JONATHAN VanDYKE in conversation with KEN LANDAUER
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KL: Seeing your new project made me think of this 1967 Marianne Moore poem:

POETRY
I, too, dislike it.
Reading it, however with a perfect contempt for it,
one discovers in
it, after all, a place for the genuine.

In the battle between art and the real, what is now at stake is not art, but the real. Art's job, in an era where we are numbed by mediation, is to reestablish the real. The visual arts is unique in its potential to short-circuit mediation, but only if it can break its own conventional boundaries. Art's job now seems to be to get beyond itself, since it is a form of mediation, and to put us in touch with non-mediated forces, something genuine, something authentic, something unpredictable, something uncontained.

JVD: Given the privilege that we assign to data, the role of knowledge gained through bodily, sensory experience is diminished. It is tempting to say that the prevalence of assemblage in the last few years stems from a desire to be more involved with materiality. But I think the issue for artists is broadly this: to constantly take information and data into our own hands, and to playfully re-form and re-contextualize that information as we see fit.

KL: In the 80's, assemblage was often considered like collage; reworking images. This shift to the physicality of assemblage is important now. Your work seems more engaged with the act of painting than the final product, the painting itself. Why are you not satisfied with painting's usual limits?

JVD: My first job out of college was at The Susquehanna Art Museum in Harrisburg, PA, and I came into the position in thrall to American abstract painting. The museum was located in a mall, and it was free. My office was tucked into a converted closet within the galleries, so even if I had to walk out to the bathroom I had to go straight through the exhibition space, and I'd often get into discussions with visitors. I remember one intense argument about a de Kooning painting. I saw how the apparent otherworldliness of abstraction remained this really tough thing for an American audience; visitors were eager to tell me that it was crap and that they didn't want to be fooled by child's play. I loved getting in these arguments because I saw that abstraction had the capacity to puncture the glaze of pleasantry.

KL: We don't need transcendence anymore. We speed through the world in our

cars, surf amazing spectacles on TV or online, and even the omniscience of the internet has become mundane and pocket-portable. Our arts – including those of the mass media – used to be concerned with providing experiences out of the ordinary. Now that the extraordinary has become so customary, and so much of our lives is spent mediated, all of the arts seem to be seeking to reestablish the ordinary or to impersonate it. We need more of the ordinary.

JVD: The museum was literally next to a food court, so there was this leak of one type of experience into the other. You could look at that de Kooning and smell a falafel. This reified my sense that art could be a haven for incredibly intense feeling and thinking and conversation, yet this experience could be framed by the most everyday of concerns.

KL: Which should we favor, the de Kooning or the falafel?

JVD: You know, I grew up in a household in which we worshipped painting; my father was an art teacher and our frequent museum visits were like pilgrimages. At the same time, everything became the material of art. We made paper from vegetables, we made giant inflatables from garbage bags, we crocheted rugs from surplus yarn, we made baskets from sheeps' tails that we salted and dried in the sun. At one point my Mom made a soft sculpture figure of an old lady from used clothes and pantyhose; she would put it the car next to her when she drove alone into a rough part of the city. What I am trying to say is that I grew up with this conception that art was both a big transcendent thing, as well as something that happened every day and with everything you touched. So I favor both the painting on the museum wall and the muck on the floor.

KL: Moving beyond the edge of painting would become a major concern of the 1960's, as Allan Kaprow prescribed with his writings on Happenings. You are not making paintings, but orienting the energies that surround painting. Pictorial content, composition, and representation are almost entirely absent. Your dripping pieces do not explode; they burp and gurgle as unpredictable and imperfect objects. The performance of your works is within the pieces themselves. It is not visual work that alludes to its physical construction. It is physical work that produces a visual form. This shift in emphasis is key. The work stresses the world around the painting. And the movement of the paint – its viscosity, instability and volatility – is more important than its final residence.

JVD: I am interested in how Kaprow activates the entire space surrounding art production. My earliest experience with dripping, while in the graduate program at Bard, was in a studio piece I called "Paint Effect Workshop." I had grown tired of the exhausting fastidiousness of my mark. So I gave myself the freely adaptable challenge of moving paint around the studio. This process engendered an openness in my work that I found incredibly pleasurable.

KL: In the *New York Times* magazine recently, William Safire wrote that the word, "Orgasmic… has in recent years been rapidly gaining in usage because its primary sense has been shifting from the clinical 'climactic' to the metaphoric 'joyful.' " I'm not sure in which sense this fits your new work more accurately. In any case, the climax is prolonged. If we are waiting for the final composition, our pleasure is delayed. Our joy may be found in the process that unfolds (or more literally, drips, flows and belches) during the course of the exhibition. The paint, which traditionally arouses our joy by delivering beauty, serves a second purpose in this work. The paint itself is dripping, seemingly post-orgasmic: not "explosive discharge," as described by Merriam-Webster and noted by Safire, but sporadic, viscous. Here, the artwork is a verb (an activity) not a noun (a finished thing activated by our gaze.)

JVD: In each installation I have tried to create a situation in which I can share with the viewer my own pleasure in watching a work of art in the act of becoming. At first glance, the work feels aloof, almost like background. But then you find that there are these openings in the surface of the work that are oozing color very, very slowly. The piece is literally covering up its tracks, its color, from the day before. I want it to feel as if the intimacy of that moment cannot be repeated.

KL: But can you be more specific about the erotic side of your work? I'm thinking of how the love in *Brokeback Mountain* was indirectly represented by landscape: when Ennis and Jack were together, we saw beautiful mountainous expanses, and when they were with their wives they were in claustrophobic domestic spaces… Are you using strategies of displacement here, or has it become impossible to directly represent anything erotic, since it so easily slides into cliché which is not erotic at all?

JVD: Abstract expressionism was branded as a gesture of the macho body; much was made of Pollock's connection to the expansive West. In *Brokeback Mountain*, there is an insertion of a homoerotic narrative into the Western panorama, a space where such a narrative was already both implicit and feared. I'd like to disrupt the space of abstraction in similar ways. One way is to disrupt the flat surface so that something literally comes out of it. Another is to displace the picture plane by re-activating the space of the floor, so that you're always looking down with my work.

Much of the art that I admire provokes a play of desire among art object, viewer, and artist. This play is usually received through the viewer's gaze, which gives the viewer a position of power and remove. I endeavor to focus and destabilize this gaze. I hope to engage your body as well as your eyes. The piece is moving; so are you. The piece drips, so does the body. You stare into the work, but the paint's origins are concealed. I want you to feel as if the piece performs

only for you.