



JORDAN KANTOR

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*Untitled (Eclipse with handlers)*, 2012, inkjet print on vinyl with nickel grommets, 48 × 72 inches  
courtesy: Jordan Kantor Studio

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# ON THE SHELF/ON THE WALL

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DEAN RADER & JORDAN KANTOR  
IN CONVERSATION

In late 2017, over several months, poet Dean Rader and artist Jordan Kantor sat down for an extended conversation about shared concerns within their respective fields. Meeting regularly in San Francisco's Mission District, where Kantor has a studio, their discussions ranged from artistic homage, originality, and process to questions of accessibility and how poetry and visual art might speak to contemporary politics. Over the course of these conversations, it became clear their ideas about the matrix of art, poetry, and society shed light on important features of their individual practices at mid-career.

Indeed, that time proved to be an interesting year for both. The first major monograph on Kantor's studio practice, *Jordan Kantor: Selected Exhibitions 2006–2016*, was published, covering the decade-plus since he relocated to the Bay Area from New York. Since then, Kantor's work has been exhibited locally at venues as diverse as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Wattis Institute of Contemporary Art, 871 Fine Arts, and Ratio 3, but that book introduced this conceptually based interdisciplinary art to a wider audience. For his part, Rader saw two books of his poems released in 2017, *Self-Portrait as Wikipedia Entry* (Copper Canyon Press) and *Suture* (Black Lawrence), a collection of sonnets co-written with Simone Muench. The following is a condensed version of Rader and Kantor's discussions.

224 **DEAN RADER** In one of our first conversations about poetry and painting, you said something I thought was both insightful and ironic. You observed that I am a poet who wants to be on the wall, and you are a painter who wants to be on the shelf. Why the shelf?

**JORDAN KANTOR** I was trying to express then something of my experience that books go places artworks do not. Artworks, for better or worse, are so obstinately physical, fragile, and logistically difficult. I am interested in how books can compress information into a small, portable, and durable format, which can reach more and more diverse populations than artworks do. The low cost of books compared to unique artworks is key here, too.

But the other half of our exchange was about your interest in being a “poet on the wall.” Why the wall?

**DR** I might say the same thing—an interest in reaching people who would not otherwise see my work. But, beyond that, I am interested

in the act of looking at poetry, not just reading it. That might sound like a reversal of what a poet would be expected to say, but to me poetry is as much a visual text as it is a linguistic or verbal text. And so, I’m intrigued by what happens when viewers bring the same set of anticipatory and aesthetic lenses to a poem as they would to a painting. What happens to the experience of interacting with a poem if you are coming to it as though it were a painting?

That leads me to the *Selected Exhibitions* book. There is a fascinating correspondence there between how works appear on the page and how they were shown on the wall of the documented exhibitions. At times, your shows can seem installed in ways that recall book design. For example, the design, the layout, of your 2016 show at the Columbus College of Art and Design looks bookish to me. In fact, as you walk into the exhibition, it seems as though you are looking at the frontispiece of a book. Even the white rectangularity of

the wall denotes a title page with its requisite black and white image and citational data. You prepare us for the act of *looking*. Of *reading*. So, I wonder if you have a similar motivation? Or the opposite? Or can the opposite be the same?

**JK** Yes, when you said you were interested in the act of looking at poetry, I was thinking that the complimentary formulation is absolutely true for me: that I am interested in how visual art can be *read*. On one hand, this can mean that I emphasize the “extra-painterly”—that is, part of the meaning of what I make is elsewhere, in the networks of historical references and in the ongoing artistic conversations my work engages and speaks back to. This approach runs counter to models of art-making that focus on the autonomy and self-containment of the artwork itself, and to the idea that the artwork must hold everything within it.

However, I believe in more diffuse spatial models of meaning. The Columbus exhibition engaged

“reading” in much more explicit ways: I planned that exhibition while working on the design of the book in which I knew its documentation was to be ultimately included. Therefore, there was a kind of reversal at work—of making a show for a book as much as documenting a show in a book. One place where this thinking took me was to consider how the design process (which was a collaboration with the great graphic designer Geoff Kaplan) might motivate or guide the installation logics of the exhibition. With this premise in mind, I started to have fun with aspects of the installation that nod to how a page is composed in layout.

But back to your point, what are the stakes of looking at poems?

**DR** We tend to think of reading as private, whereas we think of viewing or looking as public. Just think about the many assumptions attached to “reading a poem”—all representations connote solitude. But, if a poem is up on a wall, and three or four people are looking

226 at it simultaneously, engaging the poem becomes a public act, a shared act, or more precisely, a hybridized act that is at once both public and private. That's the best of both worlds.

I'm very attracted to the idea of poetry as a common, and there is an historical precedent for this by

way of the broadside, and, more recently, through Dada and Surrealism. These poets believed altering the form and structure of a poem was

not merely aesthetic but political. Undermining literary form was, at its core, a revolutionary act.

On a smaller level, foregrounding the act of looking at a poem relieves the viewer/reader of the self-imposed anxiety of "understanding" or "comprehending" the poem—what I call "poetry angst." One way I attempt to diffuse that anxiety is by utilizing common visual forms. For example, in *Works & Days*, there

is a poem that parodies the awfulness of a PowerPoint presentation. Another poem appears in the form of bulleted talking points, and another in the form of a pop song. These poems announce themselves visually as well as lexically.

I am often envious of a painting's ability to register an immedi-

ate emotional impact on the viewer. We don't necessarily think we have to understand color or shape the way we do with words.

**JK** While "understanding" might operate differently in the case of the formal attributes of a painting than with the meaning of a word, I do believe that each color, shape, or gesture has a history of prior uses that remains dormant within it, that haunts it when painted, and informs how these aspects are seen and understood. Roland Barthes has a beautiful metaphor for this which I'll have to look up, something like the prior uses of words

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cling to them like pipe smoke clings to clothing. Painters take advantage of these previous uses and latent meanings to varying degrees, depending on their strategies (or even relative awareness of them). On the other hand, when I think of what makes poetry poetic, I often associate a feeling with how words go together rather than an understanding of why or how they might be comprehended.

**DR** Well, I would say that the move to abstract and nonrepresentational gestures in painting spirits things out of the realm of denotation. Looking at the painting is not about decoding the canvas. Mark Rothko says, “A painting is not a picture of an experience; it is an experience.” Color can be an experience; form or shape can be an experience. Written language can never be only an experience because we use it to talk to a doctor, a teacher, a child, a pastor, a policeman, a coroner. Written language has as its ontology comprehension.

The poet Robert Bly says we have three ears: one in our head,

one in our chest, and one in our genitals. He claims poets are envious of musicians because music zooms past the head, hangs out in the chest, and then parties in the genitals. Poetry, at least in America, because of how it is taught, tends to lodge in the head. Maybe Neruda gets to the chest and the genitals, but only if he’s lucky.

In any case, I think painting hits all three at once.

**JK** Written language may have as its ontology comprehension, but do you think spoken language operates in the same way?

**DR** If not the same then similar. Have you ever read a poem or heard a poem spoken in a language you do not understand? It’s totally maddening. Even if the poem rhymes, you feel lost. You feel like you are missing something.

**JK** Yes, however, I believe many people have a similar, maddened response to abstract painting—believing, *contra* Rothko, that they don’t have access or can’t experience that language. His claim to

228 unmediated experience differentiated from “picturing” something is tied into the rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism, which, by now, we must take with a grain of salt. Perhaps the denotative function of language is more closely related to how representational painting operates, where what is pictured is foregrounded.

**DR** I agree. In my experience,

corrective) response to what I see as an anti-intellectualism implicit in expecting art to perform emotionally, or expressively.

**DR** To me, your work is always thinking. Maybe thinking through its emotional register, but always thinking.

**JK** Thank you. I hope so, because it relates to my process. My studio practice is really broken into a

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people have learned (or chosen) to sublimate that lack of comprehension of abstract painting to emotion. They don’t understand it, but they feel it.

**JK** I suppose it’s precisely that sublimation which frustrates me at times. While I aspire to making work that can be felt as well as analyzed, I’d prefer if my work traffics in ideas as much as emotions. I may have arrived at this position as a kind of contrarian (or

series of discrete phases in which some of these binaries—contrasting thinking with feeling, etc.—are complicated, or at least made less reductive.

There is a nonthinking (perhaps even intuitive) permission that governs the first round of production. The objects that result from that are not yet properly artworks (and some of them never will be). Then, there is a period of editing, in which I try to look at and learn

from these objects to build some kind of story—and then nominate some of them to be artworks. This is where my practice comes closest to writing, I think: these arrangements of objects, and formulations of relationships, seem to be like making poems out of individual words. And then, finally, there is another phase—making an exhibition—in which context determines the arrangement, sequence, pacing, and overall experience. This public presentation is vital to the graduation of the objects into artworks. Indeed, it is not by chance that my monograph is organized by exhibitions rather than by sequences of discrete works.

**DR** For me, I begin a poem because I can't get a line out of my head, or there is a problem I want to solve, or there is something, formally, I want to experiment with. Then, it's just editing and writing and editing and writing and editing and writing. I might go through fifty drafts of a stanza or poem before I think it's ready to be published. So in that sense

there are some similarities with our practices.

However, one thing that distinguishes writing from painting is the element of physical technique. I don't have to be competent at drawing letters, I can just type them.

**JK** What you say about not getting a line out of your head resonates with me. I sometimes become aware in the studio that I have been talking to myself, usually about what isn't right in a painting. I am constantly gauging myself against an internal standard of how things "should" be in the picture. This is the standard I don't want to question as it is happening, but which I try to contextualize when the object is finished, in terms of how I edit or arrange it with other objects in a show (or on the page of a catalog). For me, there is also another important time of mulling that happens when I am preparing the physical object—like stretching a canvas or gessoing its surface. This is one reason why I do all the handwork of making the object

230 myself.

**DR** It was fun to watch you stretch a canvas the other day. I don't make my own paper. Or my own ink. Or my own books. The physicality of a book is almost never as auratic as a painting. This leads me to larger questions about preciousness and, further, about beauty. Do you ever think about the presence (or absence) of

and love beautiful paintings. I would say that I am suspicious of beauty in my own work to some degree, however, and don't aim for it purposely. I aspire to an artistic project with a degree of cultural critique at its core, and while this certainly doesn't disqualify beauty, I do see beauty in art as markedly susceptible to ideological cooption. I realize that sounds cynical

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beauty in your work? I ask because I even want my angry poems to be beautiful, but also because I find beauty in your work, even in your darker, more oblique pieces. I see beauty in your work much the way I see beauty in Manet's. There but not there. Or, rather not obviously there but still there.

**JK** I am happy to hear people describe the experience of finding beauty in my work. I like beauty

and grumpy; I don't mean it that way. The kind of beauty I hope for in my work is darker and cooler: more like the beauty of math, perhaps. Maybe this gets close to some of the things I find beautiful in Manet? I am interested in this question, however, and wonder what the opposite of beauty is in this context. It doesn't seem like it would be ugliness. What could your angry poems be if not also

beautiful?

**DR** Conventional. Predictable. Lazy. Monotone. I think it's the latter I'm most afraid of. I want my work to sound more than one note; to hit on all registers, like a complex chord. To me the opposite of beauty is not ugliness but complacency. You and I both are drawn to especially rigorous art. Another thing we share is our interest not simply in our predecessors but in quoting or referencing our predecessors.

**JK** There are many reasons I evoke previous artists, with varying degrees of explicitness, in my work. One reason is to try to enter an ongoing conversation that can happen across space and time. When Manet quotes Velazquez, he is honoring, updating, and contradicting him all at once. At the same time, he is making the past relevant for the present in new ways, and maybe even rewriting history. I am really interested in how Borges

formulates this phenomenon. I have spoken (and written) about his "Kafka and His Precursors" on several occasions. When I borrow a composition from another artist's work, or quote a historical painting or conversation in some way, I am excited by the reactivation of the past I feel, as well as the thrill of speaking to the dead, and aligning myself with works of art

that move me.

A second important factor concerns limits. I am constantly working to create

constraints in my practice—by restricting my materials choice to what is at hand, or by allowing chance processes to determine my color palette—and I find that working with historical references creates another limitation.

Thirdly, and this relates closely to the last point, I am interested in strategies of removing arbitrary decisions in my practice, and the act of quoting an existing artwork is one way to circumvent a degree

**"To me the opposite of beauty is not ugliness but complacency."**

232 of invention. Of course, the choice of what to quote is highly subjective. Nevertheless, once that first decision is made, working within the limits it establishes is less demanding in a helpful way, if that makes any sense. I like to set up a formula, and then take it to its logical conclusion by executing it. **DR** I like what you said earlier about honoring, updating, and contradicting. That is a healthy trifecta. In *Self-Portrait*, I enter

The most prominent figure in the book, however, is Paul Klee. There are five poems about or in response to Klee's paintings or aesthetic theory—he gets more real estate than any poet. In fact, when we were talking earlier about painting and emotion, I was thinking about Klee's famous line, "One eye sees, the other feels." I think about how ... dangerous ... Hitler found Klee's work. In 1937, seventeen of Klee's pieces were

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into conversations with Neruda, Wallace Stevens, Rainer Maria Rilke, Adrienne Rich, and Langston Hughes. Each of these poems honors, updates, and contradicts their greatness. In my first book, I felt the presence of Stevens more than any other voice, and in this one, even though two poems invoke and evoke Neruda, I feel like Rilke is everywhere. I hear him in almost every poem in the book.

included in the infamous Degenerate Art Exhibition and over 100 were seized by the Nazis. I don't think of Klee as a political artist, but I see him using art as a form of resistance—just like Neruda, just like Stevens, just like Hughes, just like Rich, just like Rilke.

**JK** Adorno stated once that all totalizing narratives identify with systems of power, which I take to mean oppression. I hope that art

can be one way to act against these powers which, under the guise of consensus, make claims to truth, normalcy, identity, etc. The diversity of approaches in my studio practice—in mediums, styles, imagery, etc.—not only reflects the breadth of my interests, but also my conscious refusal of the idea that an artist “should” work in only one way to create reliable and identifiable product. That is the logic of the art market—and of art that is consumed in sound-bite form, superficially—and is far

from what I hope for, and aspire to. Perhaps this is a long way of saying that I believe a refusal to conform to consistent meanings and forms is political, and indeed contemporary, if not necessarily topical.

**DR** Indeed. To refuse to conform—to resist totalizing narratives, even “only” in the arts—was a matter of life and death at many moments in history, and crucially remains true for our own. ☞

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*Jordan Kantor writes on a wide range of contemporary art subjects, and holds a professorship at California College of the Arts, where he teaches artistic practice and theory and currently serves as chair of the Painting/Drawing Program.*

*Dean Rader co-edited *Bullets into Bells: Poets and Citizens Respond to Gun Violence* (Beacon Press), an anthology praised by the New York Times, Poets & Writers, the Washington Post, NPR, and PBS. Rader also writes about poetry and visual culture for a variety of publications such as the San Francisco Chronicle, Los Angeles Review of Books, Huffington Post, and BOMB. He is a professor at the University of San Francisco.*