

Invisible Labour

The German-born, London-based artist discusses our sculptural relationship with architecture, revealing its unspoken hierarchies, concealed infrastructure and the hidden labour that maintains it.

Nicole Wermers interviewed by Ellen Mara De Wachter



Turner Prize 2015, Tramway, Glasgow

Ellen Mara De Wachter: For more than 20 years, you have been creating works that generate meaning in several directions at once, by mobilising the attractiveness or banality of design objects, capturing the essence of how urban environments affect feelings and behaviours, and using the physical, tactile and haptic qualities of materials to trigger somatic responses. Your exhibition for The Common Guild introduces your work into a vacant office space on the seventh floor of a corporate building, where the sculptures overlook the centre of Glasgow. It raises questions around the economics of the built environment, distribution of wealth and space, gendered and class perspectives, and the value of art. How are you responding to this unusual space?

Nicole Wermers: I have always been interested in spatial hierarchies and in how architecture, objects, different surfaces and materials both express as well as create hierarchies, but also how sculpture can relate to that. In any given space there always seems to be a backstage area in which your impression and interaction with architecture can be quite different, depending on whether you are, for example, a pedestrian, a passenger, a hotel guest or a member of the maintenance staff. The Common Guild's temporary space is interesting not only as a vacant office space overlooking Glasgow, but also because the entire seventh floor

of the building has never been used before, despite being built in 2008. So, the design is dated but brand new, and its sheer existence speaks of how value generated by real estate operates at an absurd level. The 'Reclining Females' sculptures I have been making for the past two years will constitute the main part of the exhibition. This is the third context in which I will be showing the series, all of which are very different. After a beautiful modernist museum building in Switzerland and an East End gallery in London, this time it is a corporate office floor. Because the sculptures deal with issues of labour, it is interesting for me to have them shown in an actual space of labour, albeit one that has never been used before.

Vacant spaces have often featured in my works over the years. In fact, I used to make interior models of vacant shops when I was a student at Central Saint Martins, back when it was located in central London on Charing Cross Road. I was given a studio on the eighth floor during the final months of the course, and looking down onto the rooftops of Soho provided a view that was not dissimilar to the view in Glasgow. I photographed empty shops in nearby Oxford Street, a very short-lived state in the high turnover business and real estate market of London's West End. The images acted as references for my scaled-down models. I liked the idea of prolonging the undefined, vacant situation outside the economic cycle.

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The exhibition at The Common Guild includes sculptural interventions in the office space – could you describe these?

Because the space in Glasgow hasn't been used before, instead of having the usual corporate office carpet, the space has bare aluminium tiles as flooring that are standard underneath office carpets. I have taken out some of these aluminium tiles and replaced them with shallow trays filled with sand and cigarette butts. Standing ashtray sculptures as well as ashtray tables are something I have produced in the past, so the idea of subverting architecture by using it as an ashtray comes naturally to me. The trays add a narrative component to the 'Reclining Females', perhaps suggesting that maintenance staff have been smoking cigarettes during their break. It's also about doing something site-specific at the location, getting into the underbelly of that strange corporate architecture. Looking at urban offices of this era, hardly any of the design features we see relate to the hardware of the building. When you enter the elevators, you are surrounded by folded, thin, stainless steel sheeting hiding the functional and load-bearing architecture. It's the same with the offices themselves: all drop ceilings, wall panels and technology hidden underneath aluminium floor tiles and above the fake ceilings. I find the idea of breaking up the space and poking around in its guts quite interesting. In this case the space-appropriating act of extinguishing one's cigarette on the floor is turned into a feature of the building.

The 'Reclining Females' are central to the show and, as you mentioned, you included them in the exhibitions 'Reclining Fanmail' at Kunsthaus Glarus in 2022 and 'P4aM2aRF!' at Herald St in 2022-23. In these works you juxtapose plaster sculptures of reclining female nudes with some of the tools of the service industry: housekeeping carts, cleaning fluids, binbags, mops and bedsheets. Each nude lies on a wooden board balanced atop a cleaning cart, which inserts them at the top of a hierarchy. What led you to combine these elements in this way?

The series began with my interest in maintenance carts. As with many of my works, it started with photographs I took in public spaces. Since about 2015, I have been photographing housekeeping carts in hotels, as well as cleaning trolleys in train stations, airports and so on. The first image I took was the cleaning cart in my own studio building. I talked a lot to our caretaker, Fernando, about how he customises his cart. This is something I'm fascinated by: how people customise prescribed structures in their work environment. I photographed the carts without the workers, just the tools themselves. I was interested in them as assemblages of different materials, surfaces, functions, liquids and colours – a smorgasbord of plastic that the cleaning industry provides us with. I find them visually intriguing; they represent a densification of so many activities and functions. The trolleys are the tools that relate the working body to the architecture it maintains and they are designed



'Reclining Fanmail', installation view, Kunsthaus Glarus, 2022

to make the work more efficient. Maintenance staff in airports and housekeeping personnel in hotels are supposed to work fast and stay in the background – to be invisible, really – and the ‘Reclining Females’ are also a way of bringing them forward, to elevate them, to design a monument for them and the work they do. The spelled-out version of ‘P4aM2aRF!’, the title of my Herald St show is ‘Proposal for a Monument to a Reclining Female’. I have been interested in different ways of interacting with architecture for a while, and maintaining and cleaning it is the most direct and yet totally underappreciated way to do so.

During the pandemic I became interested in the reclining female body, not so much from the idea of sickness, but more so the idea of not being able to do what I normally do. After the pandemic I wanted to try a new way of working, and the physicality of working with plaster on what became my first figurative sculptures was part of that. I started bringing the motif of the reclining female and the maintenance cart together after I was asked by Melanie Ohnemus, the director of Kunsthaus Glarus, to do the show there. I visited the site and noticed how it is surrounded by impressive rockface mountains; it made me think about how mountain ranges are named after reclining figures, including the Schlafende Hexe (Sleeping Witch) in Austria and the Hockendes Weib (Crouching Woman) close to my hometown in Germany.

The reclining female nude is an art-historical genre, mainly executed by men, especially when it comes to sculpture. It is dominated by the male gaze and offers a specific viewpoint on the female body in a horizontal position. This is, of course, linked to a whole range of meanings, from the obvious sexualised and objectifying gaze to the view of a person in a passive position who can potentially be dominated, and the notion of labour that appears in these constellations. The popularity of the motif of the reclining female has a lot to do with the male fascination with female passivity. What is interesting, though, is the fact that the depicted women were mostly ‘working girls’, either prostitutes or paid nude models, so the aspect of labour visible in the maintenance trolleys is also an inherent aspect of the reclining female motif.

For me it was important that my reclining female figures were presented high up, countering any notion of being subjugated, but rather being elevated and meeting us at eye level, or indeed from a vantage point of power, looking down on us and dominating the room. They are also slightly over life-size, which contributes to their place at the top of the hierarchy in the room. Furthermore, I have chosen to depict them in slightly active reclining poses, which goes against the sense of them being submissive and is more in the line of ancient Greek or Roman reclining goddesses.

The title of this exhibition, ‘Day Care’, seems to allude to another kind of reproductive labour, that of looking after children, a kind of care performed when the demands of family collide with those of the working life. How does this additional aspect to the wider question of care and labour feature in your thinking?

I wouldn’t call day care reproductive labour in the strict sense, as people doing it tend to be paid, but of course it is part of that discussion, as paying someone to take care of your child enables you to leave the house and to work. My title ‘Day Care’ is less about the care of children, though, and more about the care of corporate buildings, which normally happens at night after the white-collar office workers have left. In Glasgow, the space is amazing: there is an abundance of light and the windows look down on the rooftops to a normally invisible infrastructure of architecture, tanks, vents, cleaning systems etc, so daytime offers a real spectacle.

The rubbish bags in some of the sculptures are full, the sheets crumpled – these look like carts in the act of being used, while the figures are at rest. There is a duality in the way the body is present in these two modes: the working body seems to be absent or vanished, while the resting body is intensely material.

While in most of my past work, people and bodies are implied but absent, as, for instance, in the ‘Untitled Chairs’ I showed in Glasgow in 2015, here the reclining bodies of maintenance workers rest on top of the tools that connect their working bodies to the architecture of the public spaces they maintain. I am always quite cautious of having too much narrative in my work, as I am more interested in structural relationships between bodies, objects and architecture. I do, however, like the notion of these reclining maintenance workers sleeping on the job.

I thought a lot about how I could address the motive of an underpaid maintenance worker from the perspective of a privileged artist. Although I come from a working-class background and worked in housekeeping myself as a student, it still felt a bit weird. My concerns around this subject somehow led me to make the sculptures figurative and not so abstract, and also the decision to physically produce them myself. The figures are made from carved Styrofoam, which I covered in plaster. In terms of material, plaster is something you have to work with really fast because it cures in five to seven minutes; it’s a highly physical process. Using it reminded me of the time pressures that maintenance workers find themselves under. In the hotel I used to work in, we had 20 minutes to completely erase the presence of former guests from a room.

You have often worked with readymades, or by remaking design objects to your specifications so they might pass for readymades. Here, the cleaning products and tools are obvious readymades. Are you treating the trope of the female nude as a readymade too?

The reclining female nude is a motif that has been executed mostly by male artists many times before, but it’s not a readymade. My additions to the canon are sculptures handmade by myself with their own unique expressions on top of carefully composed assemblages made to look like readymades. I have often produced

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work that you might call modified readymades, which combine, something handmade, either by me or a specialist, with something industrially produced. For instance, 'Moodboards' is a series of wallbound sculptures I made between 2016 and 2017 where I took conventional baby changing units, the type you find in contemporary public washrooms, and poured terrazzo into them, the kind you would find in a small-town bar in Italy unchanged since the 1940s or in an airport, bringing the floor - traditionally at the bottom of the architectural hierarchy - up to the level of display.

Spaces that require the kind of professional cleaning service alluded to by the carts are often semi-public or semi-private, such as hotels, museums, offices, shops. You have long created sculptures, collages and photographs inspired by the way these types of spaces influence people. How has your interest in these transitional spaces and their influence shifted over the years that you have been considering them? What are you finding most interesting about the current interplay of public and private space?

The urban condition is changing dramatically. Many people experience public life through a screen at home now, while having their food delivered by an underpaid Deliveroo worker, minimising any spatial or personal encounter outside their own social class or filter bubble. Most of my sculptures relate to



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structural aspects of physical public space, which to some degree is vanishing. Marc Augé's concept of 'non-spaces', the transitional spaces of train stations, airports, hotel lobbies etc that used to at least be sites where people of different backgrounds mixed, are much more segregated now, with special lounges and technical features only available to a few. The lifestyle of the wealthy is visually accessible online like never before, but even more hidden and out of reach in the physical realm of the real world.

Every aspect of the late capitalist city is considered, planned, designed to trigger a reaction, to smooth traffic or sell goods to people. When I arrived in London in the late 1990s, there were fewer chain stores and more individual designs and higgledy-piggledy improvised spaces and surfaces. I really liked that aspect of London, which was very different to Germany, where after the Second World War reconstruction meant that so much was rationally planned and newly built. Any material surface would stretch for a long way before there would be a gap and the next surface would start. One thing I liked about London was that it had been repaired so many times and no surface extended very far. The gaps between different materials and surfaces make for a more humane reality, I think. Now interiors and buildings are designed in computer programs and any haptic quality has gone from their surfaces. For example, the new buildings around Old Street in London try so hard to look like their computer renderings, which is bizarre to me. Physical building material is now created to look as close as possible to its flat computer simulation. All this is about eliminating pauses, gaps, anything that disturbs the flow. Everything is becoming super smooth and easy to clean. Of course, there is still an underbelly of labour, infrastructure and people, it's just less visible.

Have you had much response about your sculptures from the maintenance workers who clean the galleries where your work is shown?

Sadly not, but Fernando, the caretaker in my building, got really interested once the different maintenance carts started arriving at the studio. We discussed the content and the customisation of his own cart, and I think he was disappointed that I was only depicting women on top of mine. I explained that it was still way over 50% women in these types of jobs, and that I find female bodies more interesting sculpturally. And in the end, it is all about sculpture.

You once said in an interview that you are 'a sculptor who also does collage and photography, urban walking and eBay', a self-identification that acknowledges your interactions with markets and your implication in an economy of financial speculation, among the many positions an artist can occupy. How has your success as an artist whose work sells affected the way your practice and ideas have evolved over time?



Women Between Buildings, 2018, installation view, Kunstverein in Hamburg

It is important for me to not pretend to be outside of economic circles as an artist, especially with regards to real estate, which is so closely related to the art market and how artists work. I now have a professorship in Munich, so there is less reliance on selling work. Over the years there is one aspect that has enabled me to sustain a practice as a sculptor in an almost central part of London, where rents have exploded, and that is that until a few years ago I lived in my studio and did so for a very long time. My studio is in a now highly gentrified area of London, which wasn't the case at all in the early 2000s when I moved there. Living and working in one space has had an effect on my work, of course, leading to my dish-washing sculptures for instance but also to my keen interest in public space, the opposite of the domestic realm. There is a stigma to working like that, of course, a hint of 'cottage industry', once the domain of rural women. There is the danger of not being taken seriously as a professional artist. And then there are limitations to the type and amount of work I could make there, which was why I often worked with fabricators. When I started working on the 'Reclining Females', I rented a separate studio.

It is interesting that it was working figuratively, and the resting bodies you sculpted, that finally pushed you out of your home and into a separate workspace.

It's funny, isn't it? I gave a talk about maintenance art a few years ago and I was trying to dig a bit deeper into different relationships between bodies and architecture, cleaning being one of these. During the talk, I showed the Fatboy Slim video 'Weapon of Choice', directed by Spike Jonze, in which Christopher Walken dances

around a corporate hotel and ends up flying through the lobby in this really amazing, subversive and surreal relationship with the architecture. I also showed a clip of John Waters's film *Pink Flamingos* that features two competing families, one headed by Divine, whose family tries to put a curse on the other by breaking into their home and licking all the walls and furniture.

I went to art school in the 1990s when there was a lot of cultural production coming from the idea of the domestic realm fighting back, with the work of people such as David Lynch and David Cronenberg. Which reminds me that I wrote my MA thesis on liminal space in horror movies. It took the form of a guided tour through a fictitious hotel, inspired by the tour at the beginning of *The Shining* through the Overlook Hotel.

Nicole Wermers's exhibition 'Day Care' runs at The Common Guild, Glasgow to 20 April.

Ellen Mara De Wachter is a writer based in London. Her latest book, *More Than The Eyes: Art, Food and the Senses*, is published by Atelier Éditions this spring.