

An Intention to Being

Jane Boyer © 2015

The work of Andrew Vass has often been discussed in relation to the landscape,¹ in fact his work takes landscape as a referent, but in this essay I'd like to discuss Vass's work in relation to self, for in his latest works, the metaphor of self appears like never before.

In his earlier works going back to 2004 right up to 2012, works with titles such as *Tracking 01*, *New Route*, *Rise 10*, *Turn 02*, *Park Area 04*, paintings and drawings have a quality of mapping; mapping space, location, relation, position, distance and trajectory. David Ryan expressed it well in his essay, *Frequency*, "Vass's drawings are often made on location, and document a particular interface between the artist and a specific perceptual grasp of what lies before him: pressure and erasure document proximity and distance, as well as the movement of the eye and the sensation of perceived planes and masses."² There is a tactile sense in these works of feeling one's way through a space, and leaving a trace as a reminder of the way back.³ It is a self in relation to its location, busily intent on exploring every micron of the space it inhabits, a self looking, feeling, touching, sensing. But in terms of the self, it is restricted to the margins by the location. The story is not the exploring self, but the space explored.

In his latest works, from 2013 to 2015, the mapping is all but gone. In works such as, *Edging* (2013), and *HWP 01* (2014), there remain, to greater or lesser degrees, 'hooks' into location – little jagged verticals that work to pin the bolder, broader marks by one corner. This 'pinning' is the last vestige of being bound to location. The vital link to place, direction and delineation, has given way to free-floating dispersion. It's as if the mark is now related to memory of place rather than a link to an actual location event.⁴ In that free-floating memory the mark, and the self, casts itself adrift simply to be. It's in this drift that I see the self coming to the fore in the story.

To illustrate this more fully I have to go back to a group of paintings from 2009 and 2010. Vass expressed to me during a recent studio visit, that he was never quite satisfied with these paintings. As far as I know they have no group title, nor were they intended to be a series, just an enquiry that was set aside as not fully resolved. Three of those works: *Spanning* (2009)⁵, *Inclining* (2010)⁶, and *Dispersal* (2010)⁷, were different in nature to his usual 'mapping'. The works had a sense of the incidental, of occurrence, which results in an emergence of the unseen. Even the titles grammatically refer to verbs which function as nouns, used to name the result of an action.⁸ I sensed something elemental and primary in those works, but could find no way to resolution either. In Vass's most recent *red drawing* (2015) cycle, there is a reference back to those paintings. Vass has resolved the indeterminacy in the work by translating incident into intent, turning the random chance occurrence into an expression of potential; a state of possibility right before *becoming* comes into being – an intention to being.

On that same studio visit I remarked on the similarity I saw in a number of his works, to Joan Mitchell's compressed and frenetic central mass. Klaus Kertess in

his 1997 monograph essay on Mitchell's work explained the function of this central mass. "The centripetal compression focuses on – at once exposes and fortifies – the vulnerable center of the canvas plane, which becomes the embodiment of the artist's plane of consciousness."⁹ Vass has a similar vulnerable central plane, albeit a deconstructed one, which functions as the "artist's plane of consciousness." While Mitchell's mass held and dominated the centre, Vass's dissolves out from the centre in a vague wandering of dispersed fragments that don't hold any space, but suspend it. This is a self, freeing itself from physical bonds, suspended in being. The potential to will is there in the tension of the marks¹⁰ – they could coalesce into form and action at any moment, but in their free-floating state, they are pure essence, suspended between form and action.

Vass's free-floating imagery might be compared with the univocity of being described by Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*: "In effect, the essential in univocity is not that Being is said in a single and same sense, but that it is said, in a single and same sense, of all its individuating differences or intrinsic modalities. Being is the same for all these modalities, but these modalities are not the same."¹¹ The self, according to this view then, is not one voice, but one voice distributed throughout all its parts and differentiations.¹² What makes it whole is not its coherence as a unit, but the distribution of its singularity throughout each element with the potential to coalesce while simultaneously differentiating from everything else, a dispersion within the potential to will. "What Vass develops here is an incremental approach to painting. Not process-based exactly, because it maintains a singularity to the behaviour or response of each mark in relation to each other."¹³

The most obvious reason I feel the red drawings, especially, embody the self, is their colour. The blood red on the fleshy ecru feels corporeal, relating to and referencing the body in an unconscious way. I say "unconscious", because I suspect Vass made these works according to his usual method of using the landscape as referent. But this is exactly the point – moving away from the mapping and into memory, the landscape can become anything, it becomes everything. It's the topography of the skin, the coursing of the veins, the responsive movements of the body, the flickering vision laid on the night sky. Through memory the landscape becomes consciousness. It becomes a consciousness exploring the unknown by dispersing itself within it. By dispersing itself within, Being becomes one with place, while time carries the self to the potential of all things on its unwavering tide.

¹ Golding, M., *Andrew Vass – Drawings*, 2013, essay in conjunction with lecture "Marking Out the Space: The Drawing of Andrew Vass", 2015, Royal Drawing School Shoreditch.

Matar, H., *Outside the City Wall*, 2007, London: Broadbent Gallery, [online] available at: http://www.broadbentgallery.com/wp-content/files_mf/andrew20vass20brochure.pdf [accessed 9 May 2015].

Ryan, D., 2005, *Frequency*, London: Broadbent Gallery, [catalogue].

² Ibid.

³ Andrew Vass, 2015, [video], anon, England: s.n. "There is a period of discomfort where you kind of feel your initial reason to take [a mark] off hopefully will work out in a certain kind of way, suddenly it doesn't work any more and you have to shift it into new territory. I was thinking about how that works in terms of relationships with other people. I think I've experienced that particularly in friendships, sometimes in

relationships I've experienced it more with an irretrievable breakdown because I don't know how to always find my way back."

⁴ Ibid. "Just trying to think about correspondences, or memory of landscape, or memory of spaces, and as I was just drawing this area here, I was thinking of, something of the memory of living in Italy in the late 80s...I can remember the feeling of the pull of the hill...I remember at least that feeling of being pulled into space on the ascendant. So these different ideas of being enclosed then opened out, the sort of contracting and expanding of things interests me."

⁵ Andrew Vass, 2009, *Spanning*, [online], available at: <http://a-vass.co.uk/work/spanning-01-1> [accessed: 9 May 2015].

⁶ Andrew Vass, 2009, *Inclining*, [online], available at: <http://a-vass.co.uk/work/inclining> [accessed: 9 May 2015].

⁷ Andrew Vass, 2009, *Dispersal*, [online], available at: <http://a-vass.co.uk/work/dispersal> [accessed: 9 May 2015].

⁸ Chambers, 2015, Chambers Dictionary [online], John Murray Learning, available at: <http://www.chambers.co.uk/> [accessed 9 May 2015].

Wikipedia, 2015, *Gerund*, [online], (last updated: 27 April 2015), available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerund> [accessed 9 May 2015].

⁹ Kertess, K., 1997, *Joan Mitchell*, New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., p. 15

¹⁰ Andrew Vass, 2015, [video], anon, England: s.n. "In all my drawings I'm looking for a point where the marks do more than just simply mark out territory, but they start to really create tension that feeds the rest of the drawing, and I don't know where that's going to be until it suddenly appears to me."

¹¹ Deleuze, G., 1968, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Athlone Press (1994), London: Continuum, 2004, p. 45.

¹² For the purposes of this essay, I'm simplifying the philosophical debate surrounding being and the self, by equating the two.

¹³ Ryan, D., 2005, *Frequency*, London: Broadbent Gallery, [catalogue].