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**MARIKEN
WESSELS**

I am a woman

Interview Mariken Wessels

Lisanne
Van Happen

You started your career at the Academy for Theater and Dance in Amsterdam; in the following years, you continued to develop yourself with further education in theater and acting, both in the Netherlands and in the United States. After your studies at the Rietveld Academy, you shifted your focus to visual art. In which way does your theater background influence your work as an artist?

Mariken
Wessels

Yes, I graduated from the Theater Academy in Amsterdam and continued my training with classes at the Lee Strasberg Institute in New York. Afterward, I worked as a professional actor for several years. Before starting at the Theater Academy I was already engaged with photography and even made a small darkroom in my bathroom.

Alongside acting, I worked on my own projects. Acting and the way I approach a role often feed into my visual work. I construct my projects based on a range of disciplines and the final work is a sum of those parts. Research is important, not just through books and online, but working out scenarios sparked by a personal experience, finding, or an article. I base my research partly on facts, but I also try to place myself into a situation and empathize with the characters to better understand the subject at hand. This is mostly an intuitive process, but I also apply the method of writing a character description to give it more depth. Once I get started on a project, I will go into such depths that I start looking at it through a different lens and see exactly what I need. That's how I find the right books or other material, information and ideas.

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fig. 001-003 > p. 60-67

I see traces of my theater background in how I execute my work. When I attended the Theater Academy, I didn't just dream about acting but wanted to think through the whole scenario, every detail, including the characters, the stage, the clothing, and the lines. In practice, I mainly became an actor, focusing first and foremost on the execution and less on the stuff that happens around it. I did feel like I was missing something there. In my practice as a visual artist, I feel a complete sense of freedom to imagine everything and create things based on how I visualize them for myself. Sometimes I build whole scenes, life-sized or scaled, to photograph afterward, or I'll try to grasp an entire character before I take the images, make collages, sculptures, or installations.

LVH The interdisciplinary aspect of your work is, as a result of your diverse educational background, solidified in you as an artist. Do you often look for collaborations or would you consider yourself a solo-maker?

MW I always work alone in my studio and prefer to decide everything on my own. That process is part of how I work, and I need peace and quiet for it to happen. The input of others enters in the last phase when a book or exhibition needs to be produced. This is where I have collaborated before, but at that point the whole artistic practice is more or less behind me. With a book designer I will collaborate on the details of the design; the font, the cover. My latest book, *Miss Cox* (Fw:Books, 2020), is designed by Hans Gremmen. Contrary to my earlier books, I allowed for a lot of input from the publisher to work with my material based on their own understanding of it. That distance can work well and offers new perspectives on my work.

fig. 010 > p. 76

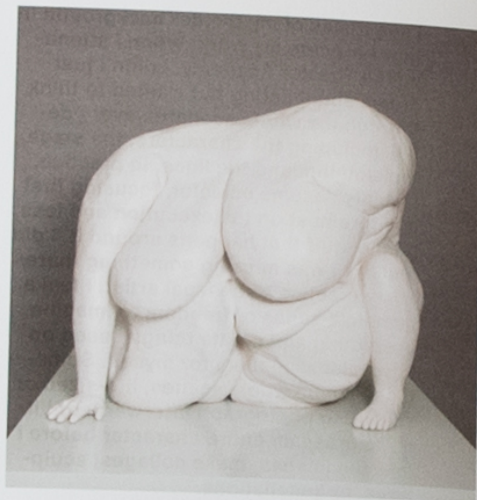


fig. 001
Mariken Wessels,
Model Crouching
from the series *Along*
from the *Along*
Ceramic sculpture,
1106 x 116 x 116
cm, 2018

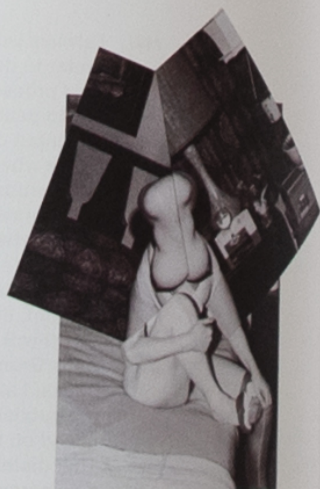


fig. 002
Mariken Wessels,
Taking Off Tights
from *Taking Off*.
Henry My Neighbor.
Photo book, 2015



fig. 003
The artist working
at the European
Ceramic Work
Center (EKWC), 2018

LVH I would like to follow up on your response to the second question where you state that you predominantly work alone and rarely look for collaborations before the last phase of your project; can I read between the lines that your collaboration with Hans Gremmen has changed your opinion on this, as it demonstrated the added value of an (equal) collaboration in the process of developing your work?

MW In previous publishing endeavors I was both the author and the designer. It felt exciting to trust a third party with the design for the book-part of the *Miss Cox* project. I feel drawn to Gremmen's work, and I immediately felt confident in our working relationship. He has added new layers to the work, for example by including installation shots of my studio, with among others studies and inspirational images, to the book. I wouldn't have made that decision myself so easily. It doesn't feel good to show study material, but in the collaboration with Hans it developed organically and it all fell into place. His decision to divide the book into three segments (the studio, photography, and sculpture) also worked very well. As a result of this structure a unity emerged, as if they always belonged together in that way. There was space for a short essay I wrote about my fascination for Miss Cox, which I initially had written as a letter to her. I am open to entering a similar collaboration in the future.

LVH A recurring figure in your work is the female protagonist. Where does your fascination with the female character come from? And in which way do you relate to this character as a female artist?

MW The fascination with the female character can easily be prescribed to the fact that

I am a woman, and as such can place myself in the shoes of 'the woman' more easily. Look, in my project *Taking Off. Henry My Neighbor*, the focus seems to be on Henry, but in the end, it is Martha who is in the leading role.

LVH Are there any up and coming female artists who inspire you at the moment? If that's the case, I'm of course curious to learn who they are and why they inspire you.

MW Artists including Chantal Ackerman, Patti Smith, or Jenny Saville and writers such as Marguerite Duras and Simone de Beauvoir, whom I continue to reread. These people live and work from a sense of urgency that leads to a unique positioning. How Patti Smith lives her life is interesting to me, it's something I sincerely love. Her book *Just Kids*¹ on her life with the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe is intense. It's about friendship, kindred spirits, about ambitions and dreams and art, about lives that are lived intensely and then come to an end. I also get very inspired by non-artists. Stories about how people live and behave fascinate me. Such lives are often the point of departure for my projects. I also like reading autobiographies and biographies, such as recently Benjamin Moser's biography of Susan Sontag. Artists, writers and 'normal' people inspire me in myriad ways. Whilst reading books I take extensive notes, on subjects that are articulated in such beautiful ways. These notes often refer to things or thoughts that have been floating in my mind but that I couldn't quite put into words yet. They offer so many new thoughts, ideas and depth. That's how it works for me when I see good art too. Sometimes a detail is enough to get inspired and bring it into my work and my world.

¹ Patti Smith, *Just Kids*. Ecco, 2010



fig. 004
Mariken Wessels,
*Taking Off. Henry
My Neighbor*, 2015



fig. 005
Mariken Wessels,
*Taking Off. Henry
My Neighbor*, 2015

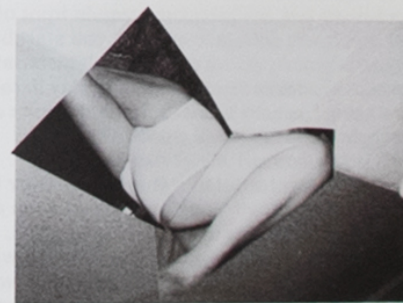


fig. 006
Mariken Wessels,
*Close Legs Crack
Underwear from
Taking Off. Henry
My Neighbor*, 2015

LVH Each of your projects is built as a sculpture. In the process, you use, amongst other things, the principle of re-enactment to expand on existing photographic archives. In which ways does re-enactment relate to the use of historical material for you?

MW My re-enactment ultimately obtains the same value as the historical material. I treat it as truthfully as this material, which I use as a starting point or addition onto which I continue to build. I elaborate on it with my own interpretations. In this process, I try to stay as close to the truth as possible. If I use historical material as a starting point, I'll conduct research to understand as much as possible about its nature. Afterward, I adapt this research in ways I consider necessary. Because in the end, it is just material to me. I attach more value to the lives that are, or were, connected to it. Generally speaking, I would love to find more historical material, for example surrounding a found photograph of a woman. But if something doesn't exist or can't be found, I'll make it myself, to give her a more complete life, to place her in a context.

LVH In your most recent work *Miss Cox* you worked with an overweight model, and refer to Eadweard Muybridge's work from 1885, in which he placed an anonymous woman in front of his camera. In the book, you start by showing sketches and research material. What role do these images play in relation to the underwater photographs and the sculptures you made?

MW It was very clear to me that I didn't want to just make fun underwater of pictures of heavy bodies. I wanted to photograph them in such a way that there is a sense of alienation. I wondered how these bodies behave and move under the pres-

sure of water. I was also looking for the animalistic aspects of the human body. To make this clear for myself, I looked for material that would intrigue me, with which I could form an attachment. That is how I found Jenny Saville's paintings, for example. The frame within which she places the body and paints them is very powerful to me. This is what I was looking for: big bodies trapped in a fixed framework. I was also looking to explore the body as a 'landscape'. And in my film the body could be associated with a spaceship.

I had to instruct my models on what I desired from them. Four models came to my studio, where I showed them the ceramic sculptures and explained to them that I was looking for lightness in their heavy bodies, and the estrangement that emerges through the pressure of being underwater. Based on my research, and a choreography I drew up beforehand, I showed them what I was looking for and explained which movements to make whilst they were underwater.

I wasn't striving for a personal portrait of an individual. This is why I didn't want to show any faces in the frame. It is about shape to me. The body as an abstract, formative, sculptural and animalistic entity. I did research into Eadweard Muybridge as well. And I read a fascinating book by Rebecca Solnit about Muybridge.² His images fascinated me, and steered me in the direction of making sculptures. Next to animals, he mainly photographed men, mostly strong men, athletic or running. Between all those images, I found a woman known as Miss Cox. She intrigued me on various levels. Her body in itself was something sculptural to me. I wanted to know more about this woman. Who was she? Seeing her heavy body made me question whether it would be liberating to float underwater, to feel free and weightless. What would this bring about in terms

lg. 007-009 > p. 74-75

² Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*, Viking, 2003



fig. 007
Mariken Wessels,
*Nude, Water and
Green Leaves III*
from the series
*Arising from the
Ground*, 2019



fig. 008
Mariken Wessels,
photo from the
series *Snapshots
of the Unknown VI*,
2020



fig. 009
Mariken Wessels,
*Snapshots of the
Unknown Lightbox*.
Installation
of Aluminium
lightboxes with
print. h 3.10 x w 3.00
m, 2020

of shape? Skin that would move up instead of down. For underwater photography, I looked for an appropriate location. Prior to the shoot, I did some test sessions to understand how these bodies would behave underwater. I found out that heavy bodies quickly move to the surface, which would complicate the shoot. During a trial session, I put weights on the bottom of the lake, with a rope attached to them so that the models would stay underwater for a longer time.

On the walls of my studio, all of the research came together: sketches, drawings, test images, illustrations, books, film stills, reproductions of work by other artists, and the search for appropriate models. This is what I need to create depth in my projects, to truly make them my own. Thanks to Hans Gremmen and Petra Stavast of Fw:Books overview images of these study walls are now part of the *Miss Cox* publication.

fig. 010
Mariken Wessels,
spread from the
book *Miss Cox*
(Fw:Books, 2020)



Chapter opening image: Mariken Wessels, *Taking Off. Henry My Neighbor*, 2015

Mariken Wessels (1963, the Netherlands) creates artist's books, photo series, film works, sculptures, and installations. Her multilayered projects lean on appropriated imagery and self-produced images to reimagine existing narratives as well as construct new ones on the boundaries of the public and private spheres. Prior to her visual practice, Wessels studied acting at the Amsterdam Theater School and, after a decade-long acting career, visual arts at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy. Wessels held solo exhibitions at the Fotomuseum Antwerp (2016) and the Fotomuseum Den Haag (2017). Works from *Nude – Arising from the Ground* are included in the group show *Human After All: Ceramic Reflections in Contemporary Art* at Museum Princessehof, Leeuwarden (2021). Wessels has published numerous books, most notably *Taking Off. Henry my Neighbor* (Art Paper Editions, 2015). Wessels' latest book, *Miss Cox*, is designed by Hans Gremmen and published by Fw:Books in 2020. Mariken Wessels is represented by The Ravestijn Gallery, Amsterdam.

With her work Lisanne van Happen supports upcoming talent. She is a freelance curator, fundraiser and producer specialized in the field of documentary photography with a particular interest in social issues. She strives to connect people and create collaborations that are greater than the sum of its parts. Lisanne has a BA in documentary photography from St. Joost in Breda. She studied social-cultural work at Koning Willem I college in Den Bosch and attended courses in Sociology at Utrecht University. Over the past nine years she worked for organizations such as: Docking Station, Critical Mass, Paris College of Art, St. Joost and Machinerie. As the talent development lead at FOTODOK Lisanne works on programs with which she supports upcoming photographers on a financial, conceptual and production level.

Collezione Donata Pizzi was founded in 2013 with the purpose of promoting the discovery and understanding of the most outstanding and original Italian female practitioners, spanning from the mid-sixties to our present day.

The collection – unique in its field – is comprised of photographic works produced by more than 70 photographers from a wide range of approaches and backgrounds.

The works that compose the collection bear witness to the significant moments that have occurred in the last 50 years within the political and social history of Italy by bringing to the forefront the conceptual, aesthetic and technological developments that have shaped photography. The central role of the body and its transformations, the need to give a voice to personal experiences of day-to-day and family life, the relationship between private and collective memory, are all building blocks that link seemingly distant images in genre and time-frame.

FOTODOK (2008) is an artistic platform based in The Netherlands. We strongly believe that documentary photography can change society for the better. FOTODOK organizes exhibitions, lectures, talent development and education programs. The works FOTODOK presents largely vary in form. What is important for FOTODOK within the variety of these artistic modes are two backbone elements: projects have to address the nature of photographic medium and engage with society. The artists we work with reflect on the ethics of representation, and look critically at their own positions as makers, recognising and revealing in their projects the paradox of documentary—the cohabitation of fact and fiction. Our motto says “FOTODOK is a place to see, think, and learn.” We constantly accumulate knowledge together with our contributors and our audience, studying the world and photography’s place in it through the prism of documentary practices.

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