

JANA SOPHIA NOLLE: LIVING ROOM

Essay by Aaron Schuman

In a 1968 transcript held by the Oral History Center and the University of California, Berkeley – which compiles together various interviews conducted with the renowned photographer Dorothea Lange in the early 1960s – the writer and social scientist Suzanne Riess begins by introducing the scene itself:

“The home of Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor at 1163 Euclid Avenue in Berkeley is approached down a steep, banked path. At the end of the walk is a great, large door; gongs and bells give a choice of ways of asking admittance. Inside is a landing and ahead, down a few steps, is the living room ... It is a many-leveled, private, beautiful, 1910 Berkeley house, completely settled into its surroundings.

Our first interview in October 1960 was held in the living room, a room with a view of trees off a balcony at the far end; inside it was all soft colors of wood and oatmeal white painted wool-covered walls and a very warm fire. The black and white of Dorothea's photographs spread across a long working desk in that room.”¹

This eloquent description of Lange's living room sets the stage for a now famous conversation in which Lange explained her creative epiphany and immediate artistic conversion of 1932, whereby she abandoned her career as an established studio portrait photographer who served San Francisco's elite and instead pursued a path that led her to become one of the most important and influential social documentary photographers of all time. “There in my studio on Montgomery Street,” Lange recalled, “I was surrounded by evidences of the Depression ... I remember well standing at that one window and just watching the flow of life ... The unemployed would drift up there, would stop, and I could just see they did not know where next. The studio room was one flight up and I looked down as long as I could ... [T]hat window...really got me going in the direction of the kind of photography for which at the time there was no name. They call it ‘documentary’ now.”²

Lange's reminiscences are of course fascinating, but furthermore, by explicitly placing this conversation within Lange's Bay Area home – and more specifically, within the comfort of her

¹ Suzanne Riess, “Introduction”, *Dorothea Lange: The Making of a Documentary Photographer* (An Interview Conducted by Suzanne Riess (Berkeley: Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1968), p. i.

² Dorothea Lange, *Dorothea Lange: The Making of a Documentary Photographer* (An Interview Conducted by Suzanne Riess (Berkeley: Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1968), pp. 144-6.

own “living room” – Riess’s introduction also subtly reveals much about both the social function and cultural importance of such a room in itself. In many ways, Riess’s description offers up a somewhat idyllic if not rather generic definition of what a contemporary living room (and implicitly a contemporary home) is still expected to be – “soft,” “warm,” “private,” “beautiful,” and “completely settled into its surroundings.” Yet it also provides remarkable insight into how such a room, which often serves as a kind of borderland between private and public space, is one of both intimate personal reflection and explicit external expression. The living room functions as a place into which we retreat and “live,” but also as one into which we welcome others; we invite people in to gain insight into our lives and ourselves, not only through the conversations we have, but also through the display of our belongings, the visitor’s understanding of them, as well as their interpretation of the overall environment itself.

At first glance, many of the photographs in Jana Sophia Nolle’s Living Room bear a striking resemblance to Lange’s living room, or at least how we might imagine it through Riess’s brief description. For example, in #1 San Francisco, 2017/2018 the room is bedecked with various accouterments – art nouveau bronzes, a red-velvet armchair, a prestigious university’s poster, framed vintage sheet-music, a vast Persian rug, and so on – which collectively signal comfortable and cultured West Coast upper-middleclassdom; additionally, the “warmth” of the room is even further accentuated by its polished wooden floorboards and pale yellow walls, as well as by the golden, Californian light that is softly diffused through the oatmeal-colored blinds which cover the surrounding suite of sash windows.

Yet, in the midst of this eloquently subdued display of cozy American affluence, as documented by Nolle, rises an idiosyncratic mound of found materials – loud, tattered, colorful and clashing. This unexpected jumble of seemingly discarded scraps initially appears to have been randomly chosen and chaotically piled high in the heart of an otherwise orderly home. But upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that this pile is anything but chaotic or random.

At its base lies a wooden platform mounted onto wheeled casters, on top of which sits a layer of foam, a blanket and a pillow which are partially hidden by the dome of a disheveled nylon camping tent, a sheet of shimmering gold material, and a ragged blue tarpaulin; beside the structure leans a heart-shaped birdcage. Gradually, as this assembly of objects is deciphered, it becomes clear that this mysterious mound is in itself a home as well – one that is perhaps meager, idiosyncratic and improvised, but nevertheless has been carefully constructed and considered; a “living room” in its own right, and in the most minimal and literal sense of the phrase.

Like many people, when German artist Jana Sophia Nolle initially arrived in San Francisco she was struck by the shocking disparity between rich and poor on display in the city's streets. "The first time I visited San Francisco was in August 2016," she explains. "What I witnessed was a city full of contrasts — so much wealth against a backdrop of very visible poverty and homelessness, with people living in makeshift structures and tents. I saw a city that was gentrifying as the technology industry brought tremendous amounts of new wealth to San Francisco, which in turn could be said to have contributed to the increasingly unaffordability of housing for many, but has in the least made homelessness even more noticeable by contrast."³

Building upon her academic background in both political science and anthropology, as well as her experiences as an international election observer (in countries such as Nepal, Myanmar, Belarus, Albania and elsewhere), Nolle started to approach and interview various homeless people whom she encountered on the street, and to carefully document their lives as well as their improvised dwellings through her own photographs, alongside collecting handwritten diagrams, descriptions, letters, lists and notes provided by the people themselves. Taking the project one step further, Nolle then decided to diligently reconstruct these elaborate structures – created out of desperation and necessity by some of San Francisco's poorest citizens, but nevertheless imaginatively crafted and often intriguingly complex – and began to install them within the living rooms of some of the Bay Area's wealthier inhabitants (whom she approached with a letter that suggestively began "Dear Living Room Owner"), ultimately photographing the result in a strikingly straightforward manner.

It is through the telling handwritten notes, portraits and street-side snapshots that Nolle compiled – which are presented as an integral part of Living Room, in conjunction with her installation-based photographs – that we learn the domed pile of materials in #1 San Francisco, 2017/2018 (made up of "1 part tent, 1 pt gold lamé, 1 pt platform" as described by its maker) is in fact the home of Memphis, an elegant but nevertheless vulnerable-looking individual who holds his cigarette like a 1930s film-star (think Bette Davis or Marlene Dietrich) and proudly refers to the structure as "The Dollhouse™." Additionally, we see that in reality Memphis's dwelling generally sits curbside, camouflaged by the surrounding pavement and debris, and can be wheeled from one San Franciscan street to another when necessary, and at a moment's notice. But when installed and photographed by Nolle within the incongruous context of a much more opulent living room, which serves to exhibit wealth, privilege,

³ Jana Sophia Nolle, "More Notes and Details About the Project" (email to the author, 12th August 2018).

permanence and the owner's own personality, the previously hidden purposes and underlying intentions of Memphis's "living room" are also revealed. Ultimately, The Dollhouse™ is exposed as not simply a poor and purely functional structure intended to provide basic shelter from the elements, but is also, despite its makeshift modesty, a distinct and original environment that, like that of the wealthy homeowner, has been created by a specific individual to serve as a place of both private refuge and personalized public expression.

Throughout Living Room, Nolle repeats this strategy time and time again, re-situating the tenuous yet ingeniously resourceful and personalized "homes" of the homeless – made of discarded cardboard and plastic sheets, supermarket trolleys, broken tents, frayed blankets and more – amongst the sumptuous fireplaces and soft furnishings, crowded bookshelves and cluttered mantelpieces, paintings in gilded frames and pan-Asian sculptures and ceramics of contemporary San Francisco's well-off. ("I live in a box with my artwork," one of her homeless subjects – Ronnie – writes in Nolle's notebook, yet the same could be said for all of these houses, built out of cardboard or not). In doing so, she reveals that despite one's means, we all seek to create meaning and understanding through the place we call home, and despite the disturbing disparity on display – not only on the streets of San Francisco, but throughout the world – everyone deserves to be recognized equally in this regard. Or put more simply, as RockLynn4Ever – whose sum of worldly possessions, including a treasured hula hoop, fits onto a small airport baggage trolley and has been reconstructed in the corner of #6 San Francisco, 2017/2018 – writes so succinctly in her accompanying handwritten note: "Home exists in my heart."

