

L'Essenziale Studio

Journal of Arts, Photography and Design

Nana Wolke, No thank you, 2022, from "Wanda's" at Nicoletti, London.

€20 US21.12 £17.77



Vol.05

Nana Wolke in conversation with Marta Orsola Sironi

Text by Marta Orsola Sironi

Nana Wolke is the fake name of an artist who plays with the perspective of others from the point of view of an outsider. Staging situations, inhabiting spaces with a transitory nature and moving smoothly between observed reality and fictional inserts, she takes the viewer on a journey through time and space, images and paintings, absence and presence, to experience even just for a moment different possibilities of freedom and interpretation, of impersonification. How many doors could we open if we looked at reality with different eyes?

Nana Wolke is based between London and the world, and is represented by the Nicoletti Contemporary Gallery, where in November 2022 she presented her last solo show *Wanda's* (Nov. 16, 2022–Jan. 28, 2023).

MOS: During the private view of *Wanda's* on November 16th, we were all amazed and surprised by the works you presented. There has been a new step forward in your practice. I'm impressed with how you are developing your research and how you remain consistent with it.

NW: I see every show as a new chapter, a new era with a specific theme and feel to it. Of course, sometimes the public expects something that has already been seen. That is what happened last year at my solo exhibition at Castor (*Nana Wolke: High Seat*, Jan. 28 – Mar. 5, 2022, ed.): the only painting in the show was a non-red landscape, somewhere between representation and abstraction. People were expecting an iteration of what I've done for my MFA Degree Show, a lot more figurative and perhaps seductive work; some were outright mad at me! In my opinion, this shock is a useful filter for separating trend-seekers and forming new as well as deeper alliances with those who are willing to go beyond the surface. Works you see in the show, paintings, sound, light installation, and even the film itself are really artefacts of staged situations. This process is crucial to the end result. Art has this obsession with the secrecy around what goes into the work on display, but I often find good work even more interesting when I am given that backstage pass. These staged private events remain for myself and the participants, but the little rumours around them only enhance the tension at work. For the exhibition at Nicoletti we went as far as to only build on that anticipation aspect: we didn't release a single image of the paintings before the exhibition. Instead, we were promoting the show with the only work that wouldn't premiere until the last day of the show—the trailer for the short film.

MOS: In your practice, you mix painting, video, sound and light to create an installation. This is also what happens inside Nicoletti, with the blue screens facing the wall, the blue lights, the music, and the paintings. *Wanda's* is a 360-degree installation.

NW: This show was conceived with a scenography of the space in mind, the car park underneath the Westway flyover and the football pitch above it. Each painting suggests our position in space. The height of the works roughly corresponds to the ceiling height of the car park, while the only work located on the football pitch aspires more towards a billboard size, like the numerous sponsorship ads you would see attached to the fence of the pitch. CCTV screens on the other end map out the wider context of the show, the drive along the Westway, which is otherwise not made apparent in paintings themselves. Sort of the main event and the anticipation of it, but it's unclear which is one or the other. Throughout the months of working on this show I have been wondering if in the end, all the parts would

have spliced together. When you work with separate elements, even if they are all built with one another in mind, you never know if in the process they might take off in their own direction. There's the risk that once they are assembled together they won't add to a whole but take from each other. For example, even with tests, I couldn't entirely predict how the screen light would act in the gallery environment in relation to the blue hue of paintings in the show. The moment of seeing them together for the first time was one of just pure joy.

MOS: Can you give us an overview of your practice?

NW: It all begins with staged situations remixing elements of observed reality and fictional inserts. These are private events that are only on view for those participating (and accidental passers-by). I work both with professionals, like actors and models, as well as people who frequent these spaces in their daily lives. I often meet them during the research phase when I am just lingering around and talking to people or closer towards the production via open calls stapled around the neighbourhood. These spaces often have a transitory aspect to them. For example, parking lots even have regulations in certain countries prohibiting you from staying in your car after you've parked. A short stay hotel that I worked with during my previous show in Vienna was mostly dedicated to brief emergency accommodation, sex work, and a cheap stay if you missed your train because of its close proximity to the main train station. Cinema tends to depict these spaces in a very one-dimensional, rather stereotypical way, further deepening the stigma of occupying them... It's interesting to me how off-screen people make these spaces valuable to themselves and their communities, echoing an atmosphere more fitting to a living room or a private garden. There are two different lives in each place, the daytime and night-time. A part of my work is trying to go deeper into that aspect, into the idea of what these 'non-spaces' really are: they don't have to be grimy, they can be upscale private properties or country clubs, spaces you usually wouldn't think of as transitory. My interest in the relationship between reality and fiction comes from the notion that in an image-driven world our reality is beginning to appear plastic and false, while fiction, consumed not just through the big cinema screen but primarily our phones, feels alive and accurate. I am fascinated with the intricate—even if glitching—worlds people build around their image online. My work tries to navigate the thin line in between.

MOS: Your works are a sort of in-between. They are fictive, staged performances, as based on a plot you decide. On the other hand, they are real, as they are played by real people in real spaces. They are borderline situations. You can recognise the reality of the gestures in the paintings, but at the same time you know they were made on purpose, to fake reality. Your work is a layered story.

NW: I think a personal response to the location is important. Westway Roundabout in North Kensington is essentially a line separating two vastly different neighbourhoods. It reminded me of socialist blocks in Sweden, Germany and also my native Slovenia, among other European countries that in the act of preserving historical centres of capitals, starting in the 1960s, pushed massive social housing to the outskirts of towns often in close proximity to main highways. If something feels uncomfortable or shameful there is a vulnerability involved which changes the sensitivity and charge of the work, as well as how I collaborate with people. I actively encourage the cast to improvise and



Installation view from "Wanda's" at Nicoletti, London, 2022. Courtesy of the Artist and Nicoletti, London. Photo: Theo Christelis.

make themselves 'feel at home', or rather, show me how they are in this space that is familiar to them. Something that might look staged could very well be this genuine response, a part of someone's daily routine. Fiction is often more interesting than reality.

It's hard to escape one's hand, but I try to paint each work in a different way. Sometimes with an opposite process to the one I worked on just before. It needs to be right for the scene it is capturing, a fast moment or a crystalized 'eternity'. I am trying to build the rhythm of the music (or against it) that you hear in the space.

MOS: As you erase the situation, another story emerges during the show: the loss of the performance. Time elapses from that loss to the paintings, giving different layers of temporality, the last of which is in your paintings.

NW: For me the time element is the most crucial aspect of the work. On some level it happens in the editing process that takes place before I ever start painting. I never decide on one image I want to work with before considering the whole. It's a push and pulls between these slippery moments. You can't entirely grasp the main event, the true action. I work with wrong moments because there is a natural conclusion that there must also be the right one—a before and after, a sense of time. All the paintings are part of one installation, an elusive plot, where time is passing in a non-linear way, but they also must stand on their own as a singular scene. I want you to take away something even if you see just one piece of the puzzle.

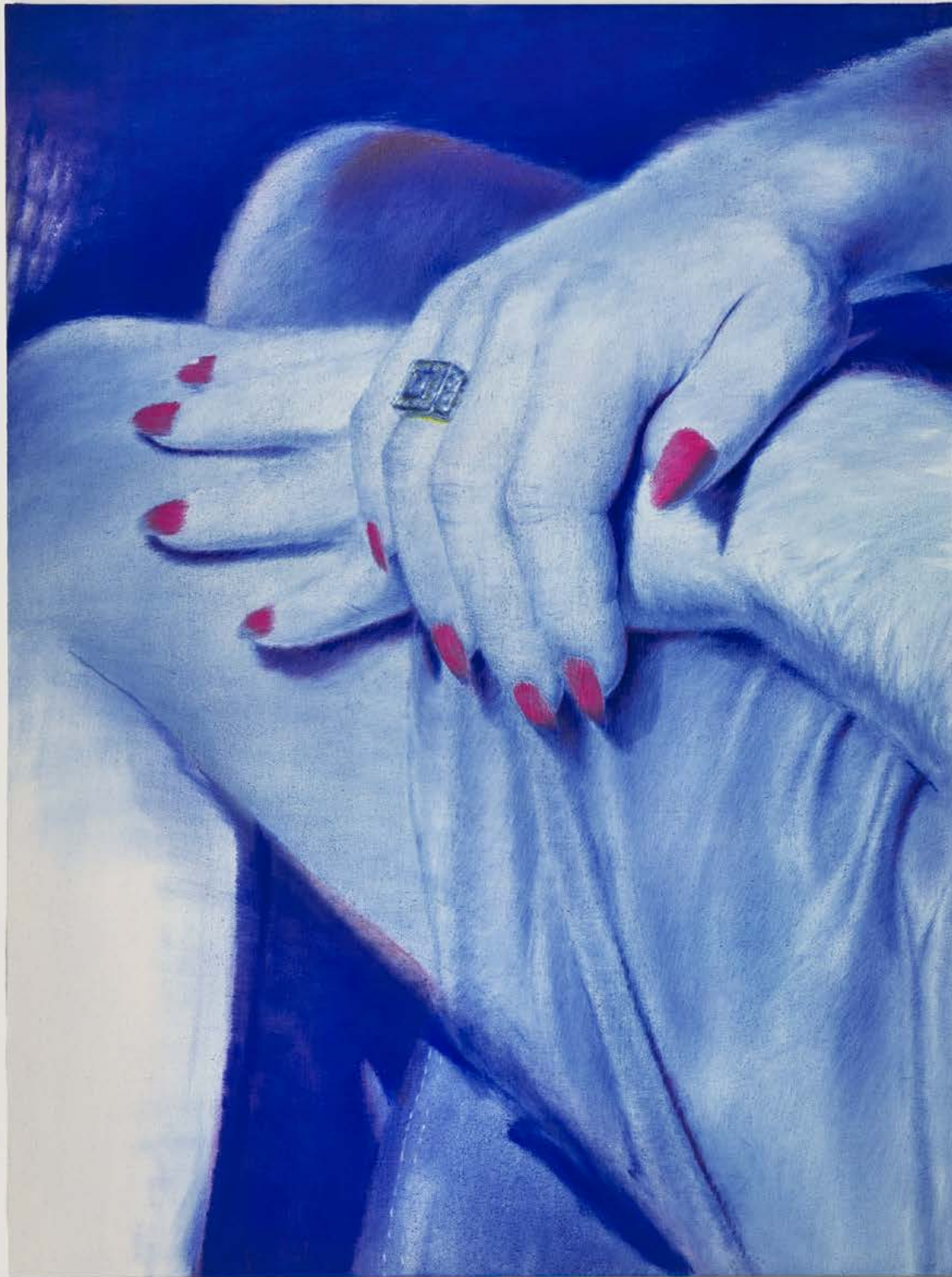
Like as you say, there is also the aspect of two different temporalities, the one characteristic to painting, the other to sound and moving image, both in a sense working against the immediacy

of staged situations. The first has this eternal quality to it, while the second runs along its own predetermined timeline. Seeing painting as a practice of building towards a rhythm (or building against it), and the effect on the perception of time the combination one of two has in an overall installation is where things become truly exciting for me.

I like the idea of artifacts, objects only through which you can access the past. Perhaps rather than loss I see in it some sort of extreme commemoration.

MOS: Can you tell us more about your painting process?

NW: I primarily work from my own reference imagery. I enter each set with a shot list and a loose script, something that can begin the dialogue and give everyone involved a prompt to which they can respond. The best part though is the unscripted. When you are working with people that are familiar with the environment, all you have to do sometimes is to take their lead. On a set I catch myself thinking as a painter, not necessarily taking the best photos but considering first and foremost what the image might translate into in its final form, the texture, immediacy or precision of paint, as well as its context in relation to other work I am planning. Later on, when I'm in the studio working with the material, it feels closer to an editing room. The process is ever evolving but I have a set of basic rules, or rather, restrictions I find important to keep with. When I am staging reference material for paintings I only use hunting lights. They are simple handheld torches, with a very intense beam, but they are handy and light in comparison to stage lights. When you are holding it you are automatically suggesting a specific perspective, in case of a hunter, a hierarchy. Hunting lights only come in red, green, yellow



I Put a Spell on You, 2022.

and blue, so the challenge is to learn how to create something new with simple equipment. Each set is alive with a life of its own, so I make sure not to interfere too much with it. What is interesting for me is what is already in the space. I shoot everything with a phone camera. Everyone is so used to this format in their everyday life they don't feel like it's 'for real'. That is one thing I do not intend to change. I'm interested in the atmosphere of the space, the feeling of it, and so on the set, everything for me should be kept free and simple.

MOS: Can we go deeper into the liminal situation between desire and shame?

NW: Being looked at and looking at something can feel full of desire or shame, both at once. I'd like my work to feel as if you were a young woman standing naked in front of a camera after your parents have told you not to, or dangerously slowing down on a highway to catch a glimpse of a car crash.

MOS: Do you see it as a sort of voyeurism?

NW: Voyeurism implies a sexual gratification or a criminal act, and very one-sided at that. I think it rather has something to do with both who we are deep inside and who we want to become, past and future grinding against each other. I'm constantly shifting from the perspective of the viewer to the subject. For example, when

I was growing up in Ljubljana, the neighbourhood we were living in was considered to be a bad neighbourhood, sort of pushed to the edge of the city. You wouldn't really go there unless you lived there. So on one hand you have the reality surrounding you that you keep denying, and on the other mass American television introduced post-socialism that you are taking in with a big spoon. In your head you've already assigned reality to fiction, what you are going through exists only as some book about your past, and you actively live in the fiction on screen, at least your perception of it. There is a desire to wake up on the front porch of a mansion of the Real Housewives of Beverly Hills but also a shame in aspiring to such shallowness.

I always think it is worth working with things that are a bit uncomfortable. It's important to be involved in the work to push it forward. Yet I tend to depict spaces that have nothing to do with my own story. I try to avoid autobiography.

MOS: Quoting Paul B. Preciado, "the crossing demands losses", but in exchange, we become able to embrace freedom¹. Do you think that leaving behind your background, your past in the east block, and moving to London has changed your perspective?

NW: You know, I changed my context several times, from Slove-



Installation view from "Wanda's" at Nicoletti, London, 2022. Courtesy of the Artist and Nicoletti, London. Photo: Theo Christelis.



Uncle Charlie, you look beautiful, 2022, from "Wanda's" at Nicoletti, London, 2022. Courtesy of the Artist and Nicoletti, London. Photo: Theo Christelis.

nia to Germany, from New York to London, but the past is always with me and against popular belief I think it's difficult to fully embrace it without making it into something else that it wasn't. Several moves down the road I feel like coming back to my hometown at times doesn't feel like home anymore, the two different timelines, my own and the town's, split. When you first move somewhere you tend to be more of an observer than a participant, just taking it all in. You're not entirely here yet but you're not there anymore either. It's a very precious period where you don't have to define anything yet and you just observe, others, but also yourself. Today I feel I have lost that sense of where exactly I belong, but I feel lucky to find myself welcome in a lot of places. I think I'm a bit like how my name is, not entirely true, not entirely of any specific nationality, but it sure reads kind of cute.



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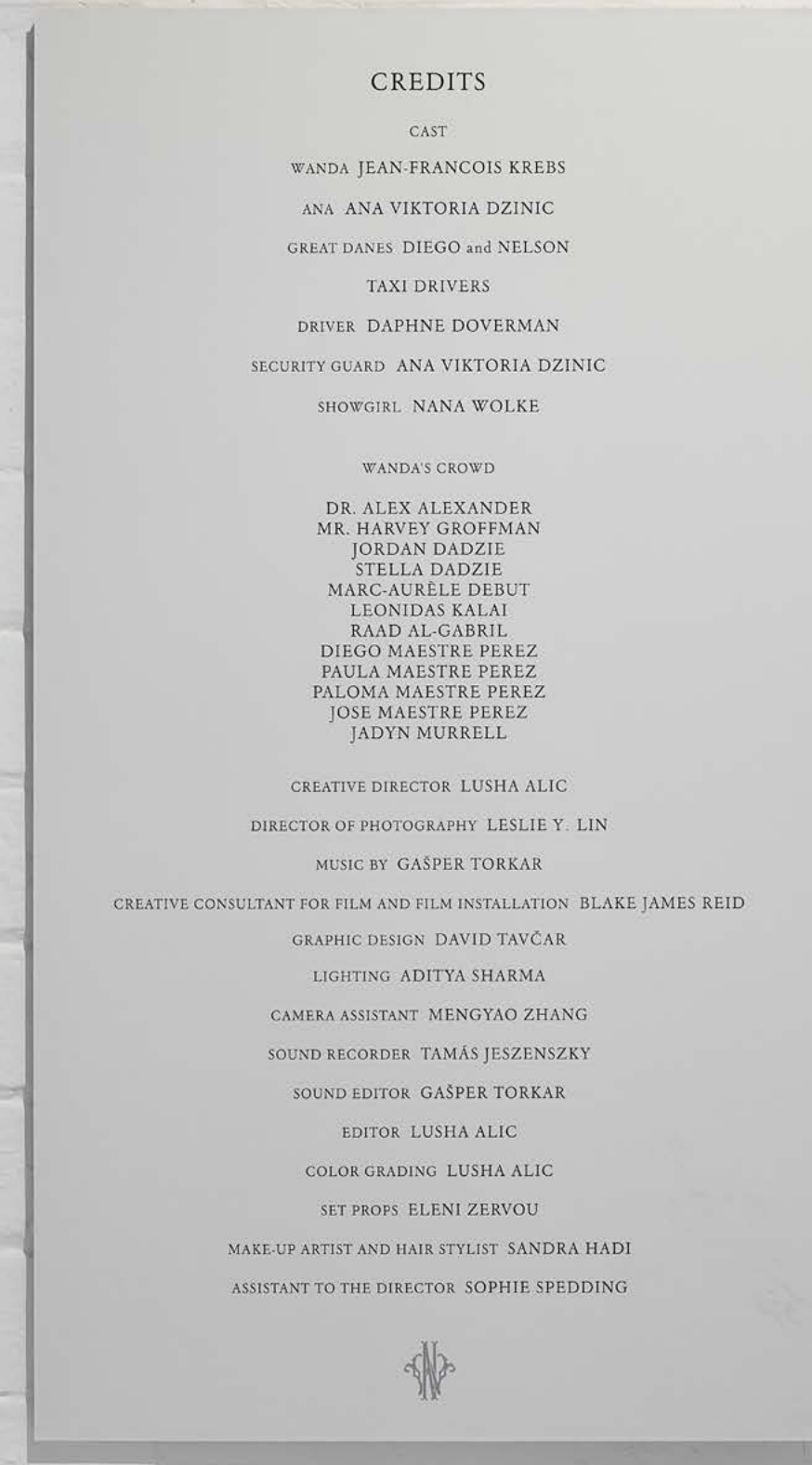
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MOS: I understand what you are saying. You have the perspective of an outsider, and this is what allows you to look at a scene and at the dynamics of that scene from different perspectives at the same time. You use hunting lights and try to look at something from another person's perspective. That is the ability to peek as an outsider. In your practice, there is always this subliminal line, this idea of playing with absence and presence, of removal. It is possible to see it in your paintings, too, and in the passage between staged performances from pictures to paintings. There are a lot of layers of addition and removal, even time is removed, but in the end there is something that is always present: the painting. Yours is a continuous movement back and forth, which opens up to different possibilities of freedom and interpretation, of impersonification in the scene. You give the viewer the condition of experiencing an outsider's perspective, for a moment.

NW: It's a dance, or at times a stumble at best, in and out of familiarity and intrigue. There is a constant push and pull that I carefully plan in the process of 'montage' and editing. The second part is switching between perspectives. Each work is conceived with a specific point of view in mind. Right now, I am working on a series of works all conceived from Shih Tzu's below-the-knees kind of POV taking place in the dog's own territory, the owner's residence. I guess even if the work is shot from an insider's perspective, because the viewer is not familiar with the situation it feels like dropping in on something. I would hope there is a moment at which you start feeling like you're on your knees yourself.

1. Cf. Paul B. Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus. Chronicles of the Crossing*, Semiotexte / Foreign Agents, 2019, p.37

Installation view from "Wanda's" at Nicoletti, London, 2022. Courtesy of the Artist and Nicoletti, London. Photo: Theo Christelis.



CREDITS

CAST

WANDA JEAN-FRANCOIS KREBS
 ANA ANA VIKTORIA DZINIC
 GREAT DANES DIEGO and NELSON
 TAXI DRIVERS
 DRIVER DAPHNE DOVERMAN
 SECURITY GUARD ANA VIKTORIA DZINIC
 SHOWGIRL NANA WOLKE

WANDA'S CROWD

DR. ALEX ALEXANDER
 MR. HARVEY GROFFMAN
 JORDAN DADZIE
 STELLA DADZIE
 MARC-AURÉLE DEBUT
 LEONIDAS KALAI
 RAAD AL-GABRIL
 DIEGO MAESTRE PEREZ
 PAULA MAESTRE PEREZ
 PALOMA MAESTRE PEREZ
 JOSE MAESTRE PEREZ
 JADYN MURRELL

CREATIVE DIRECTOR LUSHA ALIC

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY LESLIE Y. LIN

MUSIC BY GAŠPER TORKAR

CREATIVE CONSULTANT FOR FILM AND FILM INSTALLATION BLAKE JAMES REID

GRAPHIC DESIGN DAVID TAVČAR

LIGHTING ADITYA SHARMA

CAMERA ASSISTANT MENG YAO ZHANG

SOUND RECORDER TAMÁS JESZENSZKY

SOUND EDITOR GAŠPER TORKAR

EDITOR LUSHA ALIC

COLOR GRADING LUSHA ALIC

SET PROPS ELENI ZERVOU

MAKE-UP ARTIST AND HAIR STYLIST SANDRA HADI

ASSISTANT TO THE DIRECTOR SOPHIE SPEDDING



