Artworld Analog: A Conversation with Anne Doran

By Taylor Dafoe

Anne Doran is best known as a second-wave Pictures Generation artist. Her large, wall-mounted photosculptures appropriate found images from sources such as ads, porn magazines, and military literature, juxtaposing them in formally playful ways that at once recall the pop collages of James Rosenquist or Richard Hamilton and the angular designs of the Constructivists. However, Doran’s artworld footprint is much more expansive than her visual art. For nearly three decades now, she has split her time working as an artist, a critic, an editor, and a curator.

After showing at 303 Gallery in the 1980s, alongside such artists as Richard Prince, Liz Larner, and Thomas Ruff, the economic recession led Doran to take a break from making art—a hiatus that, with a few exceptions, ended up lasting twenty-plus years. However, her visual work was rediscovered several years ago by gallerists Benjamin Tischer and Risa Needleman of the upstart New York City gallery Invisible Exports, and in 2014 they showed Doran’s sculptures for the first time since they were on view in the 1990s. The exhibition garnered a great deal of reception and critical praise, helping introduce her prescient work to a new generation of artists interested in appropriation, image production, and the materiality of photographs.

Now Doran is back to making work regularly. Her second show with the gallery, Analogs, was on view January 6–February 12 of this year, and coincided with the 11th White Columns Annual, which she curated—both exhibitions received more positive reviews. In February, Doran sat down with me in Brooklyn to talk about her work, the hiatus she took from making visual art, and the many artworld hats she’s worn since.

TAYLOR DAFOE: Let’s start with your early work from the 1980s. At that time, how much did you know about the work of the Pictures artists, who were also appropriating found images?

ANNE DORAN: I moved to New York City on the advice of Martha Wilson, who had seen my senior show at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, DC. I was working at a place called d.c. space, which was a restaurant and jazz venue that also occasionally hosted performance art. Howard Halle, an old friend and one of my mentors, was a partner in the club and scheduled the art performances. He brought people like Martha, Vito Acconci, Laurie Anderson, and Robert Longo down from New York. I was living upstairs, and I’d put people up. I remember I once had the entire World Saxophone Quartet crashed out in my apartment. So I already knew some people. I moved to Brooklyn in 1979, in a snowstorm.

A friend and fellow artist, Gretchen Bender, had moved to New York City a bit earlier, and through her I got to know some of the Pictures Generation artists early on. Their work really excited me. I hadn’t realized that you could use found images as your own. But, like Gretchen, I was part of a slightly younger generation that was working with multiple images rather than a single image. I was trying to put them together in ways that resonated personally or politically. By the late ’80s, I was doing fairly well with my art. I was showing at 303 Gallery, which had moved to SoHo by then. But in 1987 the stock market crashed and the art market with it, and within a couple of years I, like many other artists, was out of a job.

At that moment, I was offered a position as an associate art editor at Grand Street magazine, which the curator Walter Hopps had persuaded Jean Stein, the author of Edie: American Girl (1994), to purchase. She bought it in 1990 from Ben Sonnenberg, who had started it as a strictly literary journal in 1981. Walter’s idea was that it should become a literary and art magazine modeled on publications like View. I’d known Walter since my Washington days, when he was working at the Smithsonian. We met when he did his 36 Hours show at the Museum of Temporary Art in DC, to which I lent a piece. By then I was already a contributing editor to the magazine, so it was a good fit.

I had started writing critically about art by that time as well. Howard, who moved to New York about the same time I did, had gotten a job as the art editor for the British listings magazine Time Out, which had just expanded into New York. He asked me if I’d like to write art reviews for him. I enjoyed doing it, although I’m a little embarrassed by some of the early ones now [laughs].

TD: Do you feel the same way when you look at the visual work you did around that time?
AD: No, absolutely not. The timeline of the sculptures is also more complicated. My first show at Invisible Exports in 2014 was of work from the late 1980s and early ’90s. My most recent show at the gallery—which was up earlier this year—featured new work, although some of the pieces were made from old collages.

There are more rules in writing than in art. And working with a good editor, or editors, is vital. The editors at Time Out were pretty hard on my early efforts. And then, at Grand Street, I began to get interested in what the editors there were doing. My job was to work with Walter on the art while Jean and my fellow staff members—great editors all—put the literary content together. I was fascinated by that process and wanted to know more about it. So, during the eight years I worked at Grand Street, I ended up taking a lot of journalism courses at New York University and Columbia University. I wanted to learn how to edit, which I did. I still struggle a lot with my own writing, though. I think all writers do.

TD: What about the arrangement of the images? They fit together quite naturally, yet the way they operate formally is very complex, playing with shifting perspectives and scales—they remind me of Gordon Matta-Clark’s photo-assemblages in that way.

AD: The arrangements are very intuitive. In the 1980s and ’90s, I had a vast collection of magazines—everything from hard-core porn, to specialized publications for the military, to industrial carpet catalogs. But a lot of my source material came from the advertising circulars that come through your mail slot each day. I think it was Marcel Duchamp who said that the best art is made from what you find in your wastebasket. And even now, plastic bags full of art material get shoveled through my letter slot every morning.

TD: They’re literally delivered to you.

AD: Yes, every day. For free. I have woodshedding periods where I just look through magazines and junk mail and cut out pictures. And then I’ll lay out the pictures that interest me the most at that moment on a big table and start rearranging them until I have a collection of images that seem right together. I’ve never been without a big table in my house. I eat at one end and play with the pictures at the other end, and try not to let the mess migrate too far from either end. After putting together a few pictures, I’m usually able to figure out what I’m after. They’re trains of thought, snippets of ideas. I’ve been in psychoanalysis for a long time, so I’m used to working associatively.

TD: Psychoanalysis seems to have had a significant impact on your work.

AD: It’s continuous. But I also like to leave things a little bit open. What I’m trying for in my art is some sort of reflection of what I’m thinking or feeling, or trying to work through in the moment. At the same time, though, I want it to be a reflection of the culture at the present. That gets complicated. My art is political, but not always obviously so [laughs]. I’m not really interested in that. It’s funny, the more explicit that you get, the more easily it can be misread. It can be easier to read, but it can also be easier to misread.

TD: I see Freudian influences in your work as well. I think your art feels prescient today not only because it foresaw the oversaturated digital image culture, but also because it keyed into the way that everyday images and ad culture have become so inextricably linked. Every image is selling something; it’s all about desire.
AD: That really came to the fore in the ‘80s. In July of 2011, I wrote a piece for *Time Out New York* about a show at Salon 94 that paired Jeff Koons’s 1980s appropriated Nike advertising posters with posters of sports stars rendered as fantasy figures, which were produced around the same time by the Costacos Brothers. It was a smart combination. There was a definite moment in the ‘80s when ads stopped selling products and started selling identity. Product and lifestyle became the same thing. And Koons, being a savvy guy, was right on top of it. Those pieces are problematic, but he had a Warholian instinct for the culture of his own time.

TD: Apropos of the image cultures that your work engages with—do you feel it necessary to confront new forms of images? Or, to put it in simpler way terms: Do you feel it necessary to engage with the internet?

AD: I do, but it has to be in a way that I find interesting. I don’t necessarily find specificity interesting, and the internet is very specific.

TD: Specific in what way?

AD: The internet is a million individual voices. Print is different, because its purpose is to reach as many people as possible.

TD: And the people who are behind print culture are not a million individual voices, but rather a pretty small group of people with very specific economic interests.

AD: Exactly. They’re trying to connect to as many people as possible. The internet reminds me of Wallace Berman’s Verifax images of radios—every radio is similar, but what we get from each one is so different. It’s as if he saw that information would become this diffuse, this individualized. And that’s a problem for me in my art. Because I’m not really interested in using particular individuals’ voices—their Tweets, or their Instagram feeds—in my work. I’m interested in my voice. So the internet is difficult to work with in that way—to fold someone else’s very individualized view into your own artwork. I end up using a lot of the same kinds of images that I used to find in print—news photographs, advertisements, banner ads, graphs, and stock imagery. I don’t know if that’s enough for me, though; it doesn’t address a big enough part of our culture, that multitude of voices. It’s tricky; I still don’t have it quite worked out. It becomes a question of “How do I address a million different views and still make something that’s mine?”

TD: You also just curated the 11th White Columns Annual. How has your experience as an editor and curator influenced your artwork, and vice versa?

AD: I don’t consider putting an artwork together, or a show together, or a portfolio in a magazine together to be all that different. For example, the threads running though the White Columns show aren’t so different from the threads running though my art: sex, memory, coded information, conventions of display, power. But there’s something more basic to it than that. I love art. If people are showing and buying my own art, that’s great. If they’re not, then I’ll write about work by other artists. And if nobody is paying me to do that, I’ll edit other people’s writing. Or I’ll interview someone, or curate a portfolio for a magazine or an exhibition for a gallery. Whatever it takes to stay involved with art, particularly the art of my time.

TAYLOR DAFOE is a writer and photographer based in Brooklyn. His written work has appeared in such venues as *Artinfo, Bomb, The Brooklyn Rail, Interview, and Modern Painters.*