
Artists at Work: Erika Vogt
Adam Putnam, Erika Vogt

Erika Vogt might alternately be described as a sculptor, printmaker or video artist, but, like so many of her peers, these labels merely point at the edges of something deeper. Born out of the tradition of experimental film, Erika brings to bear many of the techniques from that practice to her sculptures and installations – collaging, layering and cutting up different materials. In her current installation, Speech Mesh – Drawn OFF (2014), at the Hepworth Wakefield, in Yorkshire, Erika juxtaposes sculpted objects suspended by rope alongside highly textured video works. Having known Erika for years, our conversations naturally took many twists and turns, but finally landed on a recent project in Troy, New York. As the culmination of her residency at the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC) there, Erika brought together a diverse group of artists and composers to the stage for a one-night theatrical performance, the third installment of her Artist Theater Program (2011–ongoing). Our conversation begins with a question about the late underground film-maker Jack Smith. – Adam Putnam

Adam Putnam: Erika, I’ve been meaning to ask you about Jack Smith for a long time. Perhaps because going back to when we first met in the late 1960s you were working for the small, but influential, film distributor Women Make Movies. Over the years you’ve introduced me to so many experimental film-makers and films, and it’s a big part of how I identify with you as an artist. To be fair, I haven’t seen much of Smith’s work except for Paneled Creatures (1963), which I can’t stand. Something about the lack of a formal structure has always bothered me. Recently I started to feel guilty about this and watched the documentary Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis [dir. Mary Jordan, 2006]. I realised that there was a lot I had been missing – one thing, in particular, would be his desire to create illusion out of very
Simone Subal Gallery

Limited means. That was a long preamble but I thought it might actually be an excuse to start our conversation. I also just wanted an excuse to say: ‘I hate Jack Smith’.

Erika Vogt: Adam, it cracks me up to hear you say that. I remember you saying so clearly the total opposite, that You love Jack Smith’. Or maybe it’s just I assumed you loved Jack Smith. What a dramatic nature! This is part of his immediate allure for me. The Destruction of Atlantis goes into this quite a bit, such as the story of him and Jonas Mekas, and how he thought of Mekas as ‘Uncle Fishhook’ – going as far as to coin the phrase ‘lobsterism’ by which to describe the exploitation he felt by Mekas and others. I think of Jack Smith as a person opposed to the exploits of capitalism but not necessarily to commerce, which he saw as part of human existence. There’s an interview he did with Sylvère Lotinger in which he talks about all this, and also about his making work for himself and that being taken away. I’m interested in trying to understanding work without any prior knowledge. When I think about his work, I am left with the thought of what it means to make art from anything, where nothing goes to waste.

AP: He came to my mind not only in relation to how you approach you work but also because of a series of events you have been organising over the past few years. Shall I ask you about the Artist Theatre Program? The first incarnation of ATP that I remember was at the REDCAT theatre in Los Angeles in 2011. In that iteration, I sent you a sequence of short videos that you interspersed throughout the evening, alongside those of many other artists. For this latest version you have invited me to propose something larger, which has resulted in a large-scale, lighting effect. Can you talk a little bit about how this series evolved, and what led you to it in the first place?

EV: Artist Theater Program was first presented at the REDCAT at the invitation of Steve Anker and Bérengère Reynaud. The programme played again the following summer at the Hammer in August, 2012. You’ve actually participated in all three presentations of the Artist Theater Program – your work came to mind from the start because I knew you could work sculpturally with the space of the theatre. It was initially conceived as a community-building effort in which work by film and video artists were shown in a theatre space alongside experimental film-makers and performers. I wanted to make all the parts of the theatre work and move. Most of the film and video were made by artists who work with sculpture. From there, it incorporated performative elements and experimental films that had a relationship to space or could make the theatre work in a certain way.

AP: I love this idea of pushing one medium into another. For my part I am attempting to fill the stage with the illusion of a gigantic pulsating shadow, emanating from behind an enormous scrim. It has been quite the challenge to adapt what would normally be shown in the white cube of a gallery space to the black space of a theatre. I am curious to see if the piece will be able to hold up on its own in the context of a theatre without the benefits of any narrative or other props. The threshold of boredom is different there because the audience cannot simply amble away. I am also wondering about adding a soundtrack of some kind, to give people something else to latch onto beside a visual effect.

EV: Sound has been on my mind too. I have this idea of having a really quick sound play that will interrupt any movement on stage. Also it’s possible that the whole performance will have several interruptions and everything on stage will freeze from time to time.

AP: In the past your role in creating the ATP has been one of sequencing moving images, much like a curator arranges an exhibition, but for this latest version of ATP you are piecing together not just video and sound but sculptural props and written texts. It feels like you’re stepping into the role of a theatre director. I was privy to a few meetings you were having at EMPAC and I was struck by how much you’ve taken on in that role. Does this feel new for you? Or does it feel natural to do all of this?
EV: With the past two screenings, it was very similar to a drawing process. The way the space and work unfolded in the programme was inspired by Danièle Huillet’s and Jean-Marie Straub’s film *Every Revolution Is a Roll of the Dice* [1978]. I wanted to compress the space and time of an exhibition and to have each individual artist contribute a very distinct work. It doesn’t feel strange to work as a director. I think the difference is that a director can have a more artistic approach, as you are working with an artist as an artist. If a curator were to say we need to take forty minutes out of your work, it would be like, ‘f*ck you!’ But if the director said you have to do this, because it’s the content of the whole work, and because you’re working with another artist, it’d be a different response.

I was really interested in this idea too of layering all these mediums together. The layering can be chaotic, as when I’m layering my videos. I take so much video and when you put it all together it looks like murky gray paint—which is fine; I know that some painters like Amy Stillman will take that and put it back into their paintings. I’m curious about having all these things layered together—so at times they are really murky and at times the picture they form is very acute, like the detail of an object.

AP: This is also the perfect description of how you work in your studio. The last time I was in your studio you were using an old mimeograph to make multiple copies of your images. The copies were coming out blue, but then you were drawing on top of those and printing again. This is also similar to your series of photos from 2006 [I Arrive When I Am Foreign]. With that work, you made stills from footage where you seemed to be manipulating or engaging with totem-like objects. You then made huge prints out of the stills and stood on top of those and made a new video—creating new stills, so there was a constant complication of the space and time and layering. I really love the idea of making something that is murky or visually complicated from which moments of clarity can arise. Perhaps that is how your objects function in some of your recent exhibitions, like at the Hepworth. The objects hanging from the ceiling almost come off like anchors in the space. They tend to be articulated in a way that the forms or imagery in your videos rarely are. You’re constantly tinkering around in the studio, and seem to embrace a certain amount of chaos. So, the videos and prints have a visual density that is often paired with singular objects.
hung throughout the space. I am wondering if I am on the right track here — perhaps you think of them in a different way?

EV: Yes, there is often visual density to the videos and prints. It’s very tactile. I think the surface can be like that of the object that’s in the installation. The object is more of the subjective antenna and can slow you down, so that the work does not have to make sense at every moment.

AP: I’m not looking for a narrative behind those objects here, but I am interested in how you arrive at those objects. Is it a long process or is it random or personal?

EV: I find the objects in very different ways — like, ‘Oh, I’ve been looking at this everyday at home for years,’ or, ‘I have to work with that object because it is similar to what I’ve been drawing’. The objects that generated the still images and videos for *I Arrive When I Am Foreign* came from personal research and was more of a drawing process. They included a first type of industrial tin can, an early electric plug, Navajo-Churro wool, rubber, mid-century plywood from an office building, jaw bones from a jackal, and a lacquered disc used for mastering audio records. Each object had very specific reason for its being chosen, even though this was abstracted in the images. The meaning was really in the background and the texture was in the foreground. The images themselves are actually video stills that were made through physically layering prints in the studio and walking across them. I was making prints of pieces of wood on paper with charcoal at the time, so the charcoal was all over the studio and went all over the prints as well. I wanted to show video without the technology of its production — that is, the video could land on the print and not be a projection, or have to play on a monitor — and to use the print surface to change the video image’s shape.
AP: Do you ever sculpt the forms by hand or are they always cast?

EV: Some of them are sculpted by hand and then cast. Some of them are found, then cast. Some of them come from drawings. I've been making reliefs. The drawings are becoming more and more abstract gestures. I'm always trying to not have one particular meaning and that's related to studying film, because film-makers make things with a very specific meaning in mind. I always feel like I as a person — I don't know if you feel this way — never feel the same about something.

AP: Yeah, I change my mind all the time.

EV: Me too! I never wanted my work to be separate from my person or my humanity. Even if that means that it doesn't make any sense.

AP: No, I guess that's why a conversation about meaning is difficult. I almost understand your objects as words to be read. Perhaps not literally — I can't string them together into a logical sentence — but there's something that feels readable. This goes back to the idea of the objects being moments of clarity, especially thinking about all the colours making brown, and the layering of density versus singularity or articulation. Your recent installations seem to pose your drawings and prints against the objects, or the objects against the videos. There is such a great tension between articulation and disarticulation or what is said and unsaid in them, not unlike the conversation between two old friends... And perhaps this might be a good place to end.
This interview was conducted on 24 March 2014 in Troy, New York.

Footnotes