

Sculpting Light



When I speak with Nana Wolke over Zoom, she has just returned to New York after spending Christmas in Ljubljana, where she was born. The calendar has just flipped to 2025, and, as we settle into our conversation, there's an unspoken sense of shared understanding. Nana and I are the same age; last year, we both turned thirty. In different but intertwined ways, our paths in the art world run parallel: we both graduated in 2021 — a year that was, we agree, dramatically intense — and that same year, I first encountered her work in one of her first shows just as I was taking my first steps in publishing.

Turning thirty is a moment of reflection, and we can't help but talk about what it means to navigate this decade today — between peers who are building families and stability, and others, like us, who wrestle with a sense of urgency and unease about the world's stage. She's in her New York studio, I'm in Milan, and as she rotates her laptop to show me the space, the first thing that strikes me is the light. It floods the room, a presence in itself — unsurprising, given that light is a fundamental force in Wolke's practice. It's the catalyst of her work, where cinema, literature, fashion, and advertising collide in shaping a visual language that moves fluidly between photography, painting, and sound installation.

NANA WOLKE
IN CONVERSATION WITH
MICHELA CERUTI



Michela Ceruti: Your practice primarily revolves around issues of perception and the understanding of time and space. The process of creating your work is quite distinctive: it begins on film-like sets, where you document staged situations and improvised actions taking place in very different spaces – private apartments, hotel rooms, public spaces. You then assemble and edit both original and found footage, which you later translate into paintings and sound installations. How did you get to this particular practice? Was it something you wanted to do right away, or was it an approach that developed gradually over time? And to what extent has cinema influenced you?

Nana Wolke: I think I've always been fascinated with film – the constructed nature of its environment and the time that's embedded within the medium itself. In the summer of 2020, I began experimenting with lighting and set design, which marked the beginning of what I do now. In a way, it was a reaction to the structure of the Goldsmiths program,¹ which pushes you to really analyze your practice and justify intuitive choices with theoretical arguments. I think it was great for me because I came across a lot of important questions within my research and found the thread that is still leading me to many fascinating places today. But, at some point, you can get to a stage where you react too much and too directly to all the input of tutorials and critiques. In the winter of 2020, after a particularly bad critique, I think I just reached a breaking point and thought, "I'm just going to do whatever the hell I want to do." The doom of early COVID only reinforced this sentiment, and in the end provided the perfect time and isolation for my growth, which blossomed during my five-month stay in Athens.

MC Athens's light is almost otherworldly. Did it play a part in this shift in your practice?

NW Absolutely. Funnily enough, it is where I fell in love with artificial lighting, though. In a parking lot of all places. It was while my friend was parking a car and hit the brakes that the red light from the tail lights illuminated the space and the people standing behind the car in a completely magical way, making me realize how light can sculpt a space and paint a narrative—or rather, an atmosphere—by at once highlighting and obscuring elements. That's when I started thinking about light as a tool. The question became about what kind of a light would allow me to keep things simple and spontaneous, thereby ensuring I could act fast and adapt to different contexts. Today, my recording process is often more structured and planned, but I find it crucial to try to stay alert for moments of spontaneity. Actually, whenever I travel, I always bring a couple of handheld torches I have been using for years. They're very simple, but powerful enough to interact with existing lighting in a public space, which I find a particularly interesting challenge as of late. Sometimes I come across a great piece of architecture that I want to document and keep in my database, or a location where something fascinating happened that I want to revisit, for example. While I could just simply take a photograph, for me, thinking spatially through light begins the process of conceiving a painting before I ever get to the studio.

MC At that time, were you mainly working with photography or had you already started experimenting with painting?

NW Painting has always been my most intuitive medium — it's where I truly began. Even before studying art, it was simply a way of thinking that made the most sense to me, despite that during my undergrad in Slovenia, there was a sort of post-Malevich, post-conceptual attitude that dismissed painting as somewhat reactionary and unexciting. During that period, I felt like I had to make up a good enough excuse to even engage with it.



But certain things are inevitable: you can try to push them away, but they just come back even harder like a boomerang. As for photography, I've never been able to paint without some kind of reference in front of me. I sometimes envy artists who can work directly from their surroundings, effortlessly bringing elements together. For me, everything would always start with a recording of sorts, even if I wasn't always consciously aware of that. I've always been drawn to image-based media — fashion, advertising, cinema, gaming — as a significant sources of inspiration, and I think all of these elements play an active role in my work.

MC Speaking of influence, I've had the chance to see your work in person twice over the past few years. The first time was your 2021 solo show, "Some Girls Wander By Mistake," at Fondazione Coppola in Vicenza. To this day, I still remember the brief text you wrote to accompany the installation, which felt more like a journal entry. Those few lines alone set the tone for what I was about to see. It felt like being on the verge of watching a coming-of-age movie. I imagine literature plays a central role in your creative process.

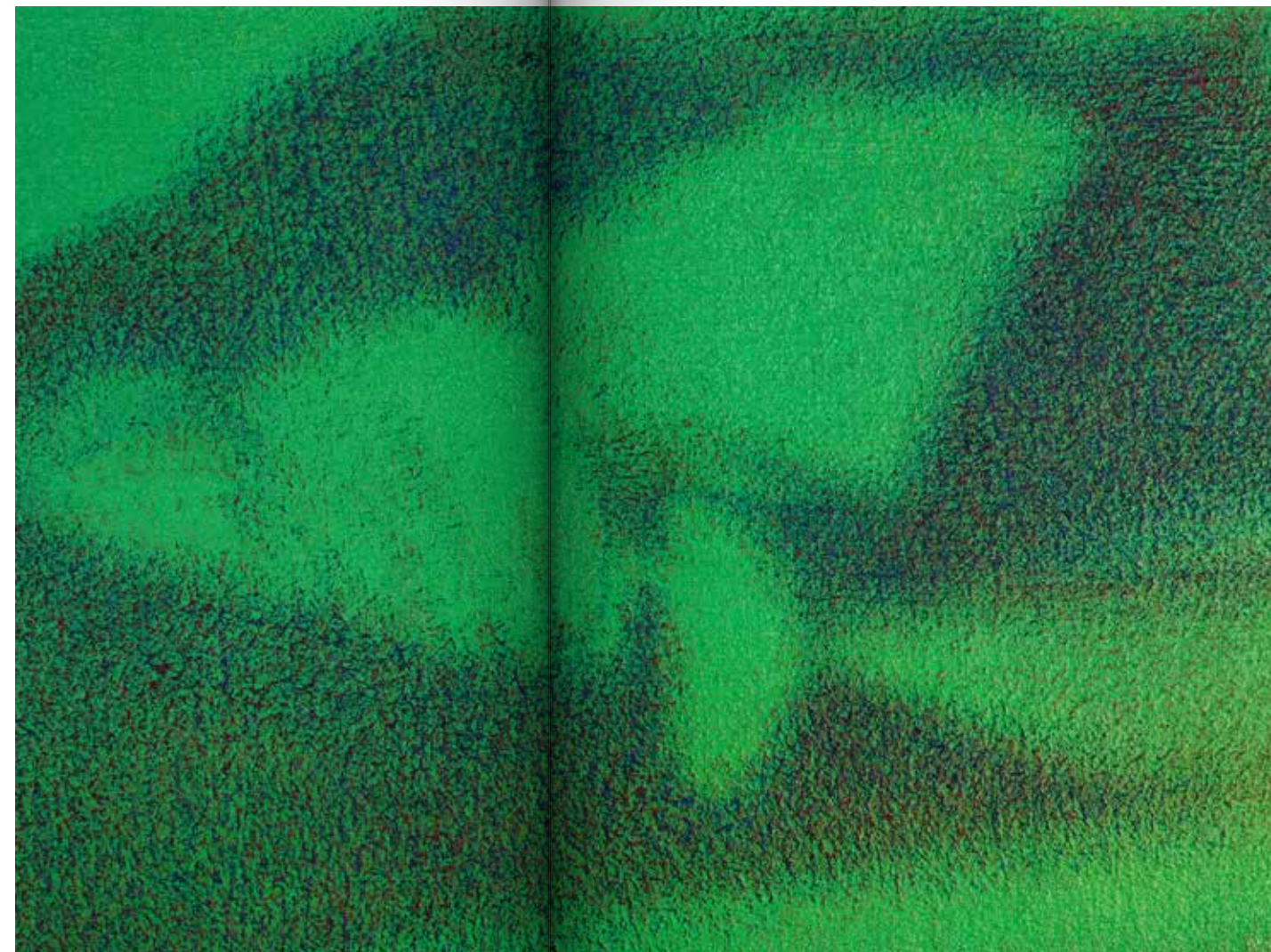
NW It does, a lot. That specific quote was inspired by an Ex-Yu collection of erotic books titled "Dotik," which translates from Slovene to "touch." I was about to turn twenty-seven at the time and felt very dramatic about the whole idea of death and youth, or rather, the death of youth. It felt like this formative moment from my youth needed to be revisited in order to be able to successfully enter the new phase. Also, 2021 was a particularly intense year for me. I had just graduated, and I never imagined I'd receive so much attention and opportunities coming my way. The pressure to live up to these expectations while navigating a crumbling marriage and an active addiction was a struggle. Reflecting on my summers as a young girl in Slovenia, I recall spending time with my best friend in her family's workshop. There was a small apartment with a living room that had belonged to her grandfather, and it was there that we discovered his collection of erotic books one hot summer afternoon. At thirteen or fourteen, we had no sexual experience, but we were certainly immensely curious. We would read the nastiest pages from the books to each other while lounging on the couch as dusty light streamed in through cracked windows. It was a fascinating juxtaposition: we were in a space meant for men's work, surrounded by industrial tools, yet engaging in this intimate, exploratory moment of girlhood. The books themselves — regular families probably had them as subtle, slightly "kinky" bookshelf items, but the language was actually not hot at all. But that made it all the more fun and intriguing as we navigated this strange new territory of desire and curiosity.

MC The second time I saw your work in person was in 2024 at Liste Art Fair in Basel, where you had a solo presentation with NiCOLETTI. The title of the project, "AThingOfBeautyIsAJoyForever_473," references John Keats's 1818 poem *Endymion*, but unlike your show at Fondazione Coppola, this presentation had a different focus. It consisted of two parts — paintings titled after the timeframe marking the duration of a scene, and a sound installation — but what intrigued me was that the title itself was taken from someone's password online. This brings the focus of your work to the theme of security and control. Can you tell me more about that?

NW I mean, that is an actual Wi-Fi password I borrowed from someone! I love that, because I'm always curious about which words or moments of their life people choose as their security mechanism. Which memory grants you access to someone's personal space? What grants you access to someone? When I first typed in this password to get Wi-Fi at



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a friend's apartment, I thought, "This needs to be part of the show!" It functioned metaphorically. The show consisted of a gate with intercom speakers and paintings drawn from footage taken from the intercom camera, with sound mapping out the inside and image laying out the outside of an apartment in the Lower East Side. The idea of a password enhanced the concept of breaching that gate — and the ones behind it. How much of the space and its inhabitants can we flesh out from what is leaking through the intercom speaker? It became an exploration of access in the urban landscape, particularly in places designed to preserve an air of exclusivity away from the mainstream population. My last two shows, the one at Liste and "Breed" (2024) at Management in New York, both dealt with this dual notion of access: the loss of control over privacy on one hand, and an increasing obsession with membership-based spaces after COVID on the other. Aspects of access in public space continue to be a core theme in my work.

MC In "Breed," I noticed a strong focus on New York's Upper East Side, private building memberships, and the broader environment. You engage more actively with physical spaces and communities, particularly those within cities that consign almost separate enclaves. There are urban programs that integrate drastically different communities that wouldn't normally intersect, yet they manage to create a form of coexistence. This is extremely evident in a previous solo exhibition you had at Castor Gallery in 2022, "High Seat."

NW That show was significant for me in many ways. Even though it wasn't yet a fully realized film set — like the one for "4:28–5:28 am" at VIN VIN, Vienna that same year — it was a crucial step. In "High Seat," I was deeply focused on the influence of cinema, and more specifically, how American imagery and advertising shaped my perception of opportunity and desire, especially coming from Eastern Europe. For example, there's a stark contrast between that imagery and the architectural reality of social housing where I grew up. The show explored the effect of sprawling, prefabricated, repetitive, gray concrete housing as a wall: both a physical, but in particular, a mental barrier that blocks views, blocks sunlight, and limits potential. Meanwhile, the TV screen presented an opposing vision, especially in the eyes of my father's generation, when then-popular Westerns depicted vast, uninhabited landscapes full of potential as something for a man to conquer. The show examined these two poles of restriction versus boundless opportunity.

MC This ties in closely with your current project on Sweden's Million Programme,² which you presented at Frieze LA. You traveled to Sweden before Christmas. Was this to collect footage?

NW It was actually when preparing for "High Seat" that I came across the idea behind the Swedish Million Programme. It came up during my research into the origin story of my own neighborhood in Ljubljana, which followed the model nearly twenty years after it was implemented in Sweden. In one way or another, a common thread in most of my exhibitions since then has been engagement with urban spaces — how people navigate various in-between zones within cities. Stockholm was an eye-opening experience. I spent five days walking all over the city, visiting different corners, and what struck me about the Million Programme is its positioning of always being on the outskirts. You have to take the subway all the way to the end of the line, and sometimes even take an additional bus or a train in order to reach it. Stockholm itself is beautifully integrated with nature; each part of





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- 01 00:26:26,417 - - > 00:55:56,958 (*Everybody comes to Hollywood*), 2025. Oil and construction sand on linen. 170 × 220 cm. Photography by Aaron Fu. Courtesy of the artist; LINSEED, Shanghai; and NiCOLETTi, London.
- 02 00:02:15,500 - - > 00:02:45,800 (*Ansicht mit Rum-Kokos Kugeln*), 2024. Oil and iron filings on linen. 61 × 91.5 cm. Photography by Inna Svyatsky / installshots.art. Courtesy of the artist and NiCOLETTi, London.
- 03 00:02:26,417 - - > 00:02:29,010 (*Empire*), 2023–24. Oil and construction sand on linen. 180 × 240 cm. Photography by Inna Svyatsky / installshots.art. Courtesy of the artist; LINSEED, Shanghai; and NiCOLETTi, London.
- 04 00:09:31,275 - - > 00:11:56,900 (*Hook*), 2024. Detail. Oil and construction sand on canvas. 61 × 111.8 cm. Photography by Inna Svyatsky / installshots.art. Courtesy of the artist; LINSEED, Shanghai; and NiCOLETTi, London.

- 05 02:10:34,195 - - > 02:18:06,207 (*Sleeping pills, sneakers, turtleneck, power cord*), 2024. Oil and iron filings on linen. 61 × 91.5 cm. Photography by Inna Svyatsky / installshots.art. Courtesy of the artist; Management, New York; and NiCOLETTi, London.
- 06 00:00:00,000 - - > 01:56:06,138 (*Close enough*), 2024. Oil and iron filings on linen. 61 × 91.5 cm. Photography by Inna Svyatsky / installshots.art. Courtesy of the artist; Management, New York; and NiCOLETTi, London.
- 07 00:07:50,750 - - > 00:10:03,075 (*Piti*), 2024. Oil and construction sand on canvas. 61 × 111.8 cm. Photography by Inna Svyatsky / installshots.art. Courtesy of the artist and NiCOLETTi, London.

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Wolke got her MFA at Goldsmiths, London, in 2021.

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The Million Programme is a public housing program implemented in Sweden between 1965 and 1975 to give all Swedish citizens access to high-quality and affordable housing.

Nana Wolke (1994, Ljubljana) lives and works in New York. Wolke's work explores the nature of perception, focusing on modes of apprehension of space and time. Her working process usually begins on film-like sets, where the artist records the unfolding of staged situations and improvised actions in spaces spanning social hierarchy. Recent solo exhibitions include: Liste Art Fair; Management, New York; NiCOLETTi, London; Castor Gallery, London; VIN VIN, Vienna; and Fondazione Coppola, Vicenza. Her work has been included in group shows at the U3 Triennial of Contemporary Art; Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana; Cankarjev Dom, Ljubljana; NiCOLETTi, London; Brigitte Mulholland, Paris; Wilhelm Hallen, Berlin; Tube Gallery, Palma de Mallorca; Green Art Family Foundation, Dallas; Marlborough Gallery, London; GUTS Gallery, London; Linseed Projects, Shanghai; Cukarna Palace, Ljubljana; and Winter Street Gallery, Edgartown.

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the city is on a different island interspersed with rocky landscapes. The idea in the 1960s and '70s was to let nature remain an integral part, incorporated even into these vast new residential areas, creating parks and large walkable no-car zones suitable for kids to roam freely, which I find fascinating rather than just grim. There was something hopelessly utopian and visionary about it, but as subsidized funding decreased after the 1990s, many of these areas were neglected and are now considered "no-go zones."

MC Given how sensitive this topic is, it makes sense that you're allowing the project to develop organically rather than forcing it into a strict timeline.

NW The moment I arrived in Sweden, I knew this couldn't be a project where I would impose my own ideas and just have others respond. It needs to be a genuine collaboration. I met so many inspiring people on this trip when and where I was least expecting it. I am already planning an exciting project this coming summer with an incredible poet who is a proud resident of the Million Programme, and I started working with a Swedish curator who is deeply invested in this topic. The more conversations I had with architects, real estate professionals, community organizers, and urban planners, the more I realized this project needed to unfold naturally, even if it takes several years. I don't want to put a deadline on it. Whenever it materializes into a show, it will, but it has to be done right. In some ways, my research also ties back to Yugoslav migration to Sweden in the '60s and '70s, when industries like Volvo attracted a huge workforce, as well as later in the '90s after the Balkan wars. Seeing people from my background in Sweden's Million Programme communities, and then reflecting on how Yugoslavia adopted the same housing model is definitely interesting to think about. Even though Slovenia is much smaller and less ethnically diverse, it experienced similar segregation patterns.

MC And housing is such a complex issue, affecting almost every country as we speak. It's completely out of control.

NW Exactly. Sweden's Million Programme was created to provide a million residences in ten years, lifting living standards dramatically. Before that, many homes didn't even have bathrooms. The first thing I always hear from people is how layouts were well-designed, and I can agree. I remember running in circles around our apartment as a child because of its central layout. But today, these areas are demonized. Meanwhile, new developments are all ranging from semi- to full luxury, making housing largely inaccessible. There's a stigma around older social housing yet younger people are beginning to recognize their value again. In Slovenia, I see millennials buying and renovating socialist-era apartments. The quality of these buildings has stood the test of time. The challenge is that when developers step in, they often convert social housing into high-end properties, pushing residents further out. There's no clear solution, but that's what makes it such an important topic to explore.