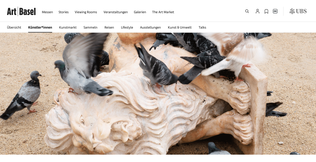


How I became an artist: Nina Beier

The Danish artist on letting objects speak, her personal sense of relativity, and seeing the world from two perspectives

By Kristian Vistrup Madsen | Sep 18, 2020 | 7 min read

Portrait of Nina Beier. Photograph by Simon Sjoborg Walker. Courtesy of the artist and Coy Nielsen.

"A new artist, or quite a late point that I realised I was becoming an artist. After studying photography in Denmark, I moved to London in 2002 to do this very short-lived course at London's Central Saint Martins. I immediately realised that I didn't like it. I felt that photography was a medium to try to develop a positive outside of established media, but it was a strange, limbo-like space, where it wasn't quite clear what we were working toward. I started collaborating with my friend **Maria Lund**, documenting social experiments and devising micro-changes-actions based on testing group dynamics in different ways. We using a distended political collective to keep their eyes closed for as long as possible, or the members of an extended family to wake up for one the scam as well of them dawn.

Nina Beier and Bob Ed, Field Trip, 2006, installation view of 'A Model' at Modern Luxembourg, 2006. © Photo: Marielle Tralho/Modern Luxembourg. Courtesy of the artists, Coy Nielsen, and Standard (Oslo).

Nina Beier and Bob Ed, Field Trip, 2006, installation view of 'A Model' at Modern Luxembourg, 2006. © Photo: Marielle Tralho/Modern Luxembourg. Courtesy of the artists, Coy Nielsen, and Standard (Oslo).

Recently, when I told the curator Cédric Fauq at the CAPC in Bordeaux about my background in photography, he said, "Well, it's not so surprising that you became an artist, because photography has to do things that already exist." I hadn't made that connection, but I know I often use photographic terms when talking about my work, like "zooming in." I always look for the type of object that is a kind of photographic equivalent, that is not a photo but has photographic properties. I'm also drawn to objects that have a broken camera with a lens that can't only focused. An aspect, for instance, is both real and artificial, a fake designer handbag is both a real bag and a representation of a bag, etc. Once you start to look out for it, you'll notice that a lot of objects are basically inadvertent sculptures.

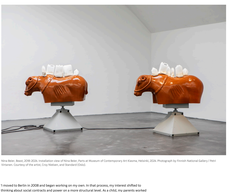
Portrait of Nina Beier. Photograph by Simon Sjoborg Walker. Courtesy of the artist and Coy Nielsen.

Nina Beier, Tomato Nuts, 2016. Installation view of Nina Beier, Acts of Cape Inside (Fall contemporary) in Bordeaux, 2016. Photograph by Arthur Pequin. Courtesy of the artist, Coy Nielsen, and Standard (Oslo).

Installation view of Nina Beier, Acts of Cape Inside (Fall contemporary) in Bordeaux, 2016. Photograph by Arthur Pequin. Courtesy of the artist, Coy Nielsen, and Standard (Oslo).

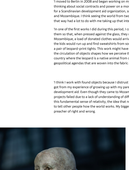
For me, the transition to making sculpture came gradually as a kind of side effect to the experiments in the videos. In one work, Maria and I built a wooden box to fit exactly around the duplicate books my mother had kept in the attic since my parents moved to Ingelstrup. These were works of classic literature, and I had the idea that we could use the box as a kind of time capsule, to bury it in one of my parents' graves. The promise was that, if they ever split up and she needed the books back, the box alone would be the work. So, although there was a sculptural element, it was still a kind of social object. To this day, I don't really distinguish between sculpture and performance in my practice.

Nina Beier and Maria Lund, The House and the Bulldozer, 2007. Courtesy of the artists and Coy Nielsen.



Nina Beier, Bazar, 2018. Installation view of Nina Beier: Force & Resistance at Contemporary Art Kaunas, Helsinki, 2018. Photograph by Finnish National Gallery/ Mari Hiltunen. Courtesy of the artist, Coy Nielsen, and Standard (Oslo).

I moved to Berlin in 2006 and began working on my own. In that process, my interest shifted to thinking about social contracts and power on a more structural level. As a child, my parents worked for a Scandinavian development aid organisation, so we moved back and forth between Denmark and Mozambique. I was very aware of the fact that I was a white person in a black country, and that was how I was able to do the making up that interest later on.



Nina Beier, Women & Children, 2022. Installation view at The Nightly, New York, 2022. Photograph by Timothy Schmalz. Courtesy of the artist and Finnish National Gallery, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, acquired with support from The Paul Computing Foundation.

Portrait of Nina Beier. Photograph by Simon Sjoborg Walker. Courtesy of the artist and Coy Nielsen.

Instead, I am trying to make the objects themselves speak to the variety of human intentions that formed their history, as testaments to the global machinery and the people who produced them. Objects are often perceived as tools, but I find that, by bringing them into formal conversations with other objects, they can be made to reveal their stories in subtle and complex ways. Definitely don't want to be a "maker of things" in the sense that I want people to think that my sculptures or paintings can affect the outside—a bathroom sink can return to being a bathroom sink and a cigar can return to being a cigar—and in that the signification of the object continues to evolve and fluctuate even after it has become part of a sculpture."

Credits and Captions

Nina Beier is represented by **Crop Nielsen** (Vienna) and **Standard (Oslo)** (Oslo).

Current and upcoming solo exhibitions include: Acts of CAPC, Bordeaux, from March 7 to September 6, 2020, Part of the Museum of Contemporary Art Kaunas Network, from March 20 to September 6, 2020, and Cuts! at Tomasz Masny City, from May 26 to September 20, 2020. Beier's work is currently on view in the group exhibitions 'A Model' (until 16 AUG at MUDAM, Luxembourg, until September 6, 2020) and 'Force & Resistance' (until September 6, 2020 at Kiasma).

Kristian Vistrup Madsen is a writer, artist, and curator based in Berlin. His work has been published in magazines including Artforum, Frieze, Mousse, and The White Review. His book Doing Time: Essays on Living Prison was published by Reaktion Books in 2020.

Caption for top image: Nina Beier, Guardians (detail), 2020. Installation view at Parc sur Ill Basel, and Galerie Nathalie, Paris, 2020. Photograph by Dawn Mackman. Courtesy of the artist, Coy Nielsen, and Galerie Nathalie.

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