

LONDON



View of "Marlie Mul," 2015.

Marlie Mul

VILMA GOLD

In her exhibition “*Arbeidsvitaminen* (Labor Vitamins)” titled after the longest-running Dutch radio music show, Berlin- and London-based artist Marlie Mul unpacked a Panglossian narrative of technological progress. Reassuring viewers of our superiority to our Stone Age ancestors in a short written text, in the show she illustrated the law of progress with a selection of props. Sticking out from thirteen torn-open cardboard boxes were varnished papier-mâché replicas of wooden clubs; these appeared all the more brutal in contrast to the white packing peanuts that spilled from boxes toppled over on their sides. As was suggested by the work’s title, ‘*Ug*’ (*Ug*), ‘*Duh*’ (*də*), ‘*Muh*’ (*mʊ:t*), ‘*Bam Bam*’ (*bæm bæm*) (all works 2015), these cudgels are tools so rudimentary that they hardly deserve the name. Along with the clubs, Mul had retrieved a second type of obsolete object as a measure of technological progress: Hung on the gallery wall were two flat cardboard boxes, their fronts ripped away to reveal large cogwheel mechanisms cushioned by more foam peanuts. Devoid of any particular practical applications, these symbols of the rational mind were neutrally titled *tech* (#1) and *tech* (#2). Last, illustrating the leap from the age of mechanical force to that of information was a specimen so sophisticated that it could outsmart the rational brain’s own irrationalities. Silk-screened onto two freestanding Plexiglas panels of different widths were a quantity of nicotine patches. Optimistically titled *Nicotine Patch Panel (Healing) #1* and *Nicotine Patch Panel (Healing) #2*, they superimposed a cheerful pattern on their surroundings.

But the presence of the nicotine patches inevitably casts doubt on Mul’s ostensible narrative of technological development. Neither overly optimistic nor disillusioning, they raise sober philosophical questions: Can the delivery of a drug in the process of addiction cessation really be considered “healing”? And is the vanishing culture of cigarette smoking truly a sign of improved well-being? As she did in her 2012 London and Basel exhibitions from the “No Oduur” series, 2012–, Mul here explored the historical narratives that underpin the current technology-driven trend for self-improvement epitomized by antismoking campaigns while at the same time challenging gallerygoers’ faith in the artist’s written text. The recurrent issues of the replica in her work, perhaps best known from her partly real, partly illusionistic 2012 “Puddle” sculptures, were also further complicated by the wooden clubs in particular: As familiar as these may be from comic strips, archaeological evidence suggests that our Stone Age ancestors were already using more advanced tools; this little-known fact deals yet another blow to the narrative of technological progress and superiority insofar as that narrative gains strength when set against a primitive prehistory.

Challenging that legend allows for thinking about the relationship between culture and technology in more complex ways than simply viewing the latter as the driving force of history and the former as its static, locally confined sequel. By placing the nicotine patches on Plexiglas panels reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp’s *Large Glass*, Mul both reminds us that artists have dealt with technological determinism for a long time and offers an updated way of addressing this sticky problem in the present situation. Her *Nicotine Patch Panels* not only make visible a technology that typically remains camouflaged on the body while delivering doses on a molecular level, but also present it as part of a system of relations in which we are active players in shaping our perception of the world.

—*Elisa Schaar*