

June 1, 2017 - Nina Katchadourian is known for her often playful conceptual works that make use of photography, sculpture, video, sound, and public spaces. Her video "Accent Elimination," in which she worked with a speech improvement coach in order to "neutralize" her parents' accents, was included in Armenian pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale. In 2016, she created *Dust Gathering*, an audio tour about dust, for the Museum of Modern Art. The ongoing project, *Seat Assignment*, consists of photographs, video, and sound works, all made during airline flights using only a camera phone. A solo survey of her work entitled *Curiouser* is currently on view at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, TX. It will travel to the Cantor Center at Stanford University in September 2017 and to the Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU in Richmond, VA in April 2018. She's an associate professor on the faculty of NYU Gallatin.



As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3165 words.

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# Nina Katchadourian on working with what you're already noticing

**The materials you use are often things you already have on hand and readily available—things that are free or close to free—like dust or spiderwebs.**

That's often my strategy, and it ties into my other ongoing strategy of trying to see what's already in the world that we're not engaging with, or thinking about, or making use of, or paying attention to, or finding interesting. The question that's always in my head is: "What else could be done with what's here?"

Not every single project follows that directive, but that's often a question I'm asking myself. It's also my way of observing the world. It's this idea of trying to look for things I haven't noticed before. Sometimes in doing that a seed of an idea may surface. I'm not necessarily walking around going, "What can I make? What's here? What can I make?," but my natural tendency is to try to be looking for those things out there.

There's so much oddness in New York City, in the way things are fixed and repaired and done provisionally and slapdash. As a citizen of the city, it drives me crazy sometimes, that stuff here is often repaired in such a shitty way. On the other hand, it can lead to beautiful and charming situations where you see the logic of its repair, its remaking, and its fixing. I like the way that layers of human activity show themselves. I've been living here for 20 years, and this interest has become reinforced by the way the city itself illustrates it.

**Mended Spiderweb—the series where you attempted to "fix" a spider web—reminds me of New York's provisional repairs. In that case, the spider rejects the repairs.**

That project didn't get interesting to me until the spider did that. It's an old piece, from 20 years ago almost, but there's something about it... I remember making it; I had a concern that people would take it as kind of like, "Oh, I'm trying to help the spider. It's sort of a gentle, kind gesture." But I was actually much more interested in the bossy, intrusive, competitive tone that I hope the project also has, where the spider rejects what I'm doing. It certainly doesn't need my help. I'm really out of line to try and help.

There's a battle of one-upmanship going on between me and the spider, who knows how to fix the web the right way. There's a video that's often shown with the photographs called, "Gift/Gift." It's a 10-minute video of me trying to insert the word "G-I-F-T" into the spider's web made with little letters made out of thread and the spider trying to kick them out one at a time. We're both working at the same time, which didn't happen when I was repairing the webs most of the time, so this is kind of an exceptional event. It becomes clear in that video that I'm really doing more harm than anything else by getting in there with my tweezers. The web gets stretched and ripped; it's really not a helpful gesture.

Repairs are often interesting to me. Like I said, in New York, it's often a case where you can witness proof that someone has done the best they can, but their best isn't perfect. There's something human and charming, but also moving to me in a funny way in that awkwardness and in that failure.



Mended Spiderweb #19, 1998

**A number of your projects are ongoing. How do you know when something's done?**

I don't know the answer to that, especially with projects like *Seat Assignment* or *Sorted Books*, because both do still feel ongoing. The *Sorted Books Project* is my longest ongoing project to date, where I'm working in libraries or book collections with other people's books and trying to work only with what's there, to draw something out from the book arrangements I make.

I'm trying to think if I've had an ongoing project that isn't still ongoing, and actually the answer is "no." Every ongoing project is still ongoing. *Sorted Books* keeps giving. The last sorting I did, a really important one for me, was one that I did in William S. Burroughs' personal library. It was so interesting to be inside that guy's mind via his books. Interesting and disturbing often too, but fascinating. It made me want to work more in the libraries of people, whether they're writers or any kind of person who's known to the public, and where somebody has a certain impression of that person already.

With Burroughs it's like, "Oh, that crazy guy who did a lot drugs and shot his wife and fled the country." There are all of these mythologies about him, both true and false. Then you get into his library and you discover he had millions of books about cats and all kinds of things that were not what you'd expect to find.

There have been series within the ongoing project of *Seat Assignment* that I do feel are closed. For example, the self portraits, the part of the project people know the best if they know it at all—these self portraits taken in the bathroom dressed up like Flemish portraits. "Lavatory Self Portraits in the Flemish Style," it's officially called. Perhaps because they've been so popular, it's felt important to me to say that all of those were made on one very long flight between San Francisco and Auckland, New Zealand. Somehow the limitations of that flight itself containing the series has felt important to me so that I can tell the story that way. They were all made on one long flight. I don't really think I need to make more. That's been explored thoroughly. They're done. They've had plenty of play and attention. Making more of them would be lazy. That series is done.



*Lavatory Self-Portrait in the Flemish Style #12(2011)* from the project 'Seat Assignment (2010-ongoing).' Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark gallery

*Seat Assignment* as a whole is ongoing. There's still more to do. One thing I haven't done yet at all, in any thorough kind of way, is to collaborate with a perfect stranger sitting next to me. That's a whole thing still yet to happen. You know, "Seat Assignment" would be another good example of the logic of, "Here I am. I'm stuck here. What is there already around me? What can I do with it?" There was a one flight recently where I just spent the entire time with one cocktail napkin. That was the challenge: How many things can I do with just this? That was a pretty productive flight.

**You were saying you were taking a flight and you focused on this one cocktail napkin as material for your work. Do you ever have creative blocks, or is it usually easy for you to find a way to use what you have at hand?**

There's a first part of observing the thing, or having the idea, but then a huge amount of the next step's work is: "What do I want to do about it? What form should it take? What am I going to do now do about it having observed it?" That is sometimes a part where it can take a long time to work out. Sometimes I get stuck. Sometimes I change my mind or have to think of very different strategies to figure out what the right one is.

Often I've had an idea for a long time, but I don't know what to do with it. I don't know how to manifest it, how to make it concrete, what form it should take, how to move it forward. There are works that have sometimes taken decades to figure out because, while I know what the subject is or what the kernel of it is, I just don't know how to move it into being a piece.

The dust project started with this open invitation from MoMA through their Artists Experiment Program to go in and make something that would engage the public—which is a very broad directive. I didn't come there thinking about dust; I came there thinking about the museum. I came there thinking about what can I do here. Really, the first question, and the question that eventually led me to dust was: "Who works here?" For many months, I just went to the museum and had these sort of meet-ups with people in different departments I had never had any contact with. People who clean the building or run security or deal with the HVAC system or are the people in the library work in curatorial and conservation.

Because I was going to the museum a lot, I was also visiting parts of the museum that I don't often make time to go and see. It was on one of those visits, after the meeting was over, that I encountered that very dusty ledge where I saw that dust and then just kept going back to it. I couldn't put a finger on why it was so fascinating, all this dust, but spending time with it led me to think more about that and then led me to realize that everybody I had been talking to in one or another way had a connection to dust, and that that really was a kind of binding material in a strange kind of way.

So I don't always know what it is I'm going to do or what I'm looking for, but I think with a project like that, the first step is just to go and try to be open to possibility and be very observant. I notice what I'm noticing. This is kind of the sort of fake zen sounding phrase that I sometimes find myself talking with students about a lot... Sometimes the clue for what you really want to make is in thinking about what you're thinking about or noticing what you're already noticing. Trying to be a sort of meta-observer of yourself, of your own curiosities and obsessions that way. Then ask why. Why dust? Why is dust so interesting to me?

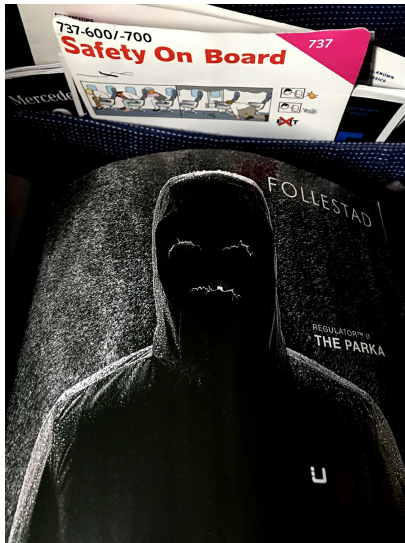
**Do you find your students trying to copy your process because, on paper, they may mistake it as being**

"easy"?

Well, sure, and it's not that I don't want everybody to make like me or observe like me, but I really do believe that people generally don't take seriously enough that idea of saying, "I really love this thing, but I don't know why." It's like, well, maybe it's good to think about why. What about the why? Don't just write it off as like, "Oh, it's just this thing I'm obsessed with." I think it's really worth giving thought to what lies behind that.

I teach a first year graduate seminar at NYU Gallatin called, "Why do you want to make it, and how can you make it better?" I mean, of course it's a sort of false promise because I can't answer that question for anyone, but I certainly feel like the ongoing goal of any artist is to get closer to the answers to that question, or to keep those questions in play. What I try to do through that course is get people to take seriously their own default ways of working to understand why they tend to do the things they do the way they do them. It's a very personal class. It's a really fun class to teach. We all get to know each other very well through that course.

One very early assignment I give, that I freely admit I borrowed from my friend Nayland Blake, is an assignment where they make two lists. One is 50 things they always do in their work, and one is 50 things they never do in their work. 50 things is a lot of things. People can give 10 things easily in each category, but then when you get up to 50, the list gets odd at a certain point, which is helpful. The struggling to fill out the list reveals things for people. We work with those lists as a recurring thing through the semester.



*Safety on Board* (2016) from the project 'Seat Assignment (2010-ongoing).' Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark gallery

**Does having a smartphone get in the way of observing the world for your art? Or is it helpful?**

We could say a million clichés right now about like what the phone has done to us and, "Oh, we don't communicate, blah, blah, blah." I will say, though, that the phone, and having one in my pocket all the time, is the very thing that has made *Seat Assignment* possible. Here comes another cliché, but we could use our technologies for better or for worse. For me, the phone has become an incredibly important device—a project came out of its presence. But I also feel like I walk around the world in some ways because of it.

I'm sort of a slightly embarrassingly enthusiastic social media person. I do Facebook. I have yet not gone the route of Instagram. Everyone keeps telling me, "It's so much better than Facebook." I somehow feel afraid, like I'll never do anything again if I also use Instagram. I do sort of participate a lot—for better or worse—in Facebook. There's a certain category of image where it's a kind of, "Hey, hey, check this out, look what I saw." I like using it that way. I like walking around and looking at the world, sometimes, with the idea that maybe there's something interesting here I could show to other people.

They don't have to be profound observations. It's just an observation of something that I think is interesting or odd or funny or entertaining. But I love the ability to take a picture and immediately throw it out there. It's made me more observant of what's around because I'm a little bit on this hunt. I am also that person who sometimes walks to the subway stop checking email the whole way and doesn't notice a thing. I'm not some perfect model case. I zombie out a lot, too. The phone has not been all bad for me by any means, though. It's also made me pay more attention.

"Five things you might not have heard that you should check out" by Nina Katchadourian:

1. Silbo, a whistled language that is used on the island of La Gomera. It's a mountainous island and the shepherds across different valleys use it to communicate with one another. It's totally amazing sounding.
2. One of my favorite sound things is the Portsmouth Sinfonia, a project from the mid '70s. An English composer and experimental musician named Gavin Bryars founded this orchestra where you could be a musician, but you couldn't play an instrument you knew how to play. Everyone is playing an instrument they don't know how to play and they're playing repertoire which is very well-known. It's stuff like Beethoven's 5th Symphony or The Blue Danube Waltz or the theme from Thus Spoke Zarathustra or the theme from 2001. There's a way in which this music is incredibly funny, but I've listened to it a lot now, and it tips over from being like crying tears running down my cheeks funny to something much more profound. I think it comes back to that idea of sort of people doing the best they can and it's really part of what we talked about earlier that makes me love this so much.
3. I've been listening to a series of albums called The Secret Ethnic Music of Mankind. I picked up a couple of these when Other Music was closing. I had store credit and about 10 minutes to grab a bunch of CDs. That was my window of opportunity. I randomly grabbed three of these, and they have proven to be so full of musical discoveries. They're recordings from something like 1925 to 1948 from absolutely all over the world, but they're kind of archival recordings. They're on my mind a lot.
4. I've also been listening a lot lately to an Ethiopian jazz musician. He plays more than just jazz. His name is Mulatu Astatke. I discovered him years ago and then kind of forgot about him and then attended a lecture recently by a musicologist who talked about him and I remembered how great he was. That's kind of my studio soundtrack right now. Everyone who's visited while I've had that on has been like, "What is this?"
5. I do this thing called Record Club. I've been doing it for, I think, 12 years, with this group of friends—but they've been doing it even longer. It's not really records as in vinyl; it's just really music, shorthand for music. We get together, a group of about six of us, and we meet about once a month. The idea is everybody brings two things to play for the group. They don't even have to be music, just two sound recordings. Without any explanation or any preemptive anything, you play the thing and everybody listens silently and then we play it again and talk about it. That's all it is. It's kind of like a book club but with music. It's one of the most delightful things in my life. Many of the things I just mentioned to you, I've brought to Record Club. I've discovered a lot of new music through these conversations with friends. There's a really great Record Club site that my friend Dan Carlson, sort of the founder of Record Club, keeps. It's RecordClub.net I think. It's an amazing long list of everything that's ever been brought to Record Club and that's a really fun database to peruse. I've never been in a book club; I don't know if I would like a book club. The communal aspect of listening together to music is so profound for me. It kind of harkens back to stuff I would do in high school. It's like, lie on the floor with your friends, turn out the lights, and listen to music. It's not just about thinking about words. Maybe that's why I like it more than I think I would like a book club—you're a little but freed up from language as your means of communicating or responding. There are a couple people in this group who are artists, but I never talk about art with them. We only talk about music. It's nice for me to be a bit outside of my normal disciplinary-based conversation with other artists. I like that about it, too.

Name

Nina Katchadourian

Vocation

Visual Artist, Teacher

Fact

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