one's body at the forefront is so singular and intimate. Sometimes we can do it with urgency and boldness, and sometimes we are too broken to even attempt such an action, within such conditions imposed on our bodies. Undoing white male privilege might be a matter of not imagining it as any kind of default but rather thinking of it as one configuration within a multitude of possibilities. This connects with our previous conversation around our shared sense of performance as the creation of physical and conceptual structures for actions that allow an artist to remove themselves. It feels like a departure from conventions around performance in visual art, where the body of the artist is often a kind of default centre.

Perhaps what is needed is to picture racialized bodies that have been made invisible before and to find the places where these representations have been forgotten or erased. There is a critical boundary-crossing happening here: where abstraction can question categories and open the possibilities to elicit visual pleasure, and where the political power of *abstracting* can offer moments of opacity that allow us to collectively or individually reimagine power relationships into more versatile, liberatory dynamics.

–F-F