Noé Sendas: The Shape of Things To Come

Jean Wainwright in conversation with Noé Sendas

"It's not where you take things from – it's where you take them to."
Jean-Luc Godard

Noé Sendas, Rue du Prince Royal 51, Brussels, 1975

Jean Wainwright: *You were born in Brussels and moved to Lisbon as a child before going to school in London. What are your earliest memories of images or art from Brussels and Lisbon?*
Noé Sendas: Well, my parents were artists, we always lived in studios rather than *homes* and as with many artists' studios there were not many "finished" artworks hanging on the wall, only things that my parents would be working on at that moment. Instead, my earliest memories are more related to tools and materials scattered around the place, which I could and did, use in any way I wished. My parents' art practice was a holistic one, more than focusing my attention on certain works of art in a museum, they would encourage me to experience an everyday art practice.
In Brussels I do remember being pushed in a stroller in *Place du Petit Sablon* gazing at the Bronze statues designed by Paul Hankar against the tree branches backdrop while falling asleep. In Lisbon I remember being enchanted by my paternal grandfather who was an amazing storyteller with a great sense of humour.

JW: *Did your parents' artistic environment influence you as a child?*
NS: Yes, they were very influenced by the Bauhaus, or what they understood to be a Bauhaus way of living. This was Brussels in the early 1970s, just after May 1968. To give you an example, at a certain point there were no chairs in our house. During meals we would sit on the drawers, which were placed back in the kitchen cabinet after the meal.
Without knowing I was being taught that everything at hand could be transformed, and that art is a way of living, of using up time. As a child I knew I could cut my clothes to make a collage, but I also knew that the next day I would have go to school with a hole in my t-shirt.

JW: *When did you move to London? What did you miss?*
NS: I was thirteen, it was a bit of a shock for me. Suddenly I was a nameless kid attending Holland Park School. I could barely speak English and for the first time in my life I felt as if I didn't belong. I knew it was a language barrier not a cultural one, as I understood all the social codes. I just could not express myself or felt I was being too slow when doing so . . . I remember for instance that I was always given the role of the dead man in Drama Classes, which I always gladly accepted.
I also started to draw. Now looking back, I feel that, through drawing, I was having a conversation with myself, I was trying to find my own voice, or seen from another perspective I was really trying not to lose my own voice and to open up a conversation with others.

JW: *Did your parents take you to museums or art galleries in London?*
NS: My mum would take me regularly to the main museums such as the Tate and the National Gallery. I remember one day we went to the Saatchi Gallery on Boundary Road. From memory I have the impression that it all happened on the same day, but now looking back it was probably a series of exhibitions. I remember being mesmerized by Anselm Kiefer's huge paintings and feeling vertigo while looking at Koons' (basketballs) tanks, as if my body wanted to grasp something that my mind could not apprehend.

JW: *You have mentioned that when you came to London your first studio was at Holland Park School. Why was that important to you?*
NS: Yes it was, in Holland Park School, where I had an amazing art teacher, Joy Wilbraham, who understood my "deafness" and tried to unlock me. She first invited me to join the life drawing classes and then offered me the storeroom of her classroom for me to use as a personal studio. This helped

me to integrate, but also protected me from becoming too much of a "cool" kid. I was a fifteen-year-old kid from Ladbroke Grove, it was the late 80s and it would have been easy to find oneself in a dark alley.

JW: *You would have seen half finished work and images – did any of that impress upon your imagination?*
NS: That's a very interesting point . . . true, in the storeroom I would always be surrounded by unfinished images. At the time though, what really caught my attention in there were the mannequins used for the still drawing classes . . . the bodies . . . just left there, always in different positions: Like a little frozen family who I would visit every day after school.

JW: *Do you think it had any influence on the way that you construct your images or your visual references?*
NS: The unfinished images? For sure!
Those years in London were an awakening of something I had experienced as a toddler in Brussels. Not so much the work that I was doing in art classes, but the conversations with myself while doing those works. It's about how one mentally constructs a spider's web that will become simultaneously structure and artwork.

JW: *When did you first realise that you wanted to be an artist, was it prior to Holland Park School?*
NS: Much later . . . At seventeen my family moved back to Portugal and I, by myself, went to Lisbon, another huge cut with the past.
In Lisbon I went to António Arroio School and most importantly to Atelier Livre, an artists' studio run by Pedro Morais, an artist and Zen practitioner, who had lived in Paris in the late 60s. On the first day in the Studio I met Joana Villaverde, who became a very good friend and artist. At the time we were just kids and led by her we found ourselves directly propelled into the creative heart of Lisbon. I would be missing out my school classes during the day and going out to openings, getting to know the artists, writers and filmmakers during the night.
Finally, I ended up attending the Ar.Co school of visual arts in Lisbon.
I was probably nineteen, when in one of those classes I was introduced to the works and thoughts of Bruce Nauman. Suddenly I had the floor taken from under my feet. The rawness in the way Nauman questioned himself and presented it as art not only reverberated, it checkmated me. It made me question myself as an artist, which meant that from then on I also *recognised* myself as an artist.

JW: *In 1993 you went to the RCA in London. What are your memories from that time and what kind of work did you produce?*
NS: Tim Mara, the then Head of Fine Art at the Royal College of Art, went to visit our school in Lisbon. I was chosen to present my work to him. After some time I was invited by Manuel Costa Cabral, the then headmaster of Ar.Co, to join the RCA printmaking course for a semester with Tim Mara as my tutor.
It was Mara who strongly suggested I should attend an art theory course "Towards the end of the Millennium" by an unknown artist to me, John Stezaker. Only much later I realised how germinal this meeting was.

JW: *Were there also theorists at the time that you were interested in and why?*
NS: I did read Félix Guattari, Gilles Deleuze and also Walter Benjamin.
At the time my main interest was cinema, so I kind of "took" Jean-Luc Godard as my main tutor by seeing his films, watching his interviews and reading his texts. Now one forgets, but this was a very exciting time for video making . . . with the early digital cameras and video projectors. Suddenly one

Noé Sendas, Royal College of Art, London, 1993

Wanderer, 1999

could make really low budget and experimental films and invite friends over for home screenings.
I would say that Godard's approach to editing, and his theorisation of the relationships between cinema, reality and history, was and still is very dear to me . . .

JW: *In 1997 you studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago [SAIC]. Why did you move from London and what did Chicago offer you?*
NS: I arrived back in Lisbon from London just to be offered a semester at the SAIC; once there I applied and was accepted for the masters in the video department. From SAIC I remember mostly the very kind and attentive Helen Mirra. Especially coming from Europe, Chicago was a really exciting but very tough city . . . it only took one ride in the metro at 2 am for you to understand its different coexisting dimensions.
Chicago offered me many hours of raw footage from W. Division Street, where I lived. One day, in-between takes, I filmed a situation that would later on become my video installation *Wanderer*, but it also raised a problem for me to solve in future works I would make later in Berlin.
At this time a lot of things were happening for me, both personal and work related. The Chicago experience was very special, but somehow I did not want to make another "cut" with my previous life . . . I decided to put on hold my place for the Masters for one year and move back to Europe to complete a four months residency at the Peggy Guggenheim Museum in Venice, followed by another four month residency at Cité internationale des art in Paris . . .

JW: *In 1999 you moved to Berlin, again at a very exciting time for artists. The Berlin Wall had only come down eight years before and there were huge building projects being instigated. What influence did the building and the demolition have on your aesthetic, if any?*
NS: I arrived in Berlin not knowing one word of German, but this time I utterly enjoyed my "deafness" and the focus you gain from it.
Berlin . . . gas lamps beautifully illuminating a broken down bullet marked city centre. You would hear a door open with music and voices coming out and once the door closed again you were surrounded by complete silence and often you would see a fox run by.
I met the dancer Claudia de Serpa Soares at one of those bars and we immediately became "twins". The contemporary dance scene in Berlin was extremely vibrant and radical at that moment, all over Europe but especially in Berlin. Pina Bausch and the young Meg Stuart, Alain Platel, Jérôme Bel, Sasha Waltz and others were all making amazing works, one after the other.
Claudia had just entered the Sasha Waltz & Guests company, and we regularly would go and see a dance piece and then stay discussing it at the Würgeengel until the morning after.
During the first months in Berlin and at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien I did not produce new works, I finished editing *Wanderer* and I arrived at a dead end.
I did not want to keep on filming unknown people from the streets, or recreate specific situations with professional actors or use myself as an actor in front of the camera. I envied the writers position just seated at their desks, having their narrators unfold the writers' plots. Suddenly it became clear to me . . . What if I created my own narrators out of polyester blocks with the use of two mirrors and a cutter. That's how it all started, me carving copies of myself out of polyester blocks.
The second important decision was to hide their faces and dress them with my used clothes. I had achieved my narrators, or as they become known, my *Nameless* figures and I could start thinking about my installation plots . . .

THEATRICAL PLOTS, CINEMA GENRES & PERIOD DRAMAS

JW: *You have talked in the past that you wish to invoke in the viewer the feeling of being part of a theatrical plot. Why is that?*
NS: If you enter an exhibition room with one of my figures, not only you look at it but you share the space with it. If a second viewer enters the room you are also seen as part of the piece. If you decide to leave the room only to come back again, the other viewer (the one who stayed) is now part of the work and you experience a completely different piece.
So yes, in these presentations my understanding or intention is that the viewer is part of a theatrical plot directed by me and that their role is an integrant part of the piece.
Maybe, thinking about it, this all started from an experience I had many years before during my Peggy Guggenheim internship. One morning I arrived at the museum, before opening hours, and a lady all dressed in black was mopping the floor and singing a beautiful Italian song, dancing by herself in the middle of the paintings.

JW: *Cinema and theatricality have always been an influence on your work. What were the particular film genres that interested you visually?*
NS: I always wonder why is it seen as natural if a cinema director works in different genres and period dramas, and the same cannot be said if it's regarding an artist. I really like the idea of making visual artworks not only in different "genres" but also set in a past time periods…but to answer your question . . .
Yes, I have always been under the influence of cinema . . . my stepfather studied it. At home we would see films by Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette and Alain Resnais and then discuss them.
Being from the MTV generation short videos with no dialogues or linear narrative made an impact on me, as did those ones just based on the rhythm of the music, like the 1987 video for *Pump of the Volume* with music by M|A|R|R|S.
But more than specific genres, individual films . . . like the opening sequences of Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* [1958] and Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* [1950]; the dialogues and the soundtrack of *The Night of the Iguana* [1961] written by Tennessee Williams and directed by John Huston, just to name a few . . . have had an impact on me visually.

JW: *You seem to have been very interested in video and photographic editing. Why was that?*
NS: In 2005, back in Berlin, I was making mostly sculpture works but then, I started to feel that there were too many "artistic" objects all over the city, just like plastic . . . it started to damage the ecosystem.
I had an urge to recycle, to reuse existing artistic objects, it was at that time I found a collection of 200 hours of copyleft B movies and I spent the next four years just re-editing fragments of these films. I would not even film, just make new works out of existing footage.

ACT I: PEEPS

JW: *Can you explain why you wanted to make your series* PEEPS *[2009 – ongoing] both relating to the genre of the Pin Up but with your own interpretation for the twenty-first century.*
NS: I was interested in working with the early Pin Up aesthetics: photographs taken by amateur photographers with no artistic background: where the composition is raw, when images are not made to be shown, but to be seen. In the style of Irving Klaw and his sister Paula's photographs.

UNREST (Lisboa), 2000

Dead Weight, 2007

I was also interested in the print formats of these photos. They were pocket sized due to fact that they would be sent through the post as clients were too ashamed to be seen acquiring them.

JW: *Are you interested in critiquing the form and commenting on Women and their changing role in the twenty-first century?*
NS: To me my *PEEPS* performers are androgynous. They belong to a kind of a cabaret aesthetic, where many of the traditional roles were played by the opposite sex.

JW: *The dynamic of the shapes and the "movement in process" create a wonderful contrast. Are there other references perhaps not so obvious such as to the Colour Field Painters?*
NS: Ah yes in *PEEP 52* there is a little homage to Mark Rothko that I would not necessarily reveal, but as you have mentioned the Colour Field Painters . . .
A more obvious reference would be The Triadic Ballet by Oskar Schlemmer.
Also normally when I think of composition I always think of magic techniques, like levitation, equivocation, or misdirection.

JW: *There are visual links between the images in the* PEEPS *series. Can you talk about the specific poses within the series and for example the high heels worn in many of the images?*
NS: I see the figure contained in my *PEEPS* works as a performer.
As the face of my performer is never seen, they have to express themselves through the limbs and the props that are worn.
With no access to the facial expressions, the eye of viewer channels its attention to notions such as balance, unbalance, stiffness, looseness . . . All these situations derive from the position of the feet. High heels delineate and change the shape and the dynamics of the body, and because of this, they are a great tool to help create expression. As in classical Greek sculpture the position of the feet determines everything. Adding to this… the extended pose effect, allows my performers to be read simultaneously as people and/or as sculptures . . . this duel existence continues to be important to me.

JW: *The way your work is installed and exhibited is important to you – for example, hanging from wires. Can you talk about these decisions?*
NS: Contrary to my previous works such as *Rolling!* [2005] or *Old School* [2007] which were large scale installations made to occupy entire rooms. The *PEEPS* series was planned as small diamonds I could carry in my pocket and hang on someone's wall.
I really wanted to make it simple but then I ended setting them up as a stage where the viewer had to wander by . . . just like in *Significant Others* [2016].

ACT II: CRYSTAL GIRLS & GUESTS

JW: *Your series* Crystal Girls *[2009 – ongoing] appears to be based on the idea of Hollywood's "Golden Age", and you have created a series of still lifes given new life by the complexity of your compositions. Why did you want to use those references? What was the trigger that instigated this series for you?*
NS: The *Crystal Girl*s exist as printed photomontages, made from doctored fragments of existing photographic images. They could exist as paintings and I don't set aside that possibility. For now they are approximately sixty portraits of no one in particular, printed on photographic paper.
I got to know the Hollywood Golden Age through Jean-Luc Godard.
In my own way I then delineated it as an archeological site of glamour, where with the correct tools, a little knowledge, and a good eye, I would be able to capture and uncover a gallery of mysterious portraits.

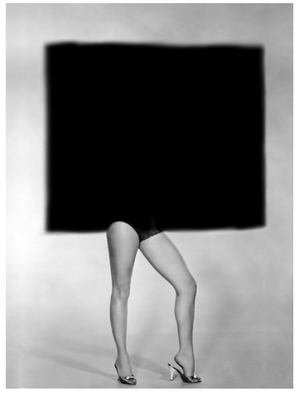
I remember that I wanted to work with photographs I had collected but I found collage a little brutal. Who was I to cut them in half? I decided to use a scanner . . . the aim was to work from printed duplicates. Instead, in the middle of this process I found something much more interesting. A way of producing new works as if I had just found a Noé Sendas work in the basement of a thrift shop in Berlin. Not only had I just become an archeologist but also a hunter and collector of Noé Sendas works.

JW: *The* Crystal Girls *series is evocative in that it addresses deconstruction, stereotypical Hollywood stars and starlets, enigmatic beauty and statuesque forms. Can you elaborate on this?*
NS: Well, when erasing a head, I believe I am not just erasing expressions but also names, titles, lineages and so forth.
When at work I don't feel that I deconstruct, it's more that I uncover . . . I am kind of *listening* to the image, sometimes I need to obliterate some areas, so I can focus on the gems within an image, finding a way of taking away all the unnecessarily parts of the image, leaving only the structure, the bones. The work is also about the limit between having a perfect unfinished image and nothing, the danger of being left with nothing.
I work with each image as an archaeologist might, as I dig deeper I find and make visible unseen elements. Once I feel there is nothing left to uncover and to witness . . . I move to a different site / image.
Enigmatic beauty and statuesque forms have existed since the beginning of times, only the approach, the ability you have to recognise and to name them differs.

JW: *What was the gestation of the series and how long did it take for you to develop your methodology?*
NS: I started it in 2009 and is still ongoing. I immediately understood that it would be a long series, that repetition and variation would play major roles in it. To avoid saturation, I do take breaks from the series.

JW: *Where did the decision come from to remove the faces from many of your figures? Is this to create a tension in the composition or intrigue in the viewer?*
NS: Most of my works exist as a resonance to previous questions I could not solve within a previous works . . . I would say that with the *Crystal Girl*s I am dealing in a very different way with problems posed by the series *Nameless,* which in turn derived from the video installation *Wanderer.*

JW: *In Ovid's* Pygmalion *a Cypriot sculptor carved a woman out of ivory which later springs to life. In* Crystal Girl No. 11 *you seem to hint at this mythology in reverse, the idealised woman is in the process of becoming a statue?*
NS: . . . Medusa captured while looking at herself on the mirror . . . that could be a thought . . .
Last year I went with my partner Sandra Feio to the uninhabited Island of Delos. It's a holy sanctuary therefore no human can sleep there. There was a time no one was even allowed to die or give birth there due to its sacred importance.
This voyage left a footprint in my mind, Delos is very much in the present, not only that . . . When in Delos, even if you're not allowed to die there, you are still allowed an undomesticated way of gazing, thinking and walking through the island. This has been lost in many parts of the newly franchised cities. In most museums, even with the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, when it was last renovated, and endless art venues . . . I can't really explain it but . . . there is something about this timeless freedom of gazing that interests me. You can still find that in a city like Palermo, in a museum like the Capitoline in Rome, or in the work of an artist like Mark Manders.



PEEP 52, 2016

Snapscope #1, 2012

JW: *You enjoy the interaction of doubling and have talked in the past of this being "narcissistic". There do seem to be references to René Magritte in your* Crystal Girls *series.*
NS: Yes the painting *Not to Be Reproduced* [1937] by Magritte is definitely a work which moulded me. It's the unsolved quality of the picture and the endless dead end sensation it provokes. I do relate to the way Magritte constructed his paintings. How he would make several variations of one work. The un-expressionist quality of his paintings, how they are almost like photomontage, and the way he incorporated mirrors and windows in his work.

JW: *How do you actually make the work and what is your working method?*
NS: I am a strong believer that a work of Art always contains different sets of velocities in the making. Some decisions are very intuitive and fast, others need a lot of preparation and research. The way Rembrandt works in fine detail on some parts of a painting, and defines others with just a few loose brushstrokes . . .this can also be seen in some of Goya's paintings.

JW: *You also became interested in early photographic viewing devices?*
NS: Yes, when your work is about editing and how to best re-insert your work in relation to all other existing artworks, viewing devices and their social history become a vital part of ones practice.
I actually find it very interesting that early photographic devices had two main objectives, the moving pictures and the 3D picture. While the moving pictures resulted in the 7th Art form, the 3D pictures attempts were a total failure.
For someone like me, who defines himself as a sculptor working with photographic materials, these failed objects such as the snapscopes are very appealing.

JW: *You are attracted to strong dynamic forms such as in your series* The Lady Vanishes.
NS: *The Lady Vanishes* was a solo show at Michael Hoppen gallery in London in 2015, that resulted from an invitation by Sarah Douglas to make a special series for *Wallpaper** magazine. Here the process was diverse, as I worked with a "ghost photographer". I asked Sarah to hire a photographer who would make draft photos under my guidance, this way I would be able to edit as I usually do with found footage. I would arrive at the set with drawings and ideas that we would produce photographically leaving blank spaces that I would work on at a later stage.
It was a very gratifying experience working with Isabelle Kountoure, Jan Lehner and the whole team.

ACT III: UNKNOWNS

JW: *The images in the* Unknowns *series could be interpreted in a number of ways. Can you talk a little about them?*
NS: It all started with an envelope I found in Rastro, with word Desconocidas hand written in pencil. The envelope contained 200 negative portrait photos of unknown women. I was enchanted with this collection, who were these handsome and not stereotyped women? Who was this male amateur photographer who took their photos, I spotted him on mirror reflections inside the photos.
It started from there and it ended there. Just like a short film.
Hopefully the works that result from this series are rich enough to entangle the viewer.

JW: *Photography traditionally refers us to the surface of the print – yet in your series the photograph has a three dimensional sculptural aspect. Your hand and creativity literally present. Is this a reaction to the wealth of digital images that we are constantly faced*

with to give photography an added value and significance?
NS: One of the main reasons that makes me work the dimensional sculptural aspect of these photomontages is to help me set the works in past time periods.
To make believe that these works always existed, that they have always been here, that I just dusted and placed them in front of the viewer.

ACT IV: THE OLD STUDIO

JW: *At what point did you begin collecting, which became such an important reference for you in your art?*
NS: My father would always have as few objects as possible surrounding him and no images what so ever. At a late stage of his life he slowly dispatched every single object from our family house, from the fridge to the most personal letters, including all his tools and artworks. When the house was 100% empty he sold it. After a few months he died.
Sometime later, I started do the flea markets & thrift shops in Berlin, in the beginning I was just collecting photos for the work I was making. I was interested in the uniqueness of each of these pieces of paper with the images printed on them. How they had survived in time until being captured by me.
I then started to collect objects from very different provenances. As I collect I am gathering memories, affections even. When I take these objects to my studio I am opening new conversations. It's an ongoing process, which can take a long time. If I am successful, the objects, the artworks, will be kept by others. My work is not only about this, *yet* it is also about this.

JW: *Has this love of collecting continued?*
NS: I visited Louise Bourgeois in New York during one of the Saturday meetings she organised in her studio/home reception room, for her to see young artist works. She was really beautiful, with very intense eyes and a unique sense of humour. At a certain moment I asked if I could go the loo. "Certainly," she said. "You just go through this door, along the corridor, pass here and there, then down the stairs until you find it, just be careful with the spider."
I had to pinch myself, as I was walking through this artpiece, slash home, slash studio, slash collection heading to the loo . . .
Once in the loo . . . I causally looked up and saw one of these huge Louise Bourgeois Spiders. This time I was the prey, I was the one that had been collected into her work.

JW: *You are also interested in literature and theory. Which books have you found particularly useful or inspirational?*
NS: Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* [1951] would be my bible.

JW: *Can you explain why?*
NS: It's such beautiful construction. It's all there, it's complete.
Each time I revisit it, I still feel I belong there, and that keeps me going.

JW: *There is isolation and tension in many of your images. Where is that coming from?*
NS: Early on I understood that some questions related to one's work do not have an answer, and that it is ok *not* to have an answer. That you just have to work. To me this is one these questions. If I had the answer I would not have to go to the studio every day and work. This said, I think your question hits a vital nerve.

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