

# ERIKA VOGT AND NANCY DE HOLL

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**ERIKA:** I've always found it exciting that I can't read your photographs immediately and that, as a viewer, I am thrown into an ambiguous relationship with what I am looking at. Your images create a strange place—or maybe it's a strange state—and I've been trying to understand this experience. There was even a hesitancy surrounding this interview, which is useful because it provides an avenue to naming something that exists within the experience of the work. It's not a hesitancy. It's a...

**NANCY:** You sensed resistance?

**ERIKA:** Yes, exactly, maybe a resistance...but to what?

**NANCY:** It's a record.

**ERIKA:** Yes, this is a fixed record that contains the possibility for definition. Do you have a resistance to definition?

**NANCY:** Well I think that's a pretty literal aspect of the work. I'm partially making decisions that are, like we said yesterday, negative decisions. By that I mean that when I'm working I have an awareness, like I think we all do, of the categories or genres that a photograph can fit into—journalistic, advertisement, black-and-white dance photography, and so on. So partly out of entertaining myself, and partly for reasons I can't explain, I attach to one of these genres or I'll avoid another until I reach a point where they coalesce into something that catches me off guard and seems like an interesting non-space space. By "negative" I mean that I am negating these slots, but at the same time entirely embracing the futility of that endeavor. So often the images imitate a genre, but the specifics don't add up.

**ERIKA:** I can see how negative decision making could be useful in avoiding certain reads [of your work]. At times I use a similar process. I am interested in making work that can manage many ideas and perspectives and I fear that leaning too heavily in any one direction might upset this balance. A clear example of this would be when I am making the wall pieces ("Up Your Wall Forever"). That series tries to complicate the relationship between modes of artistic production and modes of mass produc-

tion by using altered scraps of found materials, mass-produced commercial samples, and the smudges I make in the process of creating the work. The pieces are the outcome of many layered actions, of moving the materials around the paper for weeks on end, of which the effects of this process are mostly left visible. However, I never let the work get too expressive—that is a stopping point for me—because that would undermine the evolving relationship that is being played out between the manufactured samples, the found scraps, and my hand. I was wondering about your work and this abstraction process. Do you think about things like this when you are making your work?

**NANCY:** Well, I'm thinking about what abstraction means...one could generally say that it refers to a quality of not being representational, of moving toward a mental state that doesn't require language or identification, that it's unclassifiable.

I studied classical music before I went into painting, and for a time the question of abstraction was really important. I was personally opposed to any sort of representation for a while. It's silly how black-and-white I saw it then. I guess that's why I ended up using the most mimetic medium there is.

**ERIKA:** Do you think about things like photography and abstraction? When I was in school studying experimental film with people who had mostly structural leanings, I worked with someone who thought film could only be representational. It stuck with me because it was such an absolute statement and, being so fixed, it seemed foreign to me.

**NANCY:** I don't know if it really matters.

**ERIKA:** No—but I am curious when you talk about the mimetic and photography. I am wondering if you think about those distinctions?

**NANCY:** I start to think about it and entropy takes over. I guess I did think about those distinctions instinctually many years ago when I moved from grid painting to theatrical set-photography à la Jeff Wall.

**ERIKA:** Why have a resistance to being read?

**NANCY:** I want the image to be alive in the room. And as soon as something is read, it's no longer present. I thought your piece at D'Amelio [Terras Gallery] achieved this kind of presence really well.

I think that it's powerful in art or literature especially when your perceptions get inverted. At the moment I'm in this

phase of my practice where I'm willing to work within severe limitations, because instinctually it keeps me close to subtle contradictions that I can play with and then build on. I think that's partly why I'm not making objects, because there's something so narrow about photography that I kind of enjoy. Though at other times I think that's a weakness in the work.

**ERIKA: What kind of limitations do you give yourself?**

**NANCY:** They just appear organically. I find myself locking against a certain aesthetic or a certain format, like the tabletop. I'll just stick to the tabletop and embrace it and go really deeply into that space. My idea is that if I can fully enter the format then I can feel free within those limitations. But I don't know if I could ever be like Sol LeWitt. I also have a very bare-bones lighting situation in my studio. I tend to just use clamp lamps—that would make a lot of photographers cringe.

**ERIKA: You are choosing certain stylistic tropes over others, and you're choosing certain limitations in which to work. Could you explain your choices?**

**NANCY:** Sure. Well, I've always been interested in advertisement. So, just as a base subject matter, I think that's always present, or at least in the last six or so years. I'm interested in the gap between what the advertiser intends and what the viewer sees. I'm speaking of static images, ads with pictures. To paint a really simple scenario—because I actually think advertising is a very complex operation—sometimes the advertising is effective: someone walking on the street or looking at a magazine is impressed or they get seduced into this fantasy-scape that brands their subconscious. But then sometimes I think there is something in the image that goes awry. There's a gap of communication, something's badly retouched, or people look tortured and incongruous, the logic is really cheap and confused... the more subtle it is the more exciting. Sometimes there's a big gap. I like to enter into that space.

**ERIKA: I always have advertising in the back of my mind too and make negative decisions based on its logic. I don't want to make something that's digestible or has a focus, in a way, because advertising has a focus and clarity from which I need to separate. I don't really think about the gap between what's intended and what you see. For me, it is about being clear. Images in advertising have clarity and a singular intention. They need to be specific. Commercials are very specific. In the back of my mind, I'm constantly making decisions that are negative to forms of advertising.**

**NANCY:** Well, your aesthetic is very, very anti-commercial. *[Laughs]*

**ERIKA: So is yours, de Holl! *[Laughs]***

**NANCY:** Mine is too, yeah. But we have totally different aesthetics. Yours is almost like, especially the videos, they feel confrontational.

**ERIKA: My aesthetic can be a little confrontational.**

**NANCY:** Mine still seeks to be seductive.

**ERIKA: Seductive, yes—it's an important component to the work. Is it part of the recipe of how it becomes a strange experience? It puts me in this weird position of being in between something—of being attracted to something, but I can't immediately get a sense of what or who is pulling me in.**

**NANCY:** That's kind of the way advertising operates.

**ERIKA: Yes—you put me in this position as a viewer where things are specific and non-specific. Tell me more about this. It's really fascinating to me, and I think it's quite hard to achieve—to put me in this place.**

**NANCY:** Well, I like when the work hovers above being depictive and I think your work does this too, actually, you're not taking it all the way to that surrealist vortex of precisely illustrating something out of your subconscious. I really love surrealism, but I'm not interested in going all the way into a virtual space like Dalí, you know? It has to stop somewhere. Is that what you mean? Let me ask you, I feel like it would be helpful for you to say how you choose your objects? You're seeing them in a photograph on eBay, right? Also, when you see the object and you decide to get it—because it fits whatever inspirations you're having in your head for something—and then you get it, is there ever a disappointment? I'm curious about that whole process.

**ERIKA: My process of finding objects and materials is usually a very lengthy one. I may start looking for one thing and end up with another. Sometimes there is disappointment, but usually it's just that I need more time to realize the object's potential. For example, I wanted something heavy, so I bought an inexpensive motor part online. It arrived, and I've had a really hard time with it, to the point where I was certain that it was just trash and it needed to go away quickly. Part of the difficulty is that the motor is both literally and figuratively heavy,**

and the question becomes about how to take the motor out of being a motor and all from the position of being post-motor. Anyway, it's still not right. I need more time. Maybe it is trash...

**NANCY:** The trash question is familiar for me as well...so it's about timing too. [Laughs]

**ERIKA:** Timing is essential. When I was making *Surface Screen Projection*, I must have purchased over a dozen screens online before I found the right type. It took me a while to reduce the object to a new screen that was manufactured in the United States.

**NANCY:** So it's like a sculptural material that has a certain aesthetic or quality that you respond to.

**ERIKA:** It's something with which I want to engage. It also usually offers the potential for some delivery of multiple perspectives.

**NANCY:** So it's like a series of chain events that determine how you arrive at a certain object then.

**ERIKA:** Yes—exactly.

**NANCY:** Can you talk a bit about your interest in evolution and how that relates to the work? It's pretty apparent to me seeing the work, and also I know from hearing from you, that the work is grounded in ideas that come out of reading philosophy. Can you explain what you meant the other day when you spoke of humans as being an "intermediate species"?

**ERIKA:** I gather ideas very much like I gather objects and materials. Usually, they need to go through some process of distilling or decoding, and often one idea will lead me to another, like the chain you describe. Though I find ideas about evolution or the idea of an intermediate species fascinating, they seem more like containers to me at this point. When I take them apart, they bear an interest in the past, present, and the future.

**NANCY:** It seems like there's this desire to perceive things in artificial, hyper-real ways—by artificial I mean that it's not an ability that we, as humans, have. Because you're constructing these scenarios where we're looking at a layering of perspectives on a given object. That is the most literal in your "Number Portrait" series, where you photographed dice in a mirrored container, enabling multiple perspectives of each of its six facets. Do you

consider the space of your photographs and videos to be virtual? Is that interesting to you?

**ERIKA:** I think it's both. I see it as a virtual space and as the potential for a material space. I don't know—can the virtual be the material?

**NANCY:** I don't know!

**ERIKA:** I don't know either!

**NANCY:** Is Hannibal Lecter a material or a space?

**ERIKA:** Hmm...let's figure him to be an in-between entity.

**NANCY:** How does your use of mirrors relate to these ideas?

**ERIKA:** The mirror in the dice photographs had the effect of taking apart the object and keeping it together all at once. In the new photographs, the mirror is more abstract and more experiential. I removed the mirror from the image but still wanted something that functioned like a mirror without actually being one.

**NANCY:** I understood that you were reflecting the object by lining it up visually, but that your body was on two different planes. In the pictorial space of the photograph we see your figure as supine and foregrounded, but, illusionistically, the object appears to be reflected in a mirror. Almost like a trompe l'oeil effect. This is enhanced because you are printing the images human-scale, too, implying the viewer's body in the mirror logic.

**ERIKA:** I thought abstractly about the mirror and its function. What does it do? It sends something back. I am interested in this—the send back.

**NANCY:** What does the send back do?

**ERIKA:** It communicates. What leads you to your objects?

**NANCY:** It's a similar thing. I often start out with a vision in my head. I need to fulfill certain textures and effects. I arrange them by their formal qualities always, but sometimes the resonance of a juxtaposition overpowers this. With the still lifes I was responding to my parents' new home at the time. I felt like I was in a department store. I would be tripping out on these extremely decisive arrangements of objects that they had in the house. So I was enacting their sensibility at the same time.

**ERIKA:** Also, the displayed objects are supposed to be an indication of individuality, of selection, but they are mass-made objects. Did you think about that during the process of making the photographs?

**NANCY:** That there's a generic quality to them?

**ERIKA:** Yes.

**NANCY:** I think that's where I was able to get really alienated by them, because they had this faux veneer of having a history, but they actually exuded the furthest thing from nostalgia, which is how a lot of those things I bought at Pier 1 operate. There will be a gilded leather trunk that looks like it's a relic from Great Grandpa's travels in Morocco, but really you just got it at the Beverly Connection. Your objects on the other hand, they have tons of history corroded all over them. They are the real deal.

**ERIKA:** They have a lot of history, but I use them as raw materials. So I guess I see them more as materials with a very specific history.

**NANCY:** Right. Is it about your contact with the object?

**ERIKA:** My contact was something functional that worked with my interests. I could have gone to great lengths to conceal the support for the object—like, for example, if I were doing traditional product photography. However, I am not so interested in exactly replicating that system of production. My direct contact with the objects also opened things up for me in a way. I can take things apart, put them back together, or change them as needed because I am building the images.

**NANCY:** I wanted to ask you about what I see as a semi-analytic approach you have to using the camera and how the object operates in the photo, as opposed to being in the real world. You were saying there's this collapsing of time.

**ERIKA:** I've been using it to create an imagined space or perspective. It's very specific and instantaneous and collapsed.

**NANCY:** To me, it seems like a kind of conceptual construction, but much better because it cuts through the dryness that so much conceptual work has. I'm interested, again, in this process of you buying things you see—as images—on eBay. You connect to them some way in this fantasy space of your mind. Then you give them your credit card number. Then you receive it, unwrap it, and interact

with it. You actually get inside some of them...it appears slightly ritualistic, though I know that's not the focus of the work. It seems to me like you are invading the image of the object, like entering the picture plane.

**ERIKA:** Yes, I am invading the system of imaging objects. However, they are also very much about finding exit strategies, as I am literally trying to leave the frame and get to the place where everything is foreign i.e. the title for the series: "I Arrive When I Am Foreign." I want to say the photographs are highly encoded entities because they have so many contradictions embedded within them. I don't think of them as fantasy, though they are the result of an imaginative process. They reference too many systems of production for them to be pure fantasy. This makes me think about something that you said earlier, about wanting your photographs to achieve a presence. Why do you want your photographs to be present?

**NANCY:** Well it's related to a couple of things. But for a long time I was interested in recreating found photographs—I think my work is still derived from this interest. I responded to the remoteness and psychic potency that an image without origins can convey. It's this moment of identification or hypnosis that—though it can happen in any given medium—for me, is particular to looking at photographs. Shadows and framing can obscure things as well, and the image gains a kind of energy—that may be there some days, but other days it might be closed. It depends on the state of the viewer, ultimately.

**ERIKA:** It's interesting that you say that about the viewer. Do you want their position to shift? I'm really interested in how your photographs work. You have used a range of objects from the mass-made to the handmade, and I always feel like I am in a similar position with each—looking at something familiar but strange.

**NANCY:** No, I don't expect anything from the viewers. I think they are probably familiar because I'm incorporating aspects of photographic genres that we are all familiar with, that are particular to our visual environment right now.

**ERIKA:** Yes, of course. Let me see if I can rephrase the question and be more specific. I do think it's interesting to consider the viewer abstractly in this because they are in a way part of the legibility factor. Do you choose objects that are open to a multiplicity of readings? Also, how do the objects relate to their sets?

**NANCY:** I'm not sure how to characterize the objects. They have changed over the years. Initially they were mass-produced, semi-decorative things that go on a tabletop but are kind of vacuous and cheap and product-like. Then I began to sculpt objects out of clay. This was a move away from the intact surface of the manufactured object, to work with a material in a base way...but now I'm not sure how I'm using them. There are objects that are known, side by side with objects that are obscure. I was generally choosing to photograph objects that are kind of generic, so yeah, I'd say they were open to a multiplicity of readings. But they have gotten increasingly handmade, and the familiar and unfamiliar are now getting jumbled together.

The objects relate to their sets in ways that suit the convention, I suppose...with the still-life photos I was thinking about the coldness and reserve that catalog images have—you don't want them to have too much significance, because you want the customer to fill in the gaps. The ethnographic objects were isolated and kind of clinical but dramatic. People want to be entertained in a museum. The museum has to be a little sexual and mysterious.

The photos generally all have something to do with rituals of display.

**ERIKA:** This brings up a lot of questions and ideas. Have you thought about the objects being familiar and unfamiliar in relation to the photographs being experienced as familiar and unfamiliar? Also, could you talk more about the photographic genres that you gravitate toward? What genres are you not interested in referencing? Lastly, how do you consider them rituals of display?

**NANCY:** Yes, I think you're right, that the objects parallel the operation of the photo with the familiar/unfamiliar. The genres I gravitate toward come out of personal experiences. For instance, I was thinking about my parents' house when I was making the tabletop photos and trying to re-create these intense confrontations I was having. The ethno-photos came out of looking at artifacts at LACMA and online, the fashion photos from working as a fashion photo assistant. *That* was one of the most surreal experiences...really nuts.

By "rituals of display" I mean that the subject of most photos I take is on display—it's performing for you. It connects to the performative space of the home, the museum, and, now, the body with the contortionists.

**ERIKA:** What do you mean by "performing for you"?

**NANCY:** They are trying to sell you something you don't need. They're not to be trusted!

**ERIKA:** What about the still life? Also, can you talk about the transition in your photographs from the found object to the handmade to the human?

**NANCY:** Well I've always loved a good still life.

**ERIKA:** Being Dutch.

**NANCY:** And I'm Dutch. I came to shooting objects on a tabletop because it was the most simple thing I could do at the time. In school I was writing plays with slide projectors and photographing people with strobes, and I broke a 4x5 camera and kept fucking up my negatives. So I just was like, okay, I want to really pare it down, what's the simplest thing I could do, and the answer was to photograph an object on a table. It was kind of like clearing out the clutter. Then they got more complex and weirder, optical things were happening and stuff. I wasn't really looking at still-life painting at all. But it's interesting to me if someone sees them as related to that history. About the transition into handmaking things: ultimately, the still lifes fit into a certain formula of stock or product photography, but then I wanted to be more involved and specific. It only made sense to just start making the objects. But I liked there being this incommunicativeness to the objects still, so I started using clay because it seemed to be the most primitive material. I liked the way its tactility looked in the camera. To me, they sort of approached human flesh and this plastic quality of retouched photography. Everything was very suspended looking, suspended in motion or suspended in its modeling. To me, the whole photograph became more plastic. Right now, I'm looking at a lot of fashion magazines, because I feel like that is a plastic space.

**ERIKA:** It seems like the human presence was prefigured by the handmade objects: your current photographs involve contortionists. Have you been slowly incorporating the figurative in your work?

**NANCY:** Yes, because humans are the most plastic thing. ¶¶