



# WE RETURN IN THE NIGHT, CONSUMED BY FIRE

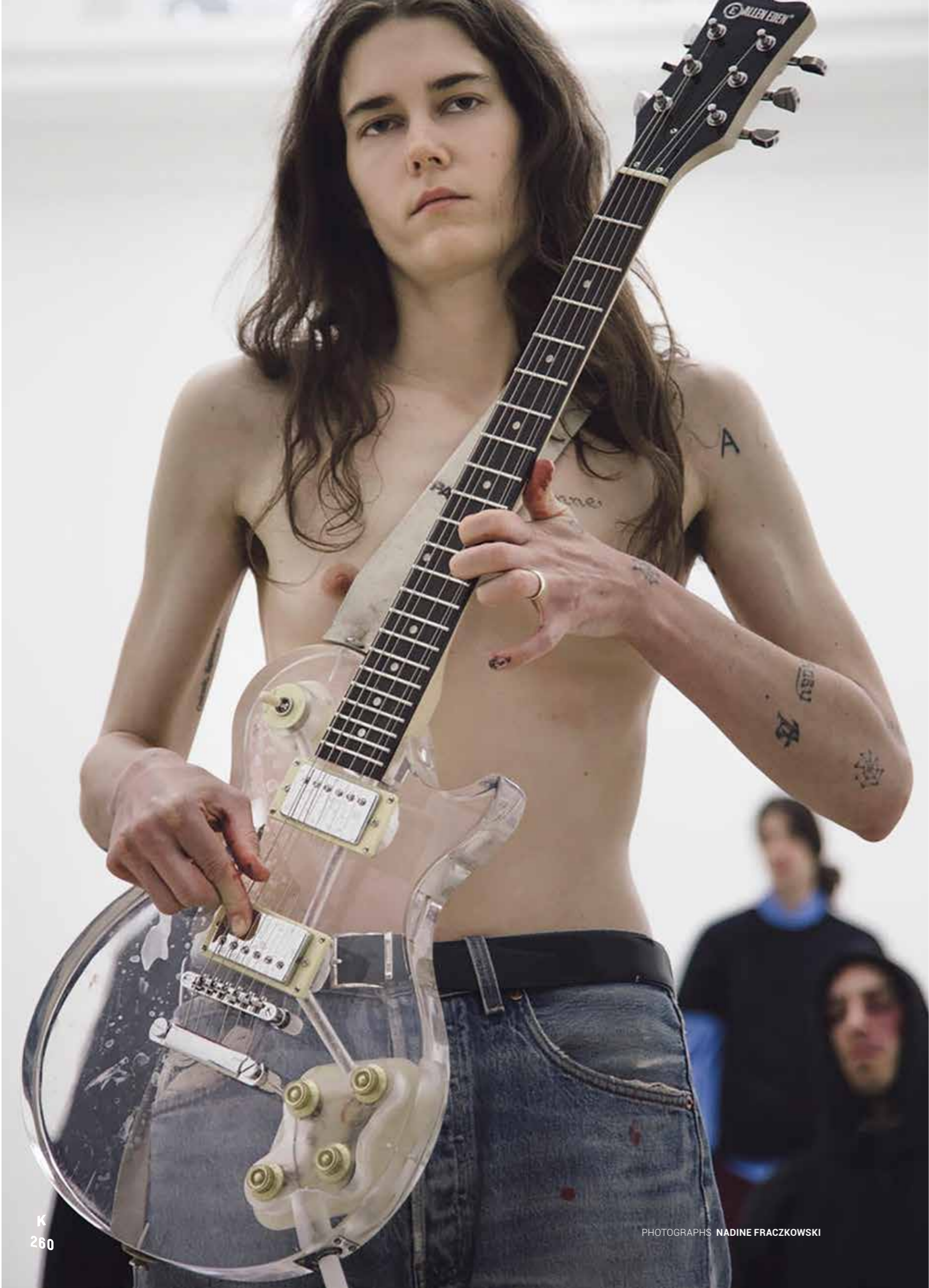
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**ELIZA DOUGLAS &  
FLORENCE BONNEFOUS**

IN CONVERSATION WITH LINNÉA BAKE





**It's the beginning of a new decade, and lately everyone, art world and beyond, seems obsessed with finding ways to describe what the 2010s were about: In an attempt to sum up and come to terms with the cultural shifts that have defined this chaotic and fragmented last decade, various best-ofs, reviews, interactive timelines, and panel discussions have been produced. Eliza Douglas' face shows up in most of them. The 2010s have obviously been an important time in Douglas' career, starting with her performing role in her partner Anne Imhof's works *Angst* (2016), *Faust* (2017), and most recently, *Sex* (2019). Uneasy, tense, apocalyptic, yet also romantic in a goth kind of way, these performances have been described as an accurate portrayal of the disillusioned state of a generation battling against itself – which we might as well use as a description of the past decade, right?**

**While being widely known for her presence as a performer and musician in Imhof's celebrated work, and for her subsequent career as a model for Balenciaga, Eliza Douglas' artistic practice revolves largely around painting. On the occasion of her upcoming solo show at Air de Paris, Douglas and her gallerist Florence Bonnefous reflect on their encounter through painting, on collaboration and interdisciplinarity, the notorious idealization of the artist's hand, and rock star fame.**

**Linnéa Bake:** I'm curious what both of you think about the 2010s: culturally, aesthetically, or personally – Eliza, your recent monster paintings and your performance as a zombie, binge watching a fragmented version of *The Walking Dead* (in your 2019 exhibition with *Puppies Puppies*) had a particularly postapocalyptic angle to them, and seem to reflect or comment on contemporary society in different ways... But also, on a more personal note, the two of you met in the 2010s and have been collaborating since Eliza's show at the 2016 annual exhibition of the Städelschule in Frankfurt, where you studied painting.

**Florence Bonnefous:** I was introduced to Eliza's paintings in 2016, by a friend who had visited the art school Rundgang. I intuitively offered her a show immediately. At Air de Paris, I am now showing US-american artist Sturtevant's early videos (1998-2006) – I think that a tense critique of our environment is present in both Eliza Douglas' and Sturtevant's works. To me, Sturtevant's cute fur toys, her gigantic installation *The House of Horrors* (at the Museum of Modern Art Paris, in 2010) and Eliza's paintings of uncanny bodies and vampire performances are expressing a similar sense of loneliness and despair. Cute or goth?

**Eliza Douglas:** I agree with the comparison Florence is making between Sturtevant and I, and I am attracted to the ambiguity she is mentioning, which seems to touch on the dual presence of both lightness and darkness in a work. Something humorous mixed with something critical or melancholic. This is definitely present in the works of mine that you both mentioned. And then there is also the most recent show I did, *Josh Smith*, in which I directly incorporated the work of another artist into my own. I guess that is another comparison one could make to Sturtevant. I wonder how she would have reacted to that show...

**LB:** Florence, since you mentioned intuition in relation to your first encounter with Eliza's work – maybe you can say a bit more about what it is that fascinated you with her paintings? Had you already seen Eliza in *Angst* at Kunsthalle Basel, or were you generally aware of her work as a performer and musician at the time?

**FB:** No, we met before *Angst* and I was not aware of any connection with Anne Imhof. And since I am not much into fashion, I didn't even know about you being the main model in Balenciaga shows... Actually, I am not very much into figurative painting either (laughs), I'm more from the conceptual planet. But with Eliza's work, I just knew it was good. And fresh. So many artists produce so many similar artworks relying on banal ideas, so I was quite enthusiastic to encounter this kind of work that is rather flat, does not pretend, but simply looks very different than any other. Maybe it is paintings in disguise. With a flavor of rock.

Eliza, about your *Josh Smith* series, who knows how Sturtevant would have seen those, she was unpredictable. She was a smart punk, very critical, also to works that are critical! Maybe she would have been interested in those paintings that reproduce the photographic documentation of *Josh Smith*'s exhibitions found all over the internet.

**LB:** Sturtevant addressed notions of authenticity and questioned the value of "the original" in a time before the digital age and the circulation of images as we know it. She once said that in exploring the relationship between repetition and difference, she wanted to encourage her audience to look beyond the surface similarities of original and copy, to what she termed the under-structure of art. Eliza, I think your work raises similar questions about authorship and originality, but also about collaboration – I'm thinking about the paintings for which you worked with various painting companies in the Dafen artist village in southern China. Are you also interested in exposing such an "under-structure" of art, even if maybe one of a different kind?





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ED: When I moved to Germany, I started out by making abstract paintings, and I used some printing techniques that were available at my school. Those were the resources available to me at the time, so I tried to push them as far as I could. I had often thought about works I would like to make if only I was trained in classical painting. So I put up an ad at an art school in New York when I was home for the Christmas break, and hired a painting student to work for me for a few days. This was the beginning of my "hands and feet" paintings. So the main reason for me hiring a painting assistant was pragmatic: I often want to make paintings that require a level of training or skills that I simply don't have.

In terms of the paintings I had made in China, I did this when I wanted the works to have a particular, kind of skewed and plastic effect. This was a utilitarian move and not a conceptual one. It has been interesting to see how provocative it has been for some people that I have used assistants in this way. It is not a new method, painters have had assistants paint for them for hundreds of years (Rembrandt for instance has authored many works that he didn't himself touch). And most importantly, it is relatively common for professional artists today to produce work this way – although I seem to be more transparent about it than most. I think this is something that artists and dealers sometimes choose not to mention, out of (legitimate) concern that it would negate some idealization necessary for the artist and the work to be imbued with value. I also think there is often misogyny involved when people are critical of my use of assistants... so many of my male colleagues have used this method, and it seems like they are given more of a permission to do so. But besides the fact that having an assistant can expand the possibilities of my work, I like that the provocation involved also seems to shed light on certain questions: Why do some works or mediums seem to require the touch of an artist and not others? When has a person earned the right to outsource work, and why? How much and in what way does the status of an artwork rely on the narrative around it (who made it, under what circumstances, and why)?

FB: The Chinese connection seemed exciting to many. It is a little myth. I have never put this forward in discussions about your work nor taken advantage of it as an incentive to sell the paintings, because I do not consider it so interesting. The idea that getting works produced in China operates as a critique of mass production and consumption, is what one calls an "idée reçue" in French. I was actually mainly fearing the working conditions

**"I DON'T THINK CRITIQUE IS CENTRAL TO ANNE'S WORK. AND I DON'T FIND IT CYNICAL OR IRONIC. IT MAKES SENSE THAT PEOPLE SEE IT AS SOME KIND OF REFLECTION OF OUR TIME, BUT THIS HAPPENED NATURALLY"**

in China, which is another *idée reçue*, a pre-conceived notion, because they are just as problematic in almost every country, in different ways. Still, I am happy you actually work more classically with assistants in charge of the technical part, decently treated and paid. These reactions have shown that the artist's hand is still perceived as some kind of magical communication tool in the *Beaux Arts*. The pattern of the hand (your own hands, reproduced in your paintings) somehow triggered the debate. Maybe it is also about the stranger, the third person intruding the work? But now, I am eager to hear about what you will do for your next exhibition with us, even if it's just a few clues only?

LB: Maybe I could add to Florence's question: Will it be mainly painting? I'm asking since you've been very present in the last years as a performer, musician, and as Florence mentioned, also in fashion as the face for Balenciaga – but what I find remarkable is that all those different aspects of what you do seem very much interconnected. For example, the way you and the other performers in Anne Imhof's works are dressed is such a defining element of the overall aesthetic of the pieces, and as far as I understand, those were partly your personal clothes. Or, another example are the Balenciaga sneakers that appear in your paintings, and so on... So, in a way it seems almost irrelevant to ask what your favorite part, your favorite artistic "medium" or your main "discipline" is – but maybe you do have one?





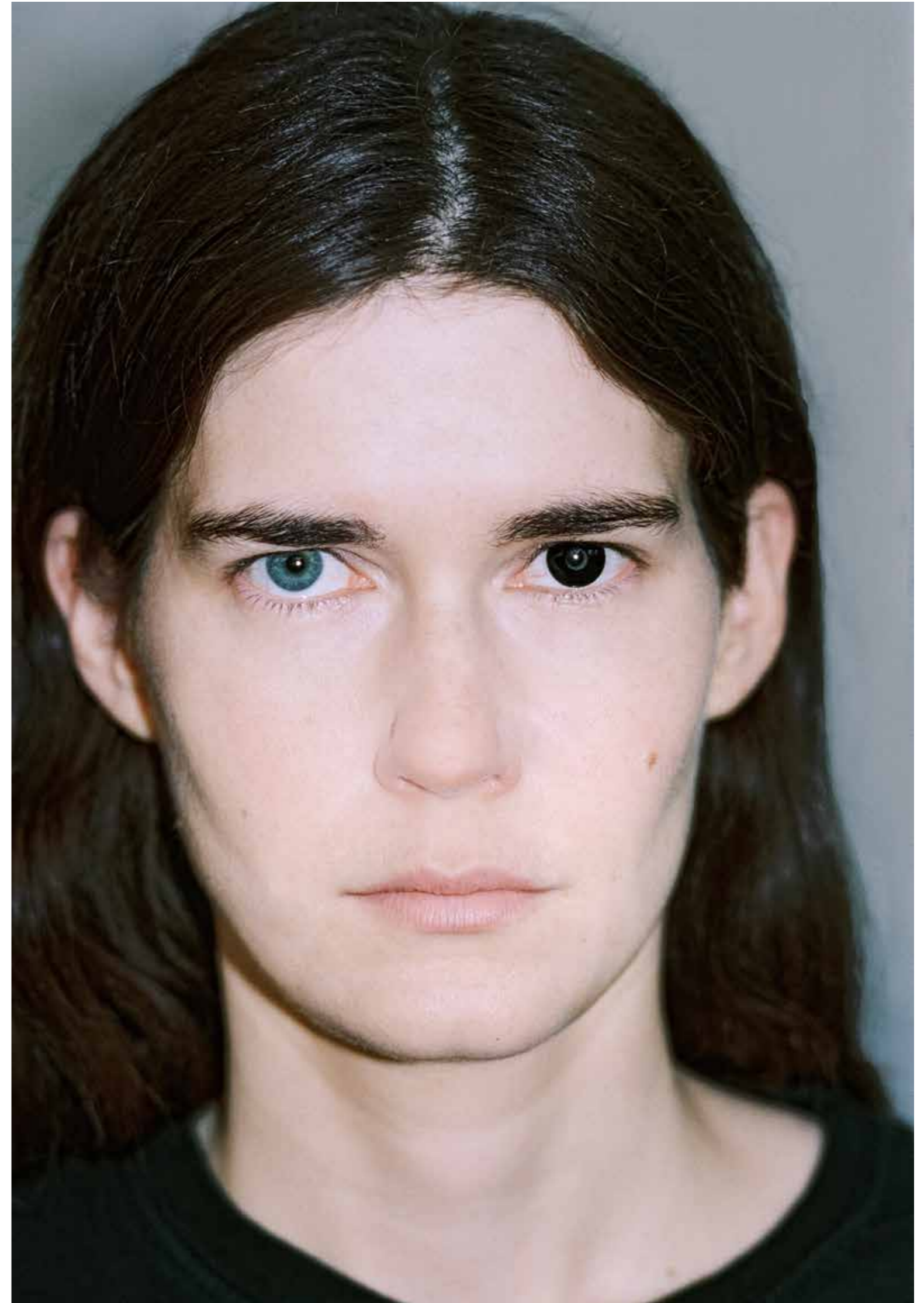
PERFORMANCE, ELIZA DOUGLAS / PUPPIES PUPPIES (JADE KURIKI OLIVO), GALERIE FRANCESCA PIA, 2019. © PHOTO: ANNE IMHOF  
COURTESY GALERIE FRANCESCA PIA, ZÜRICH

ED: I feel a bit superstitious when it comes to talking about work before it is finished, so I might avoid that topic. I also sometimes dislike describing paintings with words. It's nice that you know a lot of the clothes in Anne's work were mine, most people are not aware of that. In her Angst series, when I started doing the styling for her work, this was especially true. We didn't plan much in advance that I would have that role, it happened pretty naturally. I brought a bunch of my own t-shirts and also ordered some from eBay. Basically I just selected stuff that I thought would enhance the imagery in the piece. But it was all very much reflective of my personal style. In Angst, there was a lot of fog, so I chose very graphic clothes with strong images and sub-cultural references. For her next work, Faust, I chose more toned down clothing overall, since it was so bright and transparent. Towards the end, we even made some of our own shirts and incorporated them into the show. For instance, we had silkscreens made with some of the performers' faces.

**"THE ARTIST'S HAND IS STILL PERCEIVED AS SOME KIND OF MAGICAL COMMUNICATION TOOL IN THE BEAUX ARTS."**



I AM THE HORSE YOU SHOULD BET ON (VIII) 2017  
OIL ON CANVAS 170X170X3CM  
© OVERDUIN & CO., LOS ANGELES COURTESY AIR DE PARIS.



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Right now, we are about to finish up Anne's Sex series, which I also styled. I'm glad you are suggesting that this plays an important role in the work, this form of my contribution is rarely recognized.

In addition to the styling and performing, I also co-write the music for the work. So, in terms of your question regarding the medium: for a while, I felt like I had to pick one to dedicate myself to, and I couldn't. I am really inclined to making images on a 2D plane, but I have also realized that performing is important to me, and a big part of my performative expression has turned out to be singing. I toured with bands for a while in my 20's and dreamed of making a life from that, but then I gave up at a certain point. It has been really nice to get back into it and to realize that, for now at least, it works out to do multiple things in parallel.

LB: I think the example of the different aspects of your practice leaking into each other is quite representative of the artistic field, or more generally, cultural production at the moment. It's a lot about zeitgeist, nothing seems really contained anymore. Florence, you've been working with artists for a while. Air de Paris was founded in 1990 – would you say you've been witnessing a change in how artists approach this kind of interdisciplinarity, and in how it's being received?

FB: Indeed, Edouard Merino and myself started Air de Paris in Nice in the summer of 1990 with Les Ateliers du Paradis, which turned the gallery into a place to live together with the artists Pierre Joseph, Philippe Parreno and Philippe Perrin. The fun, adventure and multidisciplinary was experienced, rather than performed. We can see that collaborative projects and artists or transdisciplinary collectives are more numerous anew. There were many in the 90s, less in the 2000s, and more again in the 2010s.

LB: The distinction between experienced and performed multidisciplinary that you make in this context is really interesting, also from the perspective of the audience. In the Imhof performances there is no stage, so no real boundary between the audience and the performers. It's a situation in which the performers are surrounded by people, being constantly documented with smartphones, and ultimately consumed as individuals. Some compare the attention Eliza and the others have gained to "rock star fame".

FB: This brings to my mind Guy Debord's palindrome *IN GIRUM IMUS NOCTE ET CONSUMIMUR IGNI* ("we turn in the night, consumed by fire")... [Editor's note: *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978) was Debord's final film, a romantic reflection on an intensely commodified culture and the perceived moral and material degradation of modern capitalist society].



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1 MUSIC AND MATHEMATICS  
2017  
OIL ON CANVAS  
210 X 180 CM  
© PHOTO IVAN MURZIN  
COURTESY AIR DE PARIS.

2 UNTITLED  
2017  
OIL ON CANVAS  
30 X 40 INCHES  
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**"WHY DO SOME WORKS  
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**WHEN HAS A PERSON  
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LB: It's a good reference, also with regards to some other things we've touched upon... Anne Imhof's performance pieces have been widely celebrated for "hitting the nerve of time", as you say in German – also in relation to their references to youth culture and fashion, or you could say anti-fashion, which is replacing more obvious markers of wealth at the moment. But for the same reasons, Imhof's work has also been criticized for being "trendy". I think a similar example was the 2016 Berlin Biennale curated by DIS: celebrated by some for their accurate and spine-crawling take on neoliberalism, and criticized by others for becoming the thing they intended to satirize... Eliza, is that kind of criticism something you, Anne and the rest of the team talk about?

ED: I don't think critique is central to Anne's work. And I don't find it cynical or ironic. It makes sense that people see it as some kind of reflection of our time, but this happened naturally, it wasn't a premeditated goal. The work is made intuitively, and in my opinion it is born from images, not concepts. There is a lot of ambiguity and fluidity, and it produces a wide range of experiences and images that really affect people. I think if the work has a goal, it is this. Something that makes Anne's work so powerful is that it lays out a fertile ground for interpretation. Sure, often the people involved and the aesthetic of the work are considered "cool". But we are not referencing something that is somehow separate from us. As I described before, the fashion and other cultural signifiers in the work are usually tied to us, so the performers' personalities are indeed very present in the work.

FB: The debate around art and trends is about form and purity within the system, raising the question whether one can criticize the system from the inside. I believe that today it is almost impossible to stay "pure", unless ready to quit.

ED: To come back to your question, I tend to avoid reading press, and while we talk a lot about the making of the work with Anne and the others, we generally don't focus much on its reception. Obviously, Anne's work is very popular. In that sense, it is trendy I guess, but it is not ephemeral or superficial. She has made something that widely fascinates people and in my opinion, she has created her own artistic genre.