NANCY SHAVER

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
Artwork by Nancy Shaver in "Viva Arte Viva," at the Venice Biennale, through Nov. 26.

Interview by Dan Nadel
Portrait by Torkil Stavdal

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IN THE STUDIO

Nancy Shaver: *Pie*, 2014, found metal, wooden blocks, dress fabric, T-shirt fabric, china, marker on muslin, Flashe, house paint, and oil pastel, 19 inches in diameter. Courtesy Derek Eller Gallery, New York.

NANCY SHAVER's circuitous route to this year's Venice Biennale began in the farm country of western New York near the shores of Lake Ontario, forty miles outside Buffalo. Her sprawling installation for the Biennale—a motley amalgamation of her boxy sculptures and contributions from nineteen other artists—is partly autobiographical. The work reflects a long process of developing a handmade aesthetic with a communal ethos that has roots in Shaver's youthful experiences of art. One of four siblings, Shaver remembers always wanting to construct "shacks" as a girl and convincing her brothers to build from her plans. One shack was in the back of the family garage. Another she remembers as a "wondrous treehouse in a plum tree." Shaver was on track to go to college in Buffalo with the aim of eventually teaching first grade, but she grew bored with the idea and, using money she had saved, applied to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.

In the fall of 1965 she began art school as an interior design major. There she met Haim Steinbach, to whom she was later married for nine years. Both applied to Yale University for graduate school, but only Steinbach was accepted. Shaver accompanied him to New Haven, where she audited courses and met Walker Evans, her formative influence. Evans encouraged Shaver's attentiveness to vernacular culture, and the two frequently went on "seeing trips" to beaches, where Evans enjoyed observing debris left by the tides. Shaver describes those jaunts as another education, citing Matisse's famous proclamation: "I am made up of everything I have seen."

Shaver's work as a photographer culminated in the mid-1970s with a series of black-and-white images of children's clothing. (Robert Gober, who met Shaver when both were living in Middlebury, Vermont, during this period, included these photographs in the small group exhibition he organized as part of his 2014 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.) Shaver gradually moved from cataloguing objects of fascination in her photographs to creating sculptures with found objects that she affixed directly to walls. These pieces, in turn, gave way to furniturelike floor sculptures and wall-mounted reliefs composed primarily of cubes and rectangular forms. Shaver's works tend to fall into a few distinct, albeit loosely defined, genres: "blocks," "boxes," and "spacers." Blocks are agglomerations of painted wood squares arranged in groups of nine or sixteen. Boxes are containers filled with various objects, including painted cardboard tubes and tissue boxes. Spacers, her newest works, are fabric-covered canvas panels.

In 1999 the artist opened Henry, a shop in Hudson, New York. The store is not exactly her art, but it holds only things she likes to look at. Items from her studio sometimes migrate to Henry, and unsold objects from Henry likewise find their way to her studio. Lately, as if following the collective spirit of her retail operation, Shaver has begun incorporating work by friends and fellow artists into her own installations. "Dress the Form," her 2016 exhibition at Derek Eller Gallery in New York, featured the sprawling *Quilt* (2016), a collaboration with more than twenty artists. Spanning an entire wall, the site-specific installation was a dense and varied panorama of textures and

Blue and the Gray, 1989, found frames, blue corduroy trousers, and gray sweater, 23 by 36 inches, on wallpaper designed by Dawn Cerny. Courtesy Derek Eller Gallery.

images. In one area, a photograph of a melting slushy drink by Judy Linn was placed next to Shaver's brightly colored spacers, which were, in turn, adjacent to a swatch of hand-stenciled wallpaper by Dawn Cerny, a former student.

Shaver's work in Venice is done in this mode, reflecting her belief that art is both an individual experience and a communal effort. Her project, which appears in "Viva Arte Viva," the main exhibition organized by Biennale curator Christine Macel, includes contributions by many of her friends and former students. In addition to floor sculptures, the piece features three walls bearing careful arrangements of objects and images that tell the fragmentary "story" of Shaver's art and life.

Shaver splits her time between Henry, her studio, and Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, where she teaches in the MFA sculpture program. We spoke in her sunlit home studio in Jefferson, New York, on a snowy day in January.

DAN NADEL How do you select objects for both your artwork and your store? Are you working from a specific sense of taste?

NANCY SHAVER I'm totally against taste in the way that Duchamp was against it. Duchamp said, "Taste can't help you understand what art can be." In Hudson there are all these shops selling good taste to New Yorkers; I'm not interested in doing that, which makes me not a good business person.

NADEL Then tell me about what does interest you.

SHAVER When I started using found objects, about thirty-five years ago, I was reading a lot. I realized that I wanted to make a visual novel in sculpture form.

NADEL You were basically placing different objects in a row, relating one to the next like scenes in a story. The most concise version of this might be *Lares and Penates* [1987–89], which consists of an orange tea pot and a blue ceramic cat hanging from the wall on armatures.

SHAVER At that point I was adamant that I had not yet made a story. I felt that whatever I had made was a meeting point between me and the viewer, and the viewer's story was distinct from my own. I was not necessarily going to tell you my story. My story is in *Quilt* and other recent works.

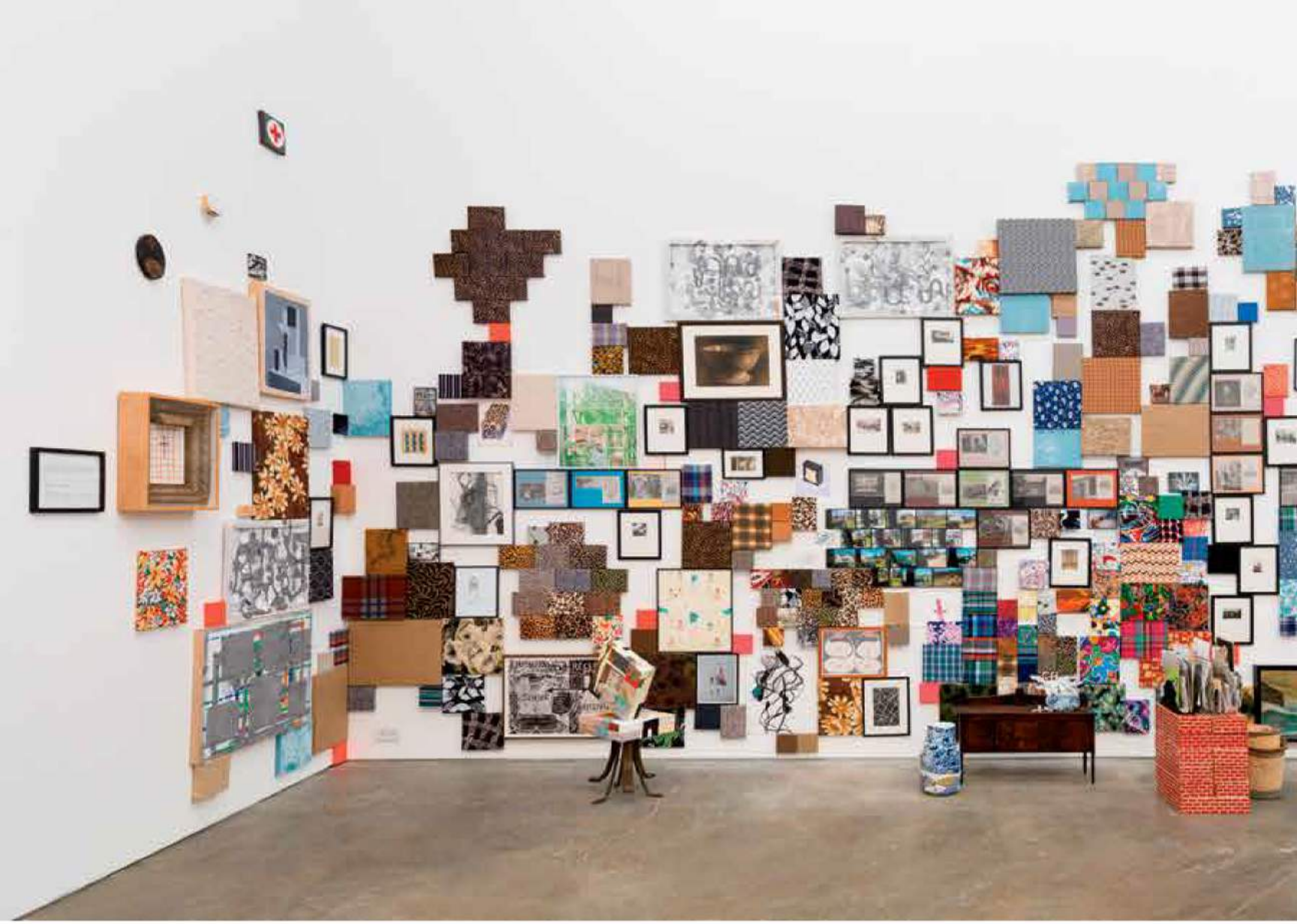
NADEL Except for the early photographs, your work is nonrepresentational. There are few narrative clues.

SHAVER The narrative is about the process of making and about the materials themselves. That narrative is conveyed via color and abstraction.

NADEL And color and abstraction are relatively new for you. When you first moved away from found objects in the '80s, you made gray-toned boxes and blocks, bringing color in only gradually. Now your boxes and blocks seem like Matisse-inspired master classes in color.

SHAVER I think everything starts from fear. When I began those boxes I was incredibly afraid of color, so I started from no color and then I began to take color on.

NADEL Why did you stop working with found objects?



"'Dress the Form' wasn't about having a bunch of discrete finished objects for sale. It was more about a way of living with art."

SHAVER Because I was tired of having the intermediary of a recognizable object with its own associations. I had made photographs, arranged found objects on walls, and placed them in containers. But I wanted to use my own hand.

NADEL The different kinds of work you've made over the years break down into what you call genres. Do you set parameters for these genres before taking up a new body of work?

SHAVER It all develops through happenstance and looking. I have new ideas about a genre very infrequently. For example, after fifteen or sixteen years of doing the blocks, I only recently started offsetting one square within the group instead of keeping the component squares flush. But it was an accident at first. It's all incremental and it's not planned.

NADEL A shift in your work seems to have occurred in the late 1990s or early 2000s, when you started using volumetric space in new ways, filling boxes with arrangements of smaller cubes and rectangles.

SHAVER All that work happened because of where I was living at the time. I'd moved upstate in the early '90s because my work was selling and I bought a house on a whim. But then my work stopped selling. I had no way to make a living, and it was pretty scary. Then I found a barn that was for sale for seventeen thousand dollars, which was the last of my savings. I realized I could buy this barn and not have a mortgage. But the barn had holes in all its walls and was like a nightmare of a mess. I got exhausted from working on it while trying to live in it. There was one half wall between the kitchen and the living room, with a couch facing it. So I hung these paper or cardboard boxes on that wall and then I lay on the couch, looking at them and thinking about how to arrange them. That's how it became my art.

View of Shaver's installation *Quilt*, 2016, mixed mediums, dimensions variable; in collaboration with twenty-five other artists. Courtesy Derek Eller Gallery.

NADEL One piece you're working on is a red, black, and light-blue sculpture made from sixteen wood blocks. Presumably you paint the blocks as you assemble them?

SHAVER In that case, the blocks were given a white underpainting. And then I applied the colors once I finished assembling the work. When I work with fabric, I cover blocks before I start arranging them, loosely choosing which fabrics go next to which as I go. I found that I have to like the fabrics in order to do this. I've tried not liking them, but I can't set up roadblocks for myself. I need to be straightforward in my relationship to the materials.

NADEL However intricate their component parts, most of your sculptures have an overall square shape.

SHAVER I love it that the square shape is not quite square. It demands your attention; your eye is much more intrigued because it can't quite settle.

NADEL You aren't aiming for geometric precision?

SHAVER Deliberate imperfection is more exciting. It activates the mechanics of the eye. I try really hard to make everything active rather than passive.

NADEL Just before the entrance to your studio you've hung an elaborate red-and-white candleholder made of wood, and speckled with dots. It has a heart-shaped base affixed to the wall. Perched on an armature off the base is a silhouette of a lady gardener watering a "plant," which is the candleholder. What is it that you find appealing about this object?

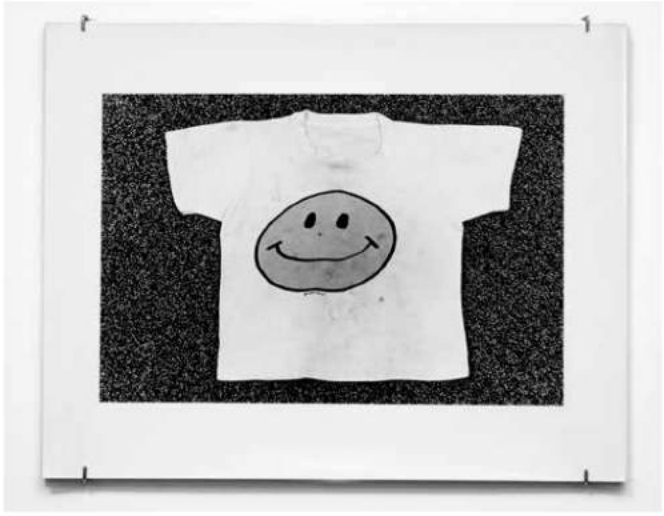
SHAVER It makes me happy because someone put incredible detail and effort into it. They used a pattern to cut it out, but what came out of that pattern was the character of the person who made it, the individual who put all those dots or whatever on it. It's an extraordinary ordinary object. It's surreal in a certain way, because who would ever think that was ordinary?

NADEL How do you define the "extraordinary ordinary"?

SHAVER It's whatever holds up to focused looking.

NADEL Did you learn about focused looking from Walker Evans?

SHAVER Evans could look at the ordinary and translate it into a new medium or take from it a new idea. I think I learned more from him than anybody else, ever, about formal-



Top, *Smile*, and bottom, *Dress*, both ca. 1970s, black-and-white photographs, 11 by 14 inches each. Private collection.

ism. He had the ability to be clear enough in his work so that people looked at what he wanted them to see. He was pretty much a renegade. That wasn't always visible.

NADEL He was obviously constructing very clear images, but they could also be full of ambiguity.

SHAVER But their clarity directed you toward these complex experiences of texture, color—the thing itself. The thing in its absolute best light. We used to go junking together, and that was like heaven. It's because of my junking trips with him, and his encouragement, that I developed those pictures of children's clothing. I was also very aware of Warhol at that point. The pictures of clothing were difficult to make because I wanted the backgrounds to be equal to the shirts. It was challenging for me to find a background that I felt was as strong as the shirt itself.

NADEL A lot of what you do involves balancing background and foreground. Are you also making a statement about hierarchy in a broader sense?

SHAVER I wanted to collapse both the spatial and hierarchical differences. I wanted both elements to be equal. I didn't want it to be about anything except the shirt and the background. I didn't want it to be about the light. I didn't want any distractions. I guess since then my art has morphed into this idea about the democracy of things.

NADEL Who else do you consider to be engaged in this sort of focused looking that Evans instilled in you?

SHAVER I'm a big admirer of Kara Walker. And David Hammons.

NADEL Do you mean their work sustains focused looking on the part of the viewer? Or do you mean the artists are doing the focused looking?

SHAVER They're doing the focused looking. They are looking so closely from their experience and their points of view, and then expanding that experience through their work.

NADEL Do you ever find the looking to be exhausting, or is it always exhilarating?

SHAVER Most of the time there is nothing that I like better than looking. Whenever I get bored in the studio, I say to Jackson, my husband, "I need to go look at something!" That means we go junking. Which means I go buying things. I am a collector by nature. I'm a visual collector. But now that I have Henry, I can collect in volume, because I can try to sell whatever I buy, allowing me to see the next thing. I've sold most of my collections in my life. I had a wonderful collection of ugly lamps. I sold most of them. Now I'm collecting textiles. You can just pile them all up and then change them by putting one on top of the others. It doesn't require as much space.

NADEL There is no firm divide between anything in life, but what you are doing in Henry seems different from what you are doing here in the studio. You aren't selling your own art in Henry, for example.

SHAVER No. Because it's easier to sell objects that live in the world of function and decoration, as opposed to art. The things I sell at Henry are real objects in that way.

NADEL Your artworks are not real objects?

SHAVER No, not really. Not to 95 percent of the viewing world. It's too arcane. Art is my private life and Henry is my public life.

NADEL How did the setting of Venice affect your decisions about what to show there?

SHAVER What affected my decisions was the show at Derek [Eller]'s last summer. I had never done any big work, ever. I believe in small work, and I wanted to do only small work. Then I asked myself, "Why have you put such a limitation on yourself?" But there are reasons and they're mostly practical. What am I going to do with a large work? But the show at Derek's—that wall—was so exciting. And then it was so confounding an experience in the present.

NADEL What do you mean "the present"?

SHAVER I mean it was about living and thinking. "Dress the Form" wasn't about having a bunch of discrete finished objects for sale. It was more about creating an installation in the moment, and making a way of living with art. This new experience was interesting to me—and scary, I suppose. And I liked the scare so much that it changed my experience of art. I couldn't just go back to producing exhibits of standalone objects. The Venice project became about continuing this new, living experience of art.

Yellow + Blue Stick, 2002, wooden box, cardboard boxes, Flashe, and house paint, 13 by 16½ by 5½ inches. Courtesy Derek Eller Gallery.

NADEL What struck me about "Dress the Form" was the sense of a community of objects speaking to one another—the "democracy of things" you mentioned earlier. Your Venice installation will include, among other objects: a sculpture by Jackson; examples of your spacers; found snapshots by anonymous photographers; a seascape painting you found in Ithaca, New York, in the 1970s; two paintings by Pamela Cardwell; and a photo by Judy Linn. But even though these are presented without hierarchical distinctions, the overall work still falls under your name.

SHAVER It does, but the other artists' names are there as well. I'm the organizer and I'm also the tyrant. I would admit to that. I'm the tyrant because I'm choosing.

NADEL And so the act of choosing and arranging . . .

SHAVER Is tyrannical?

NADEL I don't know. Is it? I was going to ask if it was fun.

SHAVER It is.

NADEL Is it more fun than making?

SHAVER Yes, it's so much fun [*laughs*]. But it's also about personal connections and collective histories, which are not always acknowledged in exhibitions. That is what I am happiest about with this work: it represents a collective history. But I did wonder about that tyrannical aspect. And then I saw it's the price to be paid, which is no different from Evans making his photographs completely straight.

NADEL What do you mean?

SHAVER He always modified his photographs in the dark room, making the orientation perfectly straight, for example, so you could look at the images the way he wanted you to. At one point, early on, my former dealer Hudson said to me, "art is a life." And I thought that was such an incredible statement, and it became the umbrella for this new work. The lives that form the collective history I want to convey become the stuff of art. They *are* the art. I am the one straightening the photographs in this version. I'm showing you how to see something. And that's why I can be a tyrant. But my approach also reflects completely personal motivations. I've been teaching in the MFA program at Bard for the last twenty years. If eighty people graduate every year, that's 1,600 artists. They're part of my life; these people are a part of my life.

NADEL So you feel responsibility for them?

SHAVER A little bit, but I also like their work and want to look at it and collect it.

NADEL Do you always feel like you're part of a community?

SHAVER I think teaching at Bard has given me an understanding of community. It's incredibly meaningful. I would not be here today talking to you if I had not had a twenty-year education at Bard.

NADEL Why is that?

SHAVER I've learned from fellow artists and students what articulation means and the importance of speaking about art, both for myself and for the person I'm talking to. ○