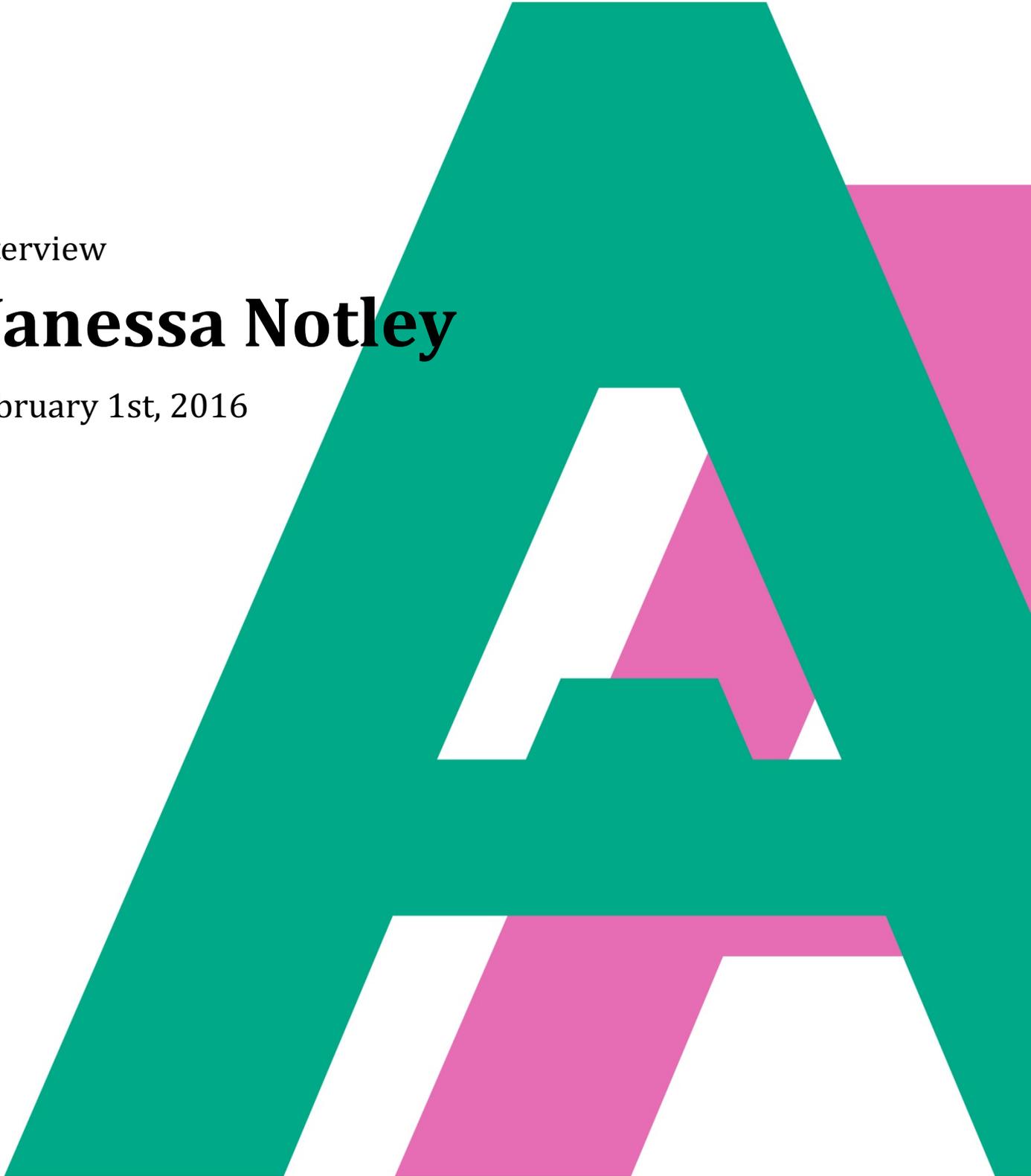


**Age of  
Artists**

Interview

# **Vanessa Notley**

February 1st, 2016



The interview was conducted by Julia Kierdorf and Thomas Castéran (Age of Artists gGmbH) on February 1st, 2016 in Sètes, Montpellier Area, Southern France.

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## Interview

Age of Artists: How did you become an artist?

Vanessa Notley: I remember that when I was at school, I was like 14 years old, and we had this kind of job orientation day. The person said: "What do you want to do?" And I said: "I want to be a painter". Then they got out a little book and it was like a house painter. That was not quite what I meant [laugh]. I knew what it was to be an artist, or I had an idea of what it was. At school, I did well in exams, and when I did have the choice of either going to university or going to Art College, I chose to go to university, because I thought it was going to be more difficult, and more challenging for me. In fact, being an artist, when I really did figure out that I was becoming an artist, that was actually more difficult and it was even more satisfying. Being a student and going to academia, I could have learned that, but it wasn't something that I had to confront myself with, whereas being an artist means always looking for difficulties.

Age of Artists: The first idea of getting an artist came from your family?

Vanessa Notley: Yes, actually it did. My family was quite artistic. I had a step-grandfather who painted. He painted these beautiful collages and paintings. I was surrounded by art. I remember that I was not really enjoying to go to

exhibitions with my parents, but once when I was on an exchange in France, in Dijon, I went to the museum of “Beaux-Arts”. It felt like the first time that I actually enjoyed looking at a painting. I did have a nice environment, I mean Edinburgh was a good place for arts as well. Also, when you are a child you get many compliments and you feel good, and they said: “You got a gift”. I was encouraged by my parents.

Age of Artists: Acknowledgement is still important for you today?

Vanessa Notley: Oh yes. It gets me really annoyed if a friend doesn't like what I have done [laughs]. That's me being a little facetious [laughs]. What I mean is, I got a world of creation that is a little bit absurd. I am slightly surrealistic, but I enjoy that, of course. I know that my work is about this frontier, at this threshold, between slightly grotesque and slightly seductive. Some people see too much the grotesque, they get a bit like that [*mimic faces*], but that's what I want them to do. The reactions, that I get from people, are sort of what I want, but at the same time, if they are not supporting me, then I get a little bit upset. But that's me being a bit piggish. Recognition in terms of having exhibitions is important. Feedback, discussions with people are really important as well. Selling work is important, that gives recognition. People writing about your work is important. You are not just doing it, you are doing it so that it rebounds for other people. So there has to be reactions at some point.

Age of Artists: When you receive feedback, do you value the feedback of other artists more than from visitors for example?

Vanessa Notley: Everybody. But I do think that if you have somebody who speaks the same language as you, this is important. Because you don't have to explain like formal physical qualities or references. You are starting off at the same point. You don't have to do too much. It's like having a conversation with somebody who understands, for example, being a feminist. You have to do a lot of work before you can have a proper conversation about equal rights. It is easier to have a conversation with somebody who understands a little bit about it.

Age of Artists: Does the feedback has an influence on your next works?

Vanessa Notley: Yes, for example, I was thinking that when you have difficulties you need time. I have to stop doing it, and go away, and think about it. I have got places in my life, where I go to when I need to think. But also, I go to people and talk about it. Problems get resolved by talking with people. I don't think that what they say will have an influence on me. But then, having said that, I had a conversation with a gallerist and she said: "I really encourage you to do sculptures again". Then I was thinking about the little drawings and I actually did see them in sculptures. She did have an influence. It was more encouragement I think. You are thinking: "Maybe I'll do it, maybe I won't. No, I just keep to the easy track." And you have someone saying: "I think you should do it. Why not?" And I was like: "Yeah, great". One of my former art professors, he was here in summer last year and we were talking about sculptures and I told him: "I don't want to do this anymore", because physically it is exhausting. At some point, in the way that I work, there has to be a passage and this was a necessary passage to do these pieces now.

Age of Artists: As you just mentioned the passage, did you go through a specific evolution or a change of some sort over time?

Vanessa Notley: I always start with drawings. The project I am working on right now, it really has to do with the word vestibule. That sort of halfway house between inside and outside. In English, it is also called a "mudroom", as it's where you take off your boots, because there are muddy. For me, the vestibule was this area that is sort in your inner ear, in your eye, and also in a woman's sexual organ. It is that they are not quite in and not quite out, but it is a place where information can get filtered. So, I started working around the word "vestibule", and then I started to do drawings of this ear trumpets and all these accessories, that kind of had to do with the sense of hearing. They are fantastic objects. You see this from the eighteenth century, they are really beautiful. I was basically drawing, and at some point, the vestibule can be like a mosaic type. It got the ground, it got the patterns, it got a motive. You got these forms. It is a filter. They started off with drawings and then got to the sculptures.

Age of Artists: Where does your inspiration, ideas and topics come from?

Vanessa Notley: Mostly books, I would say. Books, images, scientific drawings and words. There is a certain type of literature that I really like, it is the nineteenth century British literature, where you got these portraits of people, who are, at the same time, incredibly seductive and also very clumsy. I mean the people are, the characters got these two sides to them, that was always something what I liked. Or describing spaces, or objects, or people, or characters, or a situation in this kind of elegant way, really to say something that is kind of naughty. It is easily ten years ago that I tried to illustrate, not really a sentence, but it is the starting point that makes me think about the words, about how they get translated, how they get mistranslated, what's really being said. A lot comes from books and from reading.

Age of Artists: Are there things that mattered in the past, but not so much anymore today?

Vanessa Notley: I think I am really quite constant. I can get up and go anywhere. I just need a chair and do exactly the same thing. What is not constant obviously is the environment and the people that I am around. That obviously has an influence, but there is nothing that I sort of let go.

Age of Artists: As you mentioned the environment, is there anything else what you need besides a chair?

Vanessa Notley: Really in the end, it is material stuff you need. You need a space, you need a little bit of money to be able to buy stuff, you need some heating when it is cold [laughs]. But apart from that... No. A chair.

Age of Artists: What about daylight for example?

Vanessa Notley: That's the thing, I don't necessarily need it. My sculptures need light, my drawings need light. But it doesn't matter if it is a northern light or not a northern light. I don't use colors. I only use it to exaggerate something. I am not a colorist. I wouldn't be happy to work in a cellar, but I don't need daylight to work. For me, the most important thing is time. I teach as well, so I basically teach from Wednesdays through Saturdays non-stop. So when I have got the Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and I call them "plage

d'horaire", I just love it. All of a sudden, time becomes tangible. It is same for the holidays. For me the most important thing is actually having body of time, where I can work.

Age of Artists: Do you have a specific working process?

Vanessa Notley: Sort of yes and no. I always start off with drawings and lots of notes as well. This whole thinking as well. So much goes on in your head. Sometimes you write things down, sometimes you don't. But the sculptures that I make, the process is basically the same as it would be to make cloth. I have a sheet of metal, I cut it out and build it together again. I like the cutting side of metal, the pure align and welding is something quite magic. I mean it is the process that I quite enjoy, but that is technical.

Age of Artists: You always have the idea before you start?

Vanessa Notley: Yes. Well, I had the conversation with a couple of other artists. I am not somebody, where something is coming up and I change everything. I am very deliberate and I am making a lot of choices. I mean things can change, but then I do another one. If I get another idea, I do another one, but I finish basically what I have started. All my decisions are kind of made before I start. I don't have that kind of expressionistic behavior, like putting down some colors and see what it makes me think about. Accidents happen, but not that I am making the drawings like that.

Age of Artists: When there is an accident, do you try to "save" the picture?

Vanessa Notley: I keep going. I try to correct it. It's not that big accidents. It's not as if the glass is broken and I have to deal with the shards. It's just that the line is not quite the same for example, but that doesn't really matter. I don't have that spontaneity that a lot of other artists have.

Age of Artists: You organize your thoughts before?

Vanessa Notley: Yes, but there is always a discovery as well. Like the more I am working with a couple of wires, the more I realize the quality they have. There is a lot of repetition in my work as well. How I work. I need to spend a

lot of time almost doing the same gesture. By doing that, I learn so many new things every single time. I also get more aware of the touch, of the qualities the material has, but also the visual qualities, and the sound that it makes. The time that I spend doing this, also awakes a reason for it to exist. We are logical. I work things out when I am doing it. Because I am much more aware of it as I am working repetitively.

Age of Artists: Is it the discovering that motivates you doing your arts, or what motivates you most?

Vanessa Notley: There are days where I can't wait to get to the studio, because I am so happy, because I am working on something. There are other days, I just don't want to do that, as I don't know on what I am working. If I got a project then yes, if I am looking for ideas, that it is difficult. Then I have to do some sport or have to do some more reading. I can't spend time in this studio not doing anything. I can't just sit down, and fill around, and try to find something. I have to be outside.

Age of Artists: If you would have the choice again, would you choose again to do arts?

Vanessa Notley: Yes, I think I would choose it over again.

Age of Artists: Do you have any reason for it?

Vanessa Notley: That's the difficulty. Everybody gets bored, and the only thing I don't get bored with is this! I don't have that much ambition, but it is something that is necessary for me to do. I like not knowing. I like sort of having that troubled feeling: "How can I do this?" If I did not have that, if I were just a teacher, I don't think I would have that difficulty and I like that difficulty. I like not knowing, I like being surprised.

Age of Artists: So, it is the uncertainty and the continuous challenges?

Vanessa Notley: Especially the uncertainty. It is not always a nice feeling to be. It's not like you are looking for answers, but there is something that you almost got, and you look how you can translate it. You are not quite sure how

it is going to work out. It always got to do with you. You got to figure it out. It's you, on your own, who has to figure it out.

Age of Artists: Do you have sometimes problems to get ideas?

Vanessa Notley: Oh yes, I do have moments where I don't know what I am going to do.

Age of Artists: Do you think this happens because you are thinking too much about what to do?

Vanessa Notley: I don't really have a blockage, it's just that, for example, I finished a series of things and I got to start something else. The *vestibules* took me a while to figure out that it was the next direction I was going to take after having done a whole series of very realistic birds, that all had such of "entrave à la liberté". It is still going in the same sense. The preoccupation is kind of the same, but the physical form changes. Going from birds, owls, eagles to things like coffee filters. I mean, there are a lot of work that goes on a lot of time, and there was a moment where I didn't know what I was going to do. I kind of think that this is the way it is supposed to be. After I finished a series of work, and I am looking around for different ideas, and I hear something once, and I hear it again, and I come across it in a book, and I see something similar in another situation, and I think: "Yes this is working together. It is a big coincidence, even though I am looking for it. But it is kind of falling in my lap.

Age of Artists: Are you always working at several artworks at the same time or you do one work at a time?

Vanessa Notley: I only work at one thing at a time. I can multitask but not with the art. At one point I did, because I was working on something that took ages to dry, so I did do this once, but I couldn't because I lost the thread. I kind of forgot what it was. For me the gesture is really important. Even though I don't have these gestures which explode, it is kind of the rhythm and the repetition and it comes together. Even the texture of a black silhouette of an ear trumpet, if you are not on it the whole time you have forgotten the

history of your line, the history of the ink. Four minutes later you forgot about that trace, if you moved away.

Age of Artists: Are you balancing individual and collective work?

Vanessa Notley: No, I don't like people [laughs]. I am joking. I mean, I have never been a team player. I love working with people, I like people, but I cannot work on a project with them together. I love talking to people. I love to talk to them about art. I like listening to them talking about their art, thinking about their problems, but I never want to work with them.

Age of Artists: You are also not dependent on help for some things in regards to your work?

Vanessa Notley: Well, I ask people to help me, but then I pay them to do it. For example, I don't know how to vectorize a drawing. So, I got a friend who does this. If I can't do something then I find someone who can, but we are not doing the project together.

Age of Artists: If you face a difficult situation, are you also talking to other people and you need distance or how do you solve it?

Vanessa Notley: Yes, I resolve a lot by talking with other people. What I mean is that I don't do a project with another artist, but I cannot work without talking about what I am doing, and it is the same with other artists. I couldn't imagine not talking about what we do. Even if it is just showing it to someone, and asking what it makes the person think about. When there is a problem, I always talk to people. If it is just a technical problem, that is easy, but if it is a different problem then it is a bit of both – I need distance from what I am doing and I need input from other people. It is also that you don't want to bother other people, if they are working. I don't get interrupted that much either, because when you are in your studio, then you are working. There are moments, where I sit outside and have a coffee, and then we start talking about what we are doing and look at each other's work.

Age of Artists: Some organizations struggle to motivate their employees and to keep job satisfaction up. Do you have any recommendations for them?

Vanessa Notley: One of the things of being an artist is actually that everything what you are doing is not “useful” in this sense. The thing about being an artist is that you can do what you want and it doesn’t really matter. But in a business, you can’t have people just doing something for “see what happens”. It would be incredible to think that you could actually have a business environment where people would be able to just “see what happens”. That’s one of the things that I love about the work that I do here. “I don’t know, I will see”. That uncertainty about not having a fixed idea. It is not profitable. You don’t have to have a result at the end of the day. I think doubt is important. You got to have time in your life anyway when you doubt what you are doing. That’s a bit of incertitude. There is a time where you don’t do anything, physically or tangibly. Things are being worked out, but there is no concrete result. In the end art is a concrete result, but there is a lot of time, where there isn’t anything. That kind of creative environment does exist in companies anyway. You do have meetings where people get together and they think about things. At the end of the meeting nothing really happened, but you discussed a lot of ideas and you got this energy, and that is important. That’s what we would find maybe in a studio of an artist. Working on a couple of ideas and at the end of the day something comes out of it. But there is this luxury that “it doesn’t really matter when it is finished” when you are an artist. It could be a starting point for people just to talk. Talking about a book, or film, or piece of art that you have seen. That is important. Those kinds of discussions open up. I mean, I work at the art college, and we don’t even really talk about such things. The meetings there are really pragmatic. Also, I think lots of people are underemployed, and have many more skills they could use in a professional world. That is dissatisfying. When you are an artist, you are never underemployed.