

# Everything Is Negotiable

# Nicole Wermers

“A lot of my work is about occupation of space or making space; the visible and invisible structures in the city that make us walk in a certain way or behave in a certain way.” Nicole Wermers takes her cue from public spaces —considering both the macro and the micro, taking into account shapes, forms, materials and visual cues which police or encourage our behaviour within them. Emily Steer met the German, Turner Prize-nominated artist in her London studio.



I meet Nicole Wermers on a sunny Wednesday morning in East London, travelling up in a large industrial elevator to meet her in a towering block of studios which, rather tellingly for the time, has been occupied by more and more businesses than individuals in recent years. The building itself feels fitting for Wermers—a high but narrow concrete rectangle with big glass windows front and back, which offer vast views over London's skyline, full of cranes, new buildings going up and old ones coming down. "I'm all about possibility and negotiation," the German artist tells me once we're sitting down to talk. "I'm obsessed with building sites, especially as there are so many around here. For a very brief moment of time it's an area of the city where space and volume is being renegotiated. All of a sudden there is this gap and you can see the back of another building or the side of a building."

Wermers was born in Emsdetten, and came to London for university, studying at Central Saint Martins. She's been back and forth a little in the years since, but London has been her main residence. Although she came of age with the YBAs (and was nominated for the biggest YBA booty, the Turner Prize, in 2015) she isn't

one to dive into the scene, telling me that she enjoys living on the fringes. She's incredibly warm and friendly as an interviewee, but also thoughtful and controlled—she gives the impression of thinking through every answer to get to what she really means, before giving detailed answers.

"As a personality I think I'm much better at being an expat than at living in the country I grew up in," she tells me. "And that doesn't have anything to do with the fact that the country I grew up in is Germany. I seem to be quite thin-skinned and I react to certain architecture, surfaces, certain areas of the city. I react so extremely and emotionally, and I think it's healthier for me to be somewhere where I'm not so familiar with it all. There is still a distance to these codes and the way things work and look [...] The initial interest in London... although it was at the time of the YBAs, that didn't have so much to do with it," she continues. "I didn't have much interest in the art scene here but I was quite Anglophile in terms of literature and music. I came through the whole interest in subculture and counterculture via punk rock music and that sort of thing."

Her work is strongly connected with the architecture of the city—taking into account everything from material choices to hierarchy of different objects and use of space. It's a subtle influence—once you experience the final work in a gallery or art space it feels removed from the gritty directness of the street, and often has a polished feel to it. We talk about our impressions of German and British cities, as nationals of each. "Although London's huge, it is kind of small," she says. "Even the materials themselves. In Berlin and Munich for instance, it's like a feudal city and you have these really wide streets built to march in or to inspire awe. You have materials on houses and the street which stretch forever. I've been thinking about this a lot, stretching materials without a gap. In Britain, even the tarmac on the street, you have these patches, and it's more about improvising."

She has a very precise attention to detail, and often elevates or relegates the typical status of a material. As we talk, a few bunches of elegant-looking grapes sit nearby, made of what I presume to be black marble. It turns out they are plastic, covered in dust. In *Infrastruktur*, her Turner Prize-nominated work, she



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, HERALD ST., LONDON AND JESSICA SILVERMAN GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO

Previous pages, this page and following pages  
Portrait and studio  
photography by Benjamin  
McMahon

Opposite page  
§, 2016  
C-print, sandpaper sheet,  
framed, 36.5 x 54.6 cm

*"Croissants are the lattes of the eighties, so to speak. They are gastro indicators of gentrification, a taste of the wide world"*



famously placed fur coats—items which immediately speak of wealth and status (as well as the apparent ethics or lack thereof of the owner)—on the back of chairs—another status move, reserving or claiming your place in a public space. In another version of the work, she placed biker jackets on the back of plastic chairs in a ski resort—the feeling there, of the absent owners, an imagined biker gang, is more threatening. I wonder if she feels that she is drawn to luxury aesthetics.

“It’s not really luxury,” she considers. “What it is, I interpret certain features that are used to determine what people do and how they behave... I do these small-scale collages from fashion and interior magazine pages which take out the product and leave only the background—the means to make a product sellable. I use the energy that was spent on the conception of these backgrounds and props for my own purposes. I’m undermining luxury in a way. Not because I’m making it all messy, but because it uses an atmosphere which I have created for my own purposes. I’m interested in how materials transport emotions or how we project onto them. I’m interested in all the things that constitute how we live in a big city—it’s why my show and the book were called *Women Between Buildings*. It’s the urban condition. You’re always surrounded by luxury and temptation but there is also a different side to the city which I find equally interesting [...] I’m also interested in feminism and this notion of reproductive labour and how you could connect that with architecture and the male XXL domain of dealing with shapes and forms.”

There is a humour to the work—albeit not a “nudge nudge, wink wink” self-conscious type of humour, but an undercurrent at play in the selection of items she works with. For an ongoing series of works entitled *Moodboard* she places terrazzo-style floor into the trays of baby-changing units. “I like playing with social hierarchy. In this work I take a piece of floor from the lower end of the structural hierarchy and put it into something on display,” she says. “You could call it a modified readymade, it’s a reaction to a pre-existing form. I quite like to play with the function, it’s like a deliberate misuse. The design [of the baby-changing units] very much reflects our understanding of public space as it is now—hygiene, safety. It looks almost like a *Star Wars* uniform. Putting terrazzo in there is like confronting different historical strategies of public space. Terrazzo

stands for an idea of public space which has more to do with improvisation and change. The reason it became so popular is because it hides signs of heavy use.”

She shows me a book she worked on which has a similar combination of humour, attention to form and real consideration of city space and use, via that humble symbol of gentrification: the croissant. “This started as a book,” she tells me, “where I combined photographs of croissants, almost like portraits in different European cities, with sandpaper. It’s a book that destroys itself from the inside as you use it. Croissants are the lattes of the eighties, so to speak. They are gastro indicators of gentrification, a taste of the wide world. I’m also quite obsessed with the form. They are quite voluminous but they crumble to next to nothing when you tear them.”

There is often a slippage in understanding with Wermers’s work—sometimes this happens quite obviously, as with the baby-changing units which have been turned into something far more appealing, and sometimes it is a little more confusing. “*Givers and Takers* are readymade kitchen extractor fans on the top, and the bottom refers to public hand dryers,” she tells me of one series of works, which on first glance appear to be formed from readymades: kitchen fan above, hand dryer below. “So one is from a domestic context and the other from public bathrooms. But actually they’re not—I was playing around with the actual hand dryers and they were way too small to fit. In the end I scaled them up and made them in this fibreglass with metal and plastic forms. I like to keep an element of guessing in there, although they do look quite convincing.”

She also works with optical illusions of sorts in one of her most recognizable bodies of work which are called *Cousina*—which is the German word for female cousin. The works have a “relationship with the endless column by Constantin Brâncuși”, she tells me. “They pretend to have a full volume, normally it’s two different colours and it creates an optical effect of a third dimension. Once you apply two colours it pops out. I was thinking about sculpture in relation to skimming on materials and creating the illusion of volume.”

Another body of work which has a similar form to these are also semi-readymade—referencing vertical, curled up fabric patio awnings. “I am interested in how textiles are used in the city: to divide space, to shade space, protect space and also generate space,” she

says. “Textiles lend themselves well for those purposes because they are soft and flexible and expandable. And we perceive them as non-threatening. We perceive them as negotiable in a way.”

Her sculptures are often shown within monumental settings, holding their own in sculpture parks, public places and vast white cube galleries—but also alluding to the space around them. “The space is definitely part of the work,” Wermers confirms. “A lot of my work is about occupation of space or making space; the visible and invisible structures in the city that make us walk in a certain way or behave in a certain way, and how to transport that into the gallery or museum.”

I have always felt that there is a real beauty in Wermers’s practice; colours are often soft or pastel toned, and even natural or more industrial materials somehow become elegant with her treatment. We’re looking through a book with images of some of her *Abwaschskulptur (Dishwasher Sculpture)* works when I mention it—they’re simple dishwasher trays on white plinths, loaded up with stacks of crockery which are highly unusual or attractive, a porcelain lobster here, a silver leaf-shaped serving tray there. “I always choose them by my own formal criteria or the things I like, the colours I like or profile. And I also I choose the elements... Maybe it shouldn’t be so appealing!” she considers, and then laughs. “I think that I’m actually starting to do something that is less appealing.”



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*Moodboard #5*, 2016  
Cast terrazzo in baby-  
changing unit, 51 × 86 × 57 cm

*Abwaschskulptur (Dishwashing  
Sculpture) #13*, 2017  
Various china, ceramic, and  
glassware, kitchen utensils,  
modified dishwasher basket,  
plinth, 203.2 × 49.5 × 50.8 cm

*“I’m interested in how materials transport emotions or how we project onto them”*

