

Voicing the work

Kimberley Chandler

[Carpet City](#), where Maria Militsi both lives and works, is a vast flooring warehouse in Tottenham, north London. Attracted to the low rental cost and relative anonymity of the live-work space, Maria has made Carpet City her refuge. On climbing the staircase up to her studio, which she shares with artist-jeweller [Melanie Georgacopoulos](#), you find yourself within a small, cabin-like room replete with jewellery and useless objects. It is here that the transformation happens. True to its name, Carpet City offers both a domestic and collective space, a place of preciousness and productivity. In one corner is a jeweller's bench littered with tools and materials. On the shelves, several boxes of ready-to-revive odds and ends – distorted casements for disposable lighters, broken eBay finds, and ornamental jewellery ([Polychroni Sisters](#), 2017–present). Pinned to the walls are seductive Polaroids that capture fleeting moments and contexts, as well as thoughtful scribbles – a quotation or phrase. This is a space awash with invention and reverie, a place where unwanted things are cared for.

[Carpet City – By Appointment Only](#) is a quasi-retrospective: a chance for Maria to restage, and reflect on her work to date, within the sanctuary of her own space. Works both old and new, complete, and ongoing are interspersed among her own belongings, creating a dialogic space that is at once curated and lived in, spectacular and commonplace, purposive and incidental.

Since meeting with her to discuss [Carpet City – By Appointment Only](#), I have become something of a ragpicker, who, as philosopher Walter Benjamin identifies, finds value in urban refuse. He writes that:

“Everything that the big city has thrown away, everything it has lost, everything it has scorned, everything it has crushed underfoot [the ragpicker] catalogues and collects.”¹

Glistening sweet wrappers, cheap metal earrings, unknowable small plastic parts, and flattened metal – all those practically irredeemable things that find (or rather, lose) their way to the roadside now find themselves in my pocket. That Maria has inspired this purposeful gathering is no surprise. As an artist, she restores and reanimates useless things; this so-called refuse is her material. Whether the lusted shells of molluscs, gold baptismal jewellery, porcelain figurines, or other trinkets, Maria elevates others' trash into treasure; she values the excessive quality of objects, their infinite and cosmic potential, as much as she does their relationship to us.

The incidental discovery of something damaged – whether driftwood from the Thames foreshore ([Skipper](#), 2016), a found crucifix ([Self-Portraits](#), 2011), or missing jigsaw piece ([Blue Boy](#), 2008) – motivates a loving act of restoration. Maria is undoubtedly a skilled jeweller, but she also works diligently as a restorer and alchemist. With careful fingers, she remodels the broken skull of a porcelain dog in precious silver ([Sandy the Dog](#), 2011), whose mended crown then becomes a pendant; and revives a series of tattered [pin-cushion dolls](#) with an armoury of gold pins. In this way, Maria pairs her practical knowledge of tooling and precious metals with her innate ability to flesh out characters, new stories, and after-lives. Through her, things are reborn.

Yet this time round, these things wash up in another (virtual) space: her [Instagram feed](#). Since the start of this project, Maria has been using the hashtag [#carpetcitybyappointmentonly](#) to house her work online. When

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4: 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard, 2002), 48.

the invitation came to dwell among these digital threads, I was curious to understand Maria's patterning of things, how she constellates these fragmented materials, and what this digital archive holds.

Logging in and scrolling down, I am able to take in the full scope of her tessellated images. A black-and-white photograph of an elegantly dressed man hunched over his typewriter, legs crossed, his fingers at play on the keys, catches my eye. Tagged [#spontaneous_religious_sentiment](#), it is both intimate and earnest. It is the writer Italo Calvino. The photograph is paired with one of a patinated metal thimble, and its cast – a positive reproduction in silver ([Thimble](#), 2010). Next to these is an excerpt from Calvino's *The Complete Cosmicomics* (2009):

"Praise be to the stars that implode. A new freedom opens up within them: annulled from space, exonerated from time, existing, at last, for themselves alone and no longer in relation to all the rest, perhaps only they can be sure they really exist."²

Through Calvino, we come to recognise the autonomy of objects; that they resist (or object to) our manifold interpretations of them, instead withdrawing into their materiality. The lustred shell of a mollusc is protective – becoming mythic, dreamlike, and irresistible only through our sensuous experience of it; a string of luminous pearls hanging demurely from a rusted gate (*Baroque Necklace*, 2018) wakes it from its ordinariness, transforming into the nape of a woman's neck. It is the context in which these things are situated that defines them, as well as the desires and agencies of others.³ Calvino continues with his appraisal of such exhausted stars:

"'Black holes' is a derogatory nickname, dictated by envy: they are quite the opposite of holes, nothing could be fuller and heavier and denser and more compact, with a stubbornness to the way they sustain the gravity they bear within, as if clenching their fists, gritting their teeth, hunching their backs."⁴

Maria's inside-outing of a thimble mentioned earlier ([Thimble](#), 2010), then, could be read as the materialisation of its capacity to enclose and protect – a dense space, much like Calvino's star, where "the implicit and the unexpressed don't lose their energy"⁵ but instead hold fast. This is the mystery of objects: they are desirable, and yet strangely unobtainable; they are knowable only through our relationships with them. Something Maria knows only too well.

What is clear is the plug-and-play quality of her work, that her objects and assemblages have multiple meanings. With [Carpet City - By Appointment Only](#), Maria has assembled a puzzle of interacting pieces, continually shuffling them to create new juxtapositions, all within the space of her studio. This response to her material is both intuitive and practical. Living in the same space encourages a heightened perception of what these objects might suggest, or prompt her into doing. The studio becomes a stage, her objects, the performers. It follows, then, that [Maria is the stagehand](#).

This fits with how Maria describes her working process. These things find her, and often in quite remarkable ways. It's as if they've abandoned themselves to these new encounters. And in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which we've been forced to relate to our spaces in more intimate and creative ways, this puzzling-out feels all the more prescient. Our things are a measure of who we are, what we choose to surround ourselves with. They are a reassurance, a confrontation, things that help us to dream. [Carpet City - By Appointment Only](#) is a place for this retrospecting, for "falling through the surface [of things]"⁶ to imagine their past lives, but also for prospecting, for seeing things anew, for thoughts, ideas, and possibilities.

2 Italo Calvino, *The Complete Cosmicomics*, trans. Martin McLaughlin, Tim Parks, and William Weaver (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 611.

3 André Gali, 'From a System of Objects to Speculative Realism,' in *Material Perceptions*, eds. Knut Astrup Bull and André Gali (Oslo: Norwegian Crafts, 2018), 69-92: 70.

4 Calvino, *The Complete Cosmicomics*, 611-12.

5 Calvino, *The Complete Cosmicomics*, 611-12.

6 Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), Chapter One.