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This American Life: Cady Noland's Art Feels More Prescient, Incisive, and Urgent Than Ever

BY *Andrew Russeth* POSTED 03/27/18 5:00 AM



Cady Noland, *Untitled*, 1989, at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, October 14–December 22, 1989.

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'**W**hat's great about this country," Andy Warhol wrote in his 1975 tome, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, "is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too."

At the time she was working on her sculpture *Celebrity Trash Spill* (1989)—camera equipment, sunglasses, tabloids, and cigarettes, atop and around a bunched-up carpet—artist Cady Noland was reading the tabloids the *Globe* and the *Star*. She realized, she told an interviewer in 1990, "that you consume all these celebrities each week, then you turn them into trash. This trashing helps to dampen people's anger over their situation or their own place in the hierarchy of importance." In another interview, she meditated on littering, observing that, "as a culture, we tend to prefer quantity over quality."

In the work Noland produced between roughly 1985 and 2000, she assembled the raw stuff of America—its trash, its quantity—into sculptures that are somehow formally rigorous, even when utterly chaotic. Here are some of the things that appear in them: car tires, cans of Budweiser, motorcycle helmets, American flags, bullets, rubber chickens, handcuffs, at least one cowbell, and images of Charles Manson, Patty Hearst, and Betty Ford. Her pieces have also taken the form of stockades, chain-link fences, a cage, and full-scale log cabin facades. Her work conjures a world of hyper-paranoia, media manipulation, spectacular violence, public humiliation, and American lore. Twenty and thirty years after they were made, many of her pieces are looking remarkably prescient, the people whose images appear in them once again circulating through politics and media.

Take Vince Foster. For a 1993/94 piece, she printed the face of the Clintons' adviser onto aluminum, along with the text of a torn-up note found in his room after he committed suicide on July 20, 1993. It reads: "I was not meant for the job or the spotlight of public life in Washington. Here ruining people is considered sport." During the 2016 presidential campaign, one of Donald Trump's many attacks on Hillary Clinton involved his telling the *Washington Post* that Foster's death was "very fishy." Trump said, "He knew everything that was going on, and then all of a sudden he committed suicide . . . [P]eople . . . continue to bring it up because they think it was absolutely a murder. I don't do that because I don't think it's fair."

Take Lee Harvey Oswald. In *Oozewald* (1989), Noland transforms his image—that photo in which Dallas nightclub owner Jack Ruby's fatal gunshots find their target—into a larger-than-life silkscreen printed on an aluminum sheet held upright by a metal stand; the portrait bears eight large holes, an American flag stuffed

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in Oswald's grimace, the expression by which we best know him. In May 2016, in an effort to smear his Republican primary opponent Ted Cruz, Trump, riffing on a story in the *National Enquirer*, a publication put out by American Media, whose chairman and CEO is Trump pal David Pecker, told a Fox News reporter, "His father was with Lee Harvey Oswald prior to Oswald's being, you know, shot. I mean, the whole thing is ridiculous. What is this, right prior to his being shot, and nobody even brings it up. They don't even talk about that. That was reported, and nobody talks about it."

The *Enquirer* has also been a fertile source for Noland. In 1990 she made *Enquirer Page with Eyes Cut Out*, a print on metal, showing an enlarged image of the magazine's 1989 story on the acting couple David Niven Jr. and Jaclyn Smith, who was just off a divorce. Their eyes are cut out, transforming them into a version of the interactive funhouse attraction board that might have a clown or a pirate painted on it.

"Failing," Trump's word of choice in describing the "fake news New York Times," modifies the name of a newspaper in another 1990 Noland, *Press Czar*, a printed-plywood portrait of William Randolph Hearst with his eyes and mouth cut out. The text below the image says that Hearst "ushered in mass-circulation newspapers with sensationalism" and notes that he "bought the failing New York 'Morning Journal' in 1895 and made it the model of yellow journalism."

Last fall, the New York gallery *Venus Over Manhattan* presented an unexpected pairing: two of Noland's works alongside two by Alexander Calder. The Nolands—one a colonial stockade draped with an American flag and the other a cattle gate slung with leather straps and ammo—brought out a sinister aspect in the centerpiece Calder, a sharp-edged black stabile with a spinning red diamond on its front that looks like a medieval torture device. The show also included a 1972 newspaper ad, paid for in part by Calder, calling for the impeachment of Richard Nixon, another figure who has appeared in Noland's work; his name is back in the news these days, with an undertow of comparisons of scenarios in the present White House to the Watergate scandal, and lawyers and investigators who prosecuted and investigated Watergate making the talk show circuit. When you look at Noland's artworks, you can't help but feel she predicted our present moment, that we've grown into a world she envisioned.

Cady Noland was born in 1956 in Washington, D.C., to Color Field painter Kenneth Noland and artist Cornelia Langer, who would later divorce. She attended Sarah Lawrence College. She started becoming known for her dark, politically astute work in the late 1980s, and in 1990 her work came to international attention in the *Aperto* section of the 44th Venice Biennale. The next year she was included in the Whitney

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Installation view of "Kinetics of Violence: Alexander Calder + Cady Noland," with *Gibbet* (left), 1993–94, and *Corral Gates* (detail), 1989, at Venus Over Manhattan, 2017.

©CADY NOLAND/COURTESY VENUS OVER MANHATTAN, NEW YORK

Biennial. She had several more exhibitions and then, around the start of this century, she dropped out. She ceased to exhibit new work and stopped participating in the art world. By email, she declined to be interviewed for this article.

Noland's first solo show was at White Columns in New York in 1988. Bill Arning, who is now director of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, was in charge of the SoHo nonprofit at the time. One day, he was

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holding an open house where artists could bring by slides, he recalled recently, and “suddenly Cady comes in, and she’s done everything wrong,” he said. “She had a stack of Polaroids, where I couldn’t tell where the art was. She was doing these installation pieces. And I was fascinated. I went to the studio, I kept going to the studio.” He gave her a show.

The installation process went slowly. “She couldn’t finish, she couldn’t make her decisions in the time that we were going to be there,” Arning said. “I said, Look, here’s the key. I’m just going to trust you. Here’s how you lock up. And I remember coming in at, like, 8:30 the next morning, and she has pretty much barred off the room, filled it with these rubber mats and geriatric walkers and milk crates filled with jumper cables—I was like, Holy fuck! This is brilliant! And I had no idea what to do with it.” He called up supporters of White Columns, and said, “Look, something really important happened here, and I think you need to see it.”

Noland made what may be her best-known sculpture in 1989, an installation that resembles a bunker comprising 1,100 cans of Budweiser beer. Inside are metal construction scaffolding, American flags, scattered metal rods, hamburger buns, and various other detritus.

She originally created it for the Mattress Factory, an alternative space in Pittsburgh, and it now resides in the private museum of the Rubell family in Miami. “I love that the piece still exists, and I love that it happened on a little street on the North Side of Pittsburgh,” said Michael Olijnyk, Mattress Factory co-director. “We worked with a beer distributor in Pittsburgh who loaned us the beer for the entire length of the exhibition. Because the beer is freshness-dated, the distributor could not sell it after a certain date, so what we did at a point was, we took the whole thing down and put it all back up again. They were great. They came with this gigantic truck and cases and cases and cases of Budweiser. And we had a team of six or ten people, just running up and down the stairs, putting the cases in the exact same place.”

Olijnyk remembers the late curator John Caldwell coming by; he was then at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh: “He said it was a jaw-dropping piece when he saw it.” Caldwell tried and failed to get local collectors interested, Olijnyk said. Around that same time, Caldwell was named a curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and he acquired works by Noland before dying of a heart attack in 1993 at the age of 51. (One of Noland’s grandest works, a log cabin facade, carries the parenthetical subtitle *Memorial to John Caldwell*.)

In the white cube gallery of the Rubell Family Collection, the Mattress Factory piece syncs nicely with

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Minimal and Conceptual stuff, but it breathes truck exhaust, the air of trash fires, driveways made by tire tracks.

There is sly mischievousness in Noland's work. In 1990 she had a show at Luhring Augustine Hetzler, the Los Angeles partnership between New York dealers Roland Augustine and Lawrence Luhring and German dealer Max Hetzler. Her first show on the West Coast and one of her most fondly remembered, it included a log cabin facade piece and a metal cutout of a cowboy sitting and eating. The floor was scattered with the kinds of things that were becoming her signature materials: metal poles, flags, handcuffs. But she also made a special request, asking that the gallery's staff dress up in Wild West costumes. "They had holsters and chaps and the whole thing, and one of the gallerinas, as well," said Peter Nagy, a dealer and artist who knew Noland in New York. "Howdy," they said when answering the phone, according to a *Los Angeles Times* review. "It was a very difficult month for them but they were really good sports," Noland said in a 1994 interview with Mark Kremer and Camiel van Winkel.

Noland addressed a related issue in 1990, in one of her most quoted lines. "From the point at which I was making work out of objects I became interested in how, actually, under which circumstances people treat other people like objects."

For a two-person exhibition with Doug MacWithey in 1993, at the Dallas Museum of Art, Noland arranged for four wheelchairs to be made available to visitors. She told Kremer and van Winkel, "I get impatient and lazy looking at art myself. The last time I was at the Louvre I decided that the next time I go I'm going to borrow one of their wheelchairs—then I'd be able to actually enjoy the work without feeling like I had to fall down and take a nap on the floor." For the Dallas show, she printed images and text on what she called "funhouse mirrors," dissolving, in her estimation, the boundaries between "the thing and the person."

"The wheelchairs," she added, "allowed you to move if you wanted to, you were not trapped."

The following year, for a solo show at Paula Cooper in New York, she displayed four stockades. If they wanted to, visitors could lock themselves in them. "I walked over to see Cady's show at Paula Cooper's every single day of its run," said veteran art dealer José Freire, the owner of Team Gallery in SoHo. "In my 34 years working in the New York art world, it was the single most galvanizing show by a young artist I've ever witnessed."

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Installation view of "Encounters 3: Cady Noland and Doug MacWithey," 1993, at the Dallas Museum of Art.

©CADY NOLAND/COURTESY DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

In 2000 a piece by Noland appeared in a group show at Freire's gallery, curated by Bob Nickas: white barricades with plastic A-frames threaded on wooden planks. By then, she was already exiting the stage, agreeing to fewer shows.

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At Team, Freire said, she deliberated at length about where to place the piece. “Cady spent the greater part of three evenings in the space by herself, which is what she asked for,” he said. “We gave her keys to the gallery. She worked as late as she wanted to, by herself.” Eventually, she settled on a location in the smaller of Team’s two rooms, near its entrance.

A prominent New York dealer showed up on the first day of the show and asked to buy the piece, which was editioned, Freire said, but Noland had specifically instructed him not to sell to dealers. “This was a person who wanted her work treated in a certain way.”

That extended to its dismantling. “Like a serial killer disposing of a body, the gallery was ordered to take apart the work and place the pieces into separate trash bins around the city,” the artist Steven Parrino wrote, in a 2001 essay published after his death, in 2005. He was referring to Noland’s telling Freire to assure her that after her exhibition closed, he would take the A-frames and, as Freire put it, “disperse them slowly, and around the neighborhood.”

Noland also worked unusual hours when she appeared in Documenta 9 in Kassel, Germany, in 1992, presenting a project in association with Nickas—panels printed with one of her essays alongside pieces she had gathered from artist friends, like Jessica Diamond and Parrino. Artist Josephine Meckseper, who was involved in installing the show, writes in an essay that “next to the main installation was a large van turned on its side, front crushed in, glass windows shattered, sitting on wooden pallets. Danger and chaos lay in the air. We moved cinder blocks, metal barriers, and artworks around for several days in the cold, dark underground; no matter what we changed, the installation always looked good.”

Referring to three discrete works by Noland, Parrino took a stab at the sources of her work in his essay, writing that her “subjects are not social anthropology, but clues to herself. She uses emotional triggers that represent weakness. *Crashed Car* (Cady was in a wreck at a young age), *Plane Crash Photos* (Cady is afraid to fly), *The Family and the SLA that kidnapped Patty Hearst* (Cady has a fear of cults).” Noland, for her part, wrote in that Documenta essay, which she first penned in 1987, that the psychoanalyst Ethel Spector Person has suggested that “the psychopath shares the societal sanctioned characteristics of the entrepreneurial male. Their maneuvers are differentiated mostly by decibel, the acts of the psychopath being the ‘louder.’” Later, she added, “The psychopath leaves a trail littered with the broken, discarded bodies and lives of others, he trashes them.”

Noland has not shown new work since that group show at Team in 2000. The latest date on record for a piece by

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her is 2008, for a wire basket filled with two helmets and other items that is in the collection of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Stories about her proliferate: She is making work, she is not making work; she is hard to work with, she is the sweetest person; she has turned down a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. The most tantalizing rumor I heard was that a major museum had paid her a couple million dollars for a new large-scale commission that has never been shown. (Not true, a spokesperson for that museum told me.)

Noland's influence has coursed through the contemporary scene for decades now, and you can see it in superb artists as disparate as Jesse Darling, Diamond Stingily, Cameron Rowland, and Andra Ursuta. Arning, the Houston museum director, said of art students he speaks with, "They all *shero* worship her. The idea of someone who is that firm in her decision making, [who] can say no to all the cash and prizes."

"It was so clear to everybody that this person had not sold out," Freire said. "Everybody else does. She didn't, and that's very attractive."

Sarah Thornton's 2014 book, *33 Artists in 3 Acts*, which includes Noland's first interview in at least a decade, reports that megadealer Larry Gagosian attempted to do a solo show of Noland's art in 2013. According to Thornton's book, Noland responded by saying she would shoot him if he did. (It seems germane to mention here that in November 2011, *Oozewald*, the Oswald sculpture, sold for \$6.58 million at Sotheby's in New York, at the time a record for any living female artist.) Noland has also successfully prevented the sale of some works attributed to her, arguing that they are damaged or inauthentic.

Thornton's chapter on Noland includes a disclaimer: "Ms. Noland would like it to be known that she has not approved this chapter." Variations of that phrase have appeared in exhibition halls, on the wall of at least one art fair booth, and in numerous auction-house catalogues, each time casting a thin veneer of doubt over the proceedings: Maybe that is not a Noland. Maybe that is just any old American flag or length of aluminum fencing.

I'm not interested in speculating about Noland's reasons for stepping back from the art world. Only she knows them. But I am intrigued by the cascading effects of her silence. It is a way of exercising control, submitting to no questions, offering nothing new. As critic Martin Herbert has suggested in an essay on Noland, "America has not changed, only become more what she recognized it to be decades before." Why say something if there is nothing to say?

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There are no photos of Noland online, except for an old black-and-white one, shot at Documenta in 1992, in which she is covering her face with her hands, and so I have sometimes wondered if I've passed her on the street without knowing it. I was recently shown a photograph of Noland that has never been made public. She is smiling a little sheepishly for the camera. I can only characterize my reaction to seeing it as discomfort. It felt improper to look. I looked away.

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