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Stories from the Global Staffroom: Experiences of Caring and Uncaring Architectures at work with Effy Harle and Jos Boys

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ABSTRACT   Learning from the work of artist and maker, Effy Harle and cofounder of The DisOrdinary Architecture Project, Jos Boys, Manual Labours (Sophie Hope and Jenny Richards) critically examine an excerpt of their conversation from the podcast series *The Global Staffroom Podcasts* which reflects on experiences of and relationships to the staffroom both as a concept, virtual and physical space. In dialogue with intersectional feminist theory, architecture theory and social reproduction theory we consider the architecture of the staffroom in different workplaces and its tensions as a space for oppression and exclusion but also transformation, collectivity and solidarity. We conclude advocating for oral and intersectional analyses of the staffroom to intervene in its reproduction within a wage-based racial capitalist framework, and as a way to uproot it from the notion of a fixed workplace and worker: to build a staffroom for a post work imaginary that foregrounds care on the basis of our differential needs and desires.

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Introduction

In this article we/Manual Labours (a practice-based research body exploring physical and emotional relationships to work), consider the spatial and temporal aspects of the staffroom, to reflect on experiences of rest and care at work. We share an excerpt of a transcript from episode 13 of Manual Labours' *The Global Staffroom Podcast* that focused on histories and architectures of the staffroom[1] alongside four images from our ongoing cross-sector, practice-based research into physical and emotional relations to work.[2] We follow this with an analysis of the podcast extract in relation to other texts to explore the meaning of the staffroom today. Both the authors and speakers from the excerpt we analyze, work and/or study in the context of the university. Our study here sheds light on how the staffroom is positioned in the neoliberal university and who has access to it. We conclude by reflecting on what imaginaries the staffroom might hold as an intersectional space for politicization, collectivity and transformation. We argue that a look at the formal and informal spaces for care and rest at work can tell us as much about the different power strategies and structures upon the working body, as attention to employment law.[3] This allows for another type of mapping of the changing world of work and the effects this has on workers, within the university, art gallery and beyond.

We (Manual Labours) hosted *The Global Staffroom Podcast* live via Twitch TV every lunchtime for 14 weeks during UK Lockdown (May–August 2020). It acted as an itinerant virtual staffroom for isolated and individualized workers and included conversations with academics, architects, healthcare workers, activists, factory workers, teachers, domiciliary carers, and cultural workers. With an expansion of the working day, we were asking if, how and where people are able to take care of themselves and others during working hours, with an expanded sense of whether these hours are paid, unpaid or underpaid. It was advertised via social media and listeners could contribute questions and comments via the Twitch TV chat function. The work of *The Global Staffroom Podcast* was to share and learn from staffroom stories and experiences, in which staffroom inexperience is just as telling as those who have experience of and memories of lunchtimes and breaks spent in a designated space at work.

Research into the staffroom and care in and as work became an area of concern even further exposed during the beginning of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. We were alarmed by the limited debate about the inequality of those who are most affected by this crisis and wanted *The Global Staffroom Podcast* to respond to this situation as a virtual space for meetings between inspiring activists, artists, care workers and researchers. The regular live radio show created a space to think carefully, critically and collectively about the intersectional impact Covid-19 is having on changing physical and emotional relationships to work.

In episode 13 (Figure 1) our guests were the artist and maker Effy Harle, who with Finbar Prior we commissioned to build the *Wandering*
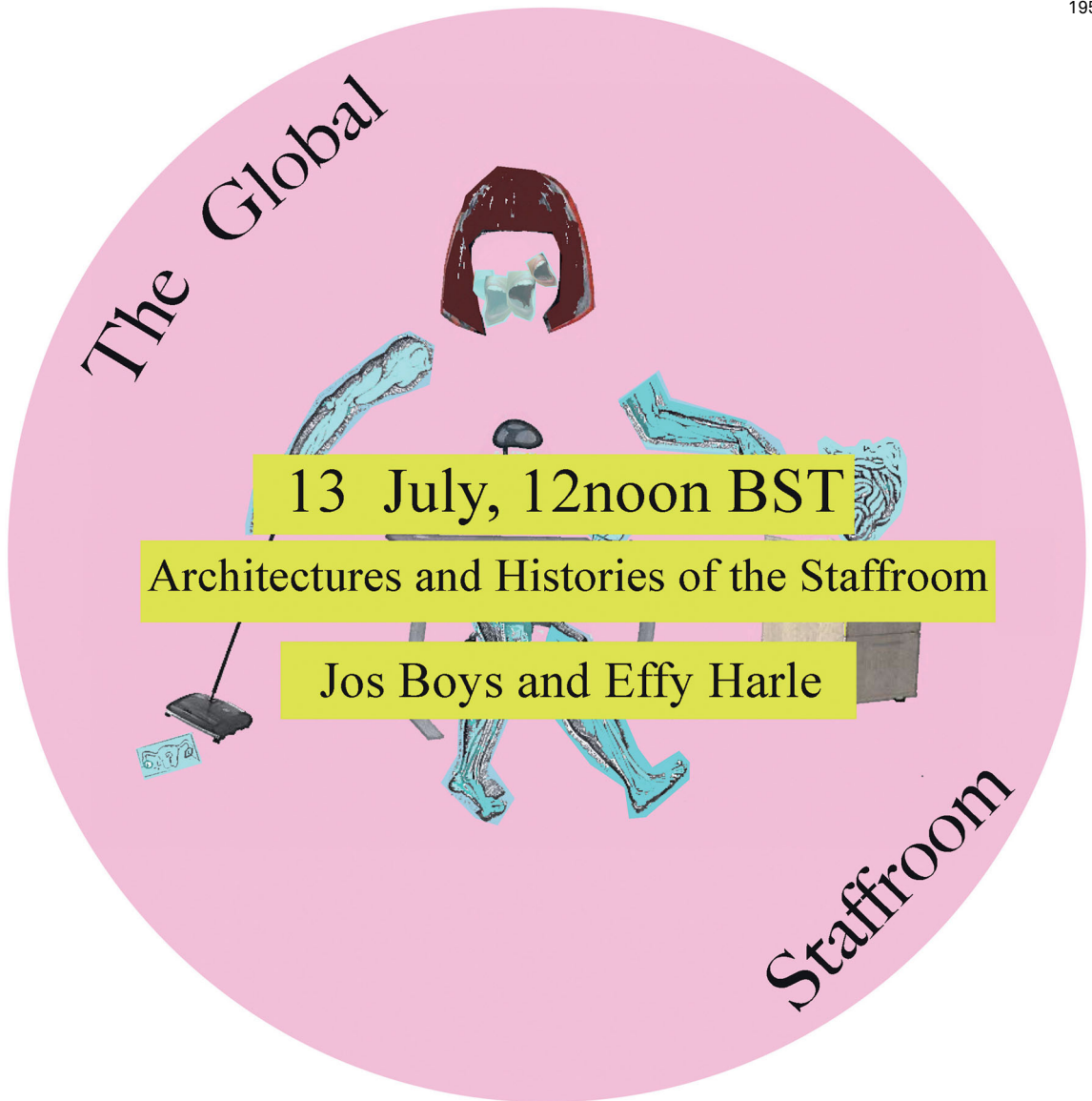
Figure 1
Manual Labours, *The Global Staffroom*, Poster, 2020. *The Global Staffroom* is a live podcast series by Manual Labours and supported by the University of Edinburgh Art Collection. At the series end, all episodes will join the Art collection holdings for use in teaching and research. Courtesy of Manual Labours.

Womb (Figure 2) as part of the previous phase of our research[4] and Jos Boys who is co-founder with Zoe Partington of the Disordinary Architecture Project.[5] We have selected this extract as it demonstrates some of the experiences of the staffroom as well as broader theoretical concerns that our discussions examining architecture, care and work are bringing to the fore. We are finding, for example, that the concept of the staffroom has both emancipatory and oppressive roots and tendencies. These conflicting ideals are intertwined and surfaced in the ways Boys

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and Harle reflect on the exclusions and reclamations of these spaces for rest and care. As spaces of well-needed rest, recuperation and informal socializing, the staffroom as a site of social reproduction is also necessary to maintain the productivity and efficiency of the worker. This neoliberal drive to maintain the worker's productivity can be seen across cognitive, manual and service work. The staffroom can also be understood as a microcosm of the workplace that reproduces the same forms of normativity, oppression and exclusion outside the staffroom.[6] At the same time, reclaiming these virtual, fragmented, cross-sector sites as collective expressions of non-work and alternative care may also be possible.

While communal spaces for workers within the workplace such as the staffroom, common room, canteen or worker club are perhaps relics of

Figure 2
Manual Labours, *The Wandering Womb,* 2018. *The Wandering Womb* was conceived by Manual Labors, designed and made by Effy Harle and Finbar Prior and funded by Birkbeck/Wellcome Trust Institutional Strategic Support Fund. Photo credit: Effy Harle.

the past, neoliberal programmes that individualize care and rest through wellbeing at work programmes, mindfulness exercises and self-help initiatives are becoming more commonplace. During *The Global Staffroom Podcast* guests shared experiences of the staffroom as places for rest, care, socializing, eating lunch or organizing around working conditions, a free place to get together and meet others from your own and different fields of work, as well as spaces of inaccess, "gentleman's club," hierarchy and workplace bullying. Just like the workplace, the staffroom is not without significant problems of exclusion and structural injustice cut across gender, race, class and disability. University staff have drawn attention to the ways in which workplaces and the staffroom in particular can often reproduce and uphold white supremacy.[7] The episode we focus on here particularly focuses on able-normativity whereas other episodes explored systemic injustice, exploitation and racial capitalism, discussing issues such as the gendered and racialized experiences of lockdown, sick pay, emotional labor of care and health workers, and the architecture of home-working. In future work we hope to further develop an intersectional analysis of the staffroom drawing on the rich, intersecting and cross-sector perspectives shared through the podcast series.

Extract from *The Global Staffroom* Podcast, episode 13: Architectures and Histories of the Staffroom[8]

> **Manual Labours:** *Tell us a bit about your relationship with spatial design and architecture and its politics?*
>
> **Jos Boys:** *I studied architecture in the 1970s and I think I've always been interested in what kinds of bodies or body-minds are assumed by the material spaces and how they are designed.[9]* **Who is welcomed in those spaces and who is valued?** *Who is marginalized, who's forgotten? The language that we in (The Disordinary Architecture Project) tend to use now is very much from Disability Studies. The scholar, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson[10] wrote a seminal text that integrated feminism and disability studies and talked about* **"mis-fitting" and 'fitting."** *Rather than thinking about, for example, being able bodied or being disabled, you think of it in a much more relational way, concerning who "fits" and who "mis-fits." And so, if your life is relatively smooth in the built environment then that expresses a privilege, a huge privilege, I think. In connection with this I've always been interested in how the material spaces that we have actually intersect with our attitudes or behaviors.* **How might we value our differences and our bio and neuro-richness, rather than reinforce norms or normality***? In the 1980s, I was cofounder of something called Matrix[11] which is a feminist architect practice. I wasn't involved in the design practice so much, but we did a lot of writing and events which were around how you might think about space being*

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gendered and how you might be able to understand it. We have to remember that this was at a time when the word sexism didn't exist, so **we were trying to get at something that was still weirdly unsayable**.

Effy Harle: *The experience that I relate to is the time I have spent working in art galleries. I have had first-hand experience of the gendered division of labor, specifically, in my more hands-on work as a gallery technician, building exhibitions, which was and is still dominated by people who identify as male. So, for a good few years, I was the only woman doing that job. In my Masters dissertation that I am currently working on I take that experience and use it to analyze the gender division of labor. I try and* **use my personal experience** *as a springboard to try and think about* **post work imaginaries**. *I get this term from the author Kathi Weeks, within her book* The Problem with Work.[12] *I'm really thinking about how, as an individual and also a member of a collective can we push beyond wage labor? That's occupying my mind quite a lot.*

Manual Labours: *And how have these experiences informed how you've organized your work since?*

Effy Harle: *I was for a few years a union representative for the gallery assistants at an arts institution. A gallery assistant's role within a gallery includes invigilating the exhibitions, looking after artefacts and exhibits, as well as being a front facing communicator who speaks to visitors. I spent quite a few years working as a gallery assistant. The specific fight for us was the* **elimination of zero-hour contracts**, *which is the usual contracts that Gallery Assistants would be employed by, which is a very precarious and very* **anxiety producing working conditions**. *For years, we tried to push for fixed term contracts, but during the time that I was there, that was not achieved. However, a lot of other things were achieved. We managed to start an Employee Forum, which was set up to be a* **collective voice** *in parallel to the voice and power structure of the Board of Trustees, which sits above the whole institution.*

Jos Boys: *I am co-founder of The Disordinary Architecture Project with Zoe Partington, who is a disabled artist. We were trying to think about how we could explore disability (and ability) in a much richer way, particularly within architectural education and practice, but also with clients and in the design of the built environment more widely, given that disability is still treated as an incredibly mundane kind of unchanging category. It is a technical category if you study architecture, that's how it's treated, it's a kind of an afterthought. You*

design spaces for "normal people," and then you adapt them for these other people who don't really count, who aren't valued. All of this is incredibly relevant in the current pandemic moment when the kind of **language of vulnerability and disposability** of certain sorts of bodies is so prevalent, and so normalized. **Care obviously fits into that in a very complex and interesting way.** The Disordinary Architecture Project is trying to shift the language and the way that we think about the diversity of bodies, and that includes in an intersectional way. **It's not just about disability, it is intersected with sexuality, with race with class, looking at how societal structures operate relationally.** For me, the really big thing, which I think is very relevant to your work, is how disability as a concept and disabled people as a kind of constituency get … bundled into an access and inclusion bracket. In terms of disability arts, activism and scholarship, where there's a huge amount of really vibrant work going on, it tends to be called social, spatial and material justice which is a really different way of thinking about disability, which for me, has been incredibly enlightening and energizing. This has all sorts of implications I think for how we talk about the architecture of space or work or care.

Manual Labours: *What is your experience or lack of experience of the staff room? What resources do you have access to for rest, informal meetings, for self and collective care at work?*

Effy Harle: *I can think of two examples of my experience of the staffroom. The first is connected to my work at this fancy restaurant in London, who have multiple restaurants across London and the country. It is impossible for them to physically bring all their workers together because we are in different spaces. **Even within one restaurant it would be impossible to have everyone in the same room at the same time. So, they have this online space which is rather similar to Facebook.** They use it to disseminate information and staff use it as a social space. My experience of this online staffroom was rather positive up until COVID-19 hit. It was **a fun way of engaging with co-workers** and I felt like it was quite an accessible way of engaging because you could switch it on and off, and you decided when you wanted to engage and when you didn't. I think that aspect of it changed during Lockdown and now it's morphed into this weird thing where you get all of the essential information about how we're going to go back to work – the health and safety measurements that they're going to take etcetera. So, things that are really important are now all communicated through this platform and so **engaging with this platform has become compulsory. It's become part of my job to read the posts, to press the "I've read it button," and it's really frustrating that they've hijacked their own staffroom.**

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Maybe it was naive to ever think that this was going to be just a nice social space. I'm also just really frustrated with this **added-on work** *to a job where I'm paid by the hour for the time I actually spend at the job. So, I guess a good example has morphed into a bad example.*

The second example is on the contrary, very much a physical space. There's a company in Nottingham called Rocket Scenery. They fabricate scenery for theatre productions. I worked there for a very short amount of time, but I really remember the experience of the staffroom. It was this amazing thing. You would start working at 9am, then around 11am **you would have breakfast together.** *There was someone at this place paid to make food for the staff. So, at the beginning of the day you decided whether you wanted to eat at work or not. It was a cheap way of getting food as well. You would get breakfast, and then at the lunch break you would get a cooked meal. All of this is happening in the same staffroom/kitchen. There was also a lot of board games and cards and playing going on in breaks. So that was quite shocking to me. I was like, okay, so it can be like this,* **this is really fun! So that's a really positive example of how you can create a community around work.**

Jos Boys: *The staffroom immediately raises questions for me about* **what kinds of care we're talking about.** *What it does allow and what it doesn't allow. I work with a lot of disabled artists who literally don't get access to staffroom spaces.* **Many people are not getting in the door of the staffroom.** *So, I find the notion of a staffroom quite complex. At UCL [University College London] where I work, we have a staffroom which I really dislike because it's a kind of gentlemen's club. It is a place where a particular type of academic goes so they don't have to mix with students, which is what they would have to do in most of the canteens. The staffroom in the university context and the academic context, is therefore* **also about other kinds of divisions.** *Disordinary Architecture has been going since 2008 and one of the things it's revealed is just how many disabled students and staff there are in academic settings. If you can pass with an impairment, then a lot of people do. I can't believe for example, how many visually impaired architecture students I've met, but* **there is often no space for them.** *And in the workplace organizing the space to talk about access and differential needs often places disability somewhere completely different. So, the staffroom is complex for me. One of the things that I really like about Disordinary Architecture is how* **we increasingly make spaces that are as accessible as possible.** *That means meetings will always have* **sofas where people can lie down, they will have a range of different chairs, they will have a range of different ways to sit**

*together so that, for example, Deaf people signing can sit in a semicircle. So, the space is literally transformed by **enabling people to be themselves** in that space and **not by pretending to be able bodied and be able to sit up at a chair or eat particular sorts of food**. In this context, you start to have a conversation where one person is lying down, then actually you find other people start to take much more comfortable positions, **that is in itself a form of caring**.*

*Also, because we're a national organization, artists we work with live all over the country, which means that we often meet along the Euston road, in London as a lot of the mainline stations are grouped on it. There are also a lot of public buildings located there. They are very definitely Disordinary Architecture's staffroom in a distributed way. There's the Quaker Meeting house, which has a particular sort of atmosphere which is very easy to **sit in for long periods of time very quietly**. There is the Wellcome building, which is very lively, but has a whole range of spaces. So that I would say **these spaces are our office and our staffroom**.*

Manual Labours: *We've found in a previous stage of our research when we were exploring what it feels like to complain or not be able to complain at work. T**he extreme pressure to perform wellness**, and how overpowering and normalized this ableism is in so many workplaces and social situations. **There are all these issues around the pressure and expectation to perform healthy, productive bodies and the critical need for finding out how we articulate our unhealthy relationship to work?***

Jos Boys: *There was a whole period of time in the disability sector where people like Tom Shakespeare were arguing for **using the word help rather than care**, **because care has knotted into it a notion that you're either cared for, or you do the caring**, **there's a kind of active-passive relationship assumed. Care has this binary opposition, which is all centred around the idea of the able bodied, independent, productive body.** Ideas that create pressures that are really bad, toxic for everybody. (There needs to be) a shift away from the (care binary) as you're either cared for, or you care about somebody. **Able bodied people do often fall into an idea that 'disabled people need caring for' model.** So even if they themselves are actually very politically motivated they may still default to this perspective and binary r**ather than the notion of care as a collective and interdependent activity**, that we are all responsible for. This is how I see you putting forward how Manual Labours wants to think about care.*

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*There is a whole set of normalized expectations (that we can call ableism) that not only pressure able bodied people to be as you say, fit and healthy people but really **perpetuate discrimination against people who literally can't perform that model, or do perform it, but they damage their own health in the process.***

Critical Voices in the Staffroom

In this section we reflect on a number of issues raised in the extract above structured around three tensions or dualities experienced in the staffroom: (1) the blurring of work and non-work and how this plays out through office architecture and co-option of staff gathering and resting spaces; (2) the ways in which staffrooms reproduce experiences of both fitting and misfitting through their design for normative bodies rather than difference; (3) the staffroom as a contested site of neoliberal self-care and also a result of hard won trade union battles for improved working conditions. We conclude with a reflection on the extent to which staffrooms, in the context of universities and other work contexts, could be pre-figurative, imaginary spaces for reflecting and organizing.

The format of the extract from the podcast foregrounds the voices of two people in dialogue, referring to their personal and professional experiences in architecture, academia, education, art and design to respond to questions about the staffroom. At the core of our practice-based work is a situated and discursive methodology, built around creating platforms for dialogue and exchange, particularly between individuals or groups who have never met before. In what follows, we bring the embodied, academic, architectural and artistic knowledge that Harle and Boys share of the physical and virtual staffroom in dialogue with other writers, academic research and critical reflection to help deepen and expand our exploration into the concepts, histories and architectures of the staffroom.

Staffrooms at/as Work

The staffroom is a site of social reproduction where both work and non-work take place. Care and rest can become part of a number of other work activities. Harle tells us about a more "fun" approach to the staff room she experienced where staff eat breakfast and dinner together. The kitchen becomes an extension of the office where the separation between work and non-work morphs further and interaction between colleagues is encouraged. Eating together and playing board games as work-sanctioned activities (paid for by work and on company time) are symptoms of those work/non-work blurring of boundaries spatially and temporally in the workplace. Rather than purpose built and designed physical spaces, the staffroom becomes a temporal occasion for recovery, recuperation and refueling where the flagging body is brought back to life, en route to the next meeting, or as seems to be increasingly the case, grabbing a bite to eat while the camera is turned off during a meeting.

This is also touched upon by Boys who refers to the various institutional cafes along the Euston Road as "our office and our staffroom," where they can "sit in for long periods of time very quietly," indicating how the informality of the cafe is also becoming a site of work and where the activity of eating and nourishment is entwined within the work meeting or task.

The incorporation of care at work has been explored from different perspectives by researchers in a number fields, such as positive psychology, organizational psychology, interior architecture and the sociology of work and post-work. Our research draws on these different approaches, but is aligned with a critical, post-work imaginary that explores the historical, political and economic backdrop to the rise and fall of the staffroom. Through research methods such as the Podcast, the aim was to create space for staffroom stories to be shared so as to collectively and anecdotally find out more about the expectations, implications, privileges and pitfalls of opportunities of not working whilst at work today.

In its beginnings the staffroom was a space conceived and adapted within the logics of a waged based society, and has historically been designed for employees in physical workplaces. Erik Sundstrom and Mary Graehl Sundstrom in 1986, for example, were discussing the benefits of having space for staff to socialize and rest from a perspective of wellbeing and the mental health of staff describing how, "The morale of these office workers improved noticeably after they began to gather in the room frequented by other employees."[13] This is supported more recently by Paul Keedwell who describes how, "The amount of personal space available for work and storage has been identified as the most important influence over workplace satisfaction."[14] Within the current context of a growing gig-based economy, and during this past year of working during a pandemic, the historical trajectory of the physical staffroom might seem somewhat of an outdated concept.

Harle shares with us her experience of an online staffroom during the pandemic and describes how this staffroom shifted from starting out as an informal space for staff to meet to a more formal space where management distributed information alerts and where her engagement had become compulsory, stating, "management have hijacked the staffroom." The staffroom is often no longer only a physical space and source of work satisfaction and improved morale, but rather a virtual space that becomes an extension of the physical workplace and a platform to facilitate different work activities outside of paid time. Rather than a space where informal, unplanned gatherings might occur, this digital space is surveilled where every click and form of engagement becomes archived for managers and work colleagues to log. This virtual staffroom, once a "side" space possible for connection between workers has been re-purposed by management who then determine the content and terms of engagement in that space. This points to a gap that now

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exists for workers in this particular place of work, and the importance of informal, improvised, perhaps hidden areas for workers to rest, chat, complain and plot, that are not under the watchful eye of one's manager.[15] These kinds of spaces are perhaps more difficult to secure if they are organized through workplace online platforms which can be more easily monitored.

A sibling to the virtual staffroom, might be the use of the open-plan office as an expanded staffroom where you are meant to take "breaks," "socialize" and eat lunch. Developed in the late 1960s, the open office "was designed to reduce error and increase efficiency by constantly adjusting the office apparatus."[16] Rather than a work environment that reflected the workplace hierarchy, the open office was conceived around the notion that, "Work relationships are not to be understood in terms of administrative departmental organisation, nor in terms of rank and status, but only as matters of communication flow."[17] Similarly to the online staffroom, the open plan office is designed for speed and efficiency of communication, which you are expected to participate in. The terms of engagement with online and open plan offices are often implicit: you must work hard, but also look like you are having a good time, you must engage in conversation with other staff but not too much. While the open plan office as expanded staffroom means that it might be easier to informally meet others, these meetings are also watched by colleagues and management, a dual tension between comradeship and control encircles this space.

What the example of the online staffroom, the open plan office and Boys's distributed staffroom along the cafes of Euston Road speak to is the lack of defined physical staffroom within the workplace, and indeed, the loss of the fixed workplace altogether.[18] The wider disappearance of the staffroom is something we too have experienced in our own university and cultural workplaces as well as through our research with workers in call centers and other cultural and educational organizations.[19] *The Global Staffroom Podcast* conversations with educators and care workers told stories of how the meeting room, where they used to take a lunch or coffee break, has been repurposed to another office space, hired out for extra income, or in the case of one university turned into a commercial bar for staff. The curtailing of the concept of the staffroom and eroding of the space it occupies can also be seen in building policy for schools. The Education (School Premises) Regulations in England was amended in 2012 to not have to include a space for teachers and staff to work and socialize.[20] This shift has received strong criticism and according to Kevin Courtney, Joint General Secretary of the National Education Union, no staffroom or refuge to go to during work hours is now a common complaint from staff. This has other underlying benefits for management, as Courtney attests, "While some schools are desperate for space, we suspect that some school managements just don't want teachers talking together."[21] Within the

Podcast Boys refers to her university staffroom as an exclusive "gentleman's club," "where a particular type of academic goes so they don't have to mix with students." Where staffrooms do exist then, in the university context they can represent other kinds of divisions, between workers as well as between students and staff.

The removal of spaces of congregation and discussion was also a feature of our discussion with architect, Stephanie Webs of Caruso St. John during the previous phase of our research.[22] When designing the art space, Nottingham Contemporary, Webs describes how the original design was for a much smaller staff group than currently works there. Communal space for staff has since had to be rented out or booked for education events due to the austerity measures around public funding post the 2008 crash.[23] Unlike the earlier emphasis on greater communication between workers in an open-plan office, in examples from the public sector: galleries, schools and universities, spaces for communication between colleagues is reduced through the different staffing and economic pressures on the organization. The consequence of this is no longer seen as a roadblock to worker efficiency, rather reducing collegial relations is perceived as a benefit to management.

Designing for Normativity and Difference

As discussed in the previous section, the lack of a staffroom assumes working bodies do not need to rest (or they could do this at their desks). If these facilities are formally available, then they are often designed with certain usages and bodies in mind. In this section we explore how the staffroom is both welcoming and a refuge for some whilst simultaneously being an exclusionary space for others. Boys refers to how spaces are "designed for normal people" and this also applies to those spaces of rest at work, such as the kitchen or staffroom. With reference to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Boys relates the sense of fitting and misfitting to the staffroom.[24] She refers to the work of the feminist architecture collective Matrix, of which she was a member, who worked to point out the unsayable aspects of gender inequality in architecture, and their sense of misfitting in different built environments. She asked who is welcomed in those spaces and who is valued? Being welcomed implies an invitation into that space, but who does the inviting and what are the conditions of entry? These might be contractual arrangements, or visible within the physical architecture, but also operate via the unseen, or more specifically what architect and educator Marie-Louise Richards terms, 'hyper-visible' invisibility of architecture and spatial design which creates exclusions.[25] For example, a staffroom might be physically inaccessible for a wheelchair user, and then in addition their design (e.g., open plan, lighting, furniture, messages on the walls, the behavior of those using these spaces, even an informal atmosphere), might be a reason not to enter as it feels uncomfortable, and designed without a diversity of users and needs in mind.

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Harle refers to the anxiety produced by precarious contracts, and how these working conditions with vast differential protection and security for workers are also reflected in the architectures the staff use, have access to or are excluded from. Exclusions occur not only as a way of reinforcing hierarchies within staff of an organization but also at the level of bodies and feelings. Feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, pain and discomfort are not necessarily welcome in these staffroom spaces as they disrupt the path to wellness and productivity. This sense of exclusion from the very spaces where people are allowed to rest and unwind, can, as Harle and Boys point out, increase a sense of anxiety at work. Boys refers to ways in which Disordinary Architecture are promoting designing spaces where people can "be themselves," implying a time and space for coworkers to drop the performance that their work might expect, where we can be vulnerable, either alone or with trusted colleagues, where we can let our insecurities, doubts, illnesses, and access needs be aired. This approach challenges the reproduction of able-normative spatial design and explores what accessibility can mean for different people in different situations.

The architectures and histories of the staffroom are underpinned by a depth of research and discourse around space and its gendered, racialized and able-normative structuring that Michelle Murphy argues in turn reproduces and affects the bodies, behaviors and expectations that are shaped within their walls.[26] Murphy's work on sick buildings and sick bodies explores the spatial and material aspects of work's toxicities, in which hierarchies based on gender in particular are seen not only by management but "built into the air conditioning, and paper trails of office buildings."[27] Murphy's work enables us to discuss and critique the racialized and gendered toxicity of the contemporary workplace building on what Marie-Louise Richards and Boys identify as invisibilized social normative architectures. This can be felt through the material organization of contemporary office materials and logistics that continue to reproduce structural inequality within spaces such as the university. This is reflected in, for example, the fact architecture courses are still dominated by people who are white and middle class.[28] Another university-worker on another podcast episode, remarks on the social architecture that reproduces uncaring and excluding spaces of education: "nothing prepares me for the pace and level of activity in demand within the university context. So your capacity to care for coworkers is challenged by the demand of the institution and the subsequent demand you create on other people. And I found [this] very difficult at different times."[29] This incapacity to care for oneself and one's coworkers due to the pressures of university work and study, is not necessarily going to be resolved by having a staffroom, particularly one rooted in existing gendered, racialized and able-normative exclusions. Instead, the staffroom becomes a site through which to see to these structural inequalities and organize to challenge them.

A long line of feminist architecture practice including Peg Rawes, Katie Lloyd-Thomas, Jane Rendell and Boys herself, have worked to raise the discussion around the gendered architecturing of space since the 1970s that designs buildings with particular bodies in mind. As Diane Agrest points out, the fundamental patriarchal foundation of architecture has meant that, "Woman not only has been displaced/replaced at a general social level throughout the history of architecture, but more specifically at the level of body and architecture."[30] The structuring of space to benefit some bodies at the exclusion of others, ties into the argument made by Leopold Lambert within the journal *The Funambulist*, in which architecture is critiqued as a "machine engaging processes of normitization"[31] Lambert points to books such as Ernst Neufert, *Architects' Data*, which "establishes a rationalization of the human (male) body and its direct built environment (furniture, street, building etc.) so that the latter perfectly adapts to the former."[32] While the discussion around gender and architecture has been raised and features in many architectural courses, the discourse around race and architecture has, argues Marie-Loiuse Richards, been purposefully obscured in order to uphold the hegemony of whiteness. As she writes;

> Based on the assumption that what constitutes whiteness is that which is normal and neutral, considered to be the universal, it assigns structural advantages allowing cultural norms and practices of whiteness to go unnamed and unquestioned. This makes whiteness both invisible and hyper-visible, existing everywhere and nowhere, on the individual body (through phenotype) and beyond the corporeal simultaneously.[33]

Richards draws on the work of Mabel O. Wilson[34] to argue that the lack of work architectural practice has done to engage with questions of race is in part attributed to modern architecture's foundations built on the virtues of whiteness. Richards calls for close scrutiny of the unseen or the invisible as a way to interrogate and examine spaces in which race occupies that absence. She asks: "Can the politics, poetics and affects of the unseen (or perhaps not seen) be included in an architectural practice?"[35] In tandem with Boys' argument Richards unpacks the expectations, character traits and behavior of this "norm" revealing the racist, able-normative and gendered construction of the built environment.

Important questions of the staffroom's role in the reproduction of normativity have been discussed in our Podcast in terms of race, gender and disability. In an episode with Henry Chango Lopez, president of the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain, he shared how Goldsmiths University workers talked of the work canteen as a space of exclusion.[36] In line with Harle's argument on worker status, here outsourced staff working in security at the university were treated as second class

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employees and while they did have the right to enter the work canteen there was an unwritten rule that they were not welcome there. The differing contracts in one workplace impacts who the staffroom is for and who is entitled to enter and have the chance to take care of themselves (Figure 3). Furthermore, the way those contracts are decided is entwined with the reproduction of racist hierarchies or as Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes is part of the foundation of racial capitalism,[37] in which the majority of those occupying precarious jobs, or on lower-pay being held by people of color or those with migration backgrounds.[38]

Space to Care at Work

In the previous section we drew on Harle and Boys's conversation to explore the tensions between the staffroom as accessible to some and exclusionary to others. In this final section we go back to the discourses of our symbolic staffroom as a site of both worker control and liberation. We might group some of the different approaches to the staffroom under the broad definition of space to care at work which allows us to bring in other voices from the fields of feminist theory, social reproduction theory, work and wellness.

Throughout history, care at work has been capitalized and instrumentalized from factories like the UK's Bournville factory known for their pioneering schemes of employee welfare to the offices of Google and Facebook where the staff's social reproductive needs, even including the freezing of workers eggs, is catered for.[39] Measuring worker productivity and efficiency through levels of fatigue, workplace accidents,
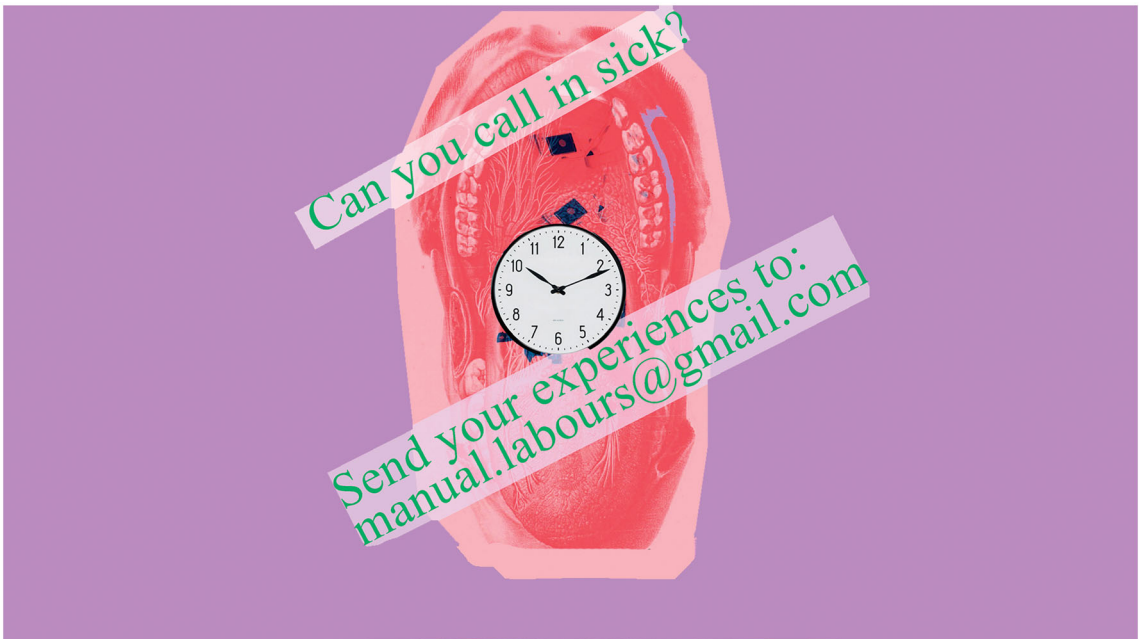

Figure 3
Manual Labours, *Can you call in sick?*, Collage. 2020. Courtesy of Manual Labors.

staff turnover and absences[40] is knotted together with trade union campaigning for safer and more humane working conditions.[41] The campaigning work of the IWGB, for example, has highlighted the inequality of access to spaces to eat and rest at work. They found some cleaners in universities, for example, were eating in the cupboards where the chemicals are as they didn't have access to canteens or other spaces to eat.[42] These demands from both workers and managers, culminate in the need for a physical staffroom where workers can take a break, have lunch and reboot ready for the next period of working.

The different approaches to the staffroom, whether it exists in a physical or virtual form, whether it is accessible for all employees or not, can tell us a lot about the different values and ethos around what work, bodies and productivity is valued and supported at the expense of others, in different sites of work. While we have outlined the inaccessibility and spatial inequality in relation to the staffroom, artist Romily Alice Walden points to concerns around how these exclusions are reproduced in the university through educational materials, length of classes and work demands. In another of our podcast episodes, Walden refers to access needs in relation to universities and how their ongoing requests to provide online materials, and remote access to conferences and teaching materials have in the past been flat out refused. Now these requests "become instantly possible because of Covid-19". They state how "this pandemic has definitely highlighted the ways that when people say that they don't have the money for something, it really often just means that they're not prioritizing it."[43] Walden is not convinced these changes will translate post Covid-19 into permanent provisions or the better prioritizing of the diverse access needs of university students and workers more generally, particularly if there is no productivity gain for management.

The site of the staffroom and broader understanding of care at work is one of entanglement, a space and activity fraught with expectations and purpose from both management and worker perspectives. There is a duality to the staffroom in which it can be both a space of refuge and rest and a space of exclusion and further work. For those who have the time and space to rest at work, their activities may be surveilled and encouraged based on its benefits to worker productivity. These two radically different discourses for defending spaces for rest at work can often sit next to each other in close proximity (Figure 4).

Maddalena Fragnito in another of our podcasts discusses how the co-option of care is seen at the level of language:

> Care is a word subjected to the rules of capital and patriarchy. What we have seen these last months – the mode and the ethic of care that we have listened to and has been represented – is

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care in the worst way. The concept of care as a top-down care. I would say this is the care for capital accumulation.[44]

Boys also brings in an important reflection on the term care from a disability perspective. Care can produce a binary meaning there are those deemed in need of care and those that do the caring. Boys, along with The Care Collective[45] and Romily Alice Walden promote an understanding of care as a political interdependent relation. We are all in need of care and capable of caring for others, whether that be through physical tasks, or through emotional work. Care work is often invisibilized or marginalized in the way care gets taken up and organized through the welfare system. Allocating some people as dependent and others as capable is part of an ableist rhetoric and stereotyping that demonizes people with disabilities as unproductive and unable to contribute to society. As a way to acknowledge the ambivalent, entangled concept of care, perhaps positioning the staffroom as a site of uncare, unproductivity and unwork could also help us critique the normative ideas of wellbeing, rest and care that promote ableism and are so easily capitalized as work.

A way forward is for us to uncouple care from rest and, following the words of Fragnito, "keep rest and care as two separate things."[46] Fragnito suggests it is important to understand care as work and therefore rest should also involve rest from caring. Rest is therefore only possible if one has time and space to be unproductive.[47] This raises the
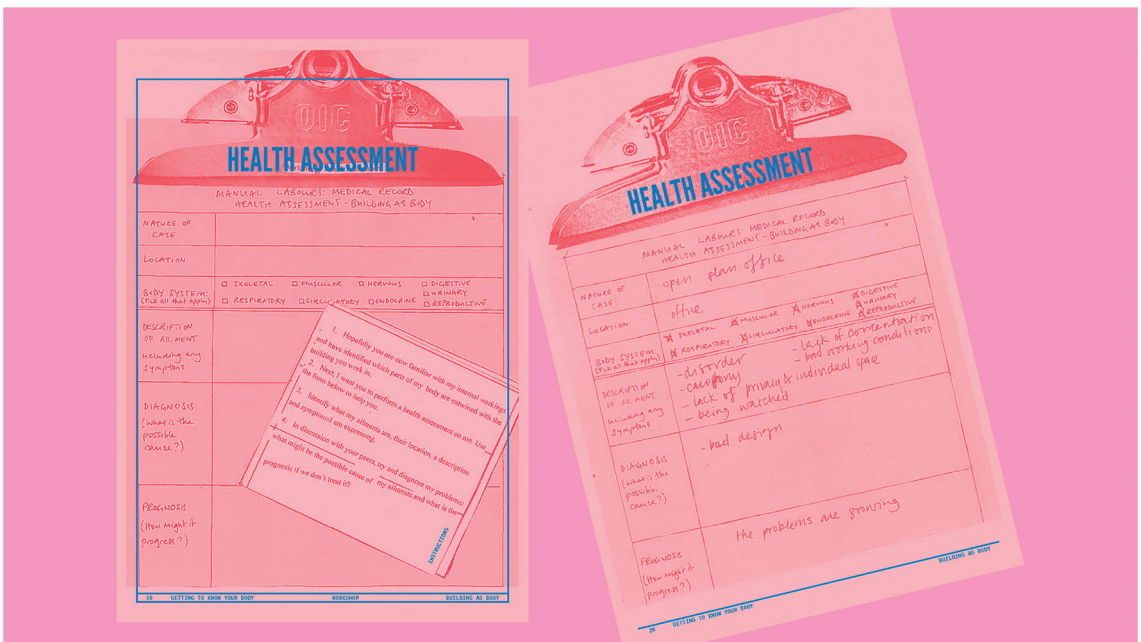

Figure 4
Manual Labours, *Health Assessment Workshop,* Worksheet, in *Manual Labours Manual #4 Building as Body*, 2018. Courtesy of Manual Labours.

importance of the interdependent conditions of unproductivity – who/ what enables you to rest? These infrastructures of care, that enable some to not work are heavily gendered, racialized and ableist. The staffroom is a space where the necessary work of self and collective care takes place, but is also a site for us to repurpose and re-center that care on an "egalitarian basis."[48]

Conclusions/Staffroom Imaginaries

While we have focused on the destructive, violent and oppressive role of the staffroom in reproducing hierarchy and exclusion, we have also found through this podcast episode and the broader podcast series, that the staffroom also holds the potential for meeting, gathering and organizing resistance against these exclusions.[49] We would like to argue that with all its limits, the staffroom also holds promise as a space for collectively, creativity, care and transgression.

Learning from the work of Harle and Boys, our own work experiences, and many others who have been part of *The Global Staffroom Podcasts* we are aware that the use of the concept of the staffroom is in danger of privileging and foregrounding the worker and the workplace as fixed identities and spaces. Such imagined spaces are susceptible to privileging whiteness, hetero-patriarchy and able-normativity. We have learnt that care in and as work is unevenly distributed and cannot be disentangled from structural racism and inequality. Care becomes the responsibility of individual workers who, perhaps unwelcome in the staffroom or without an accessible place to go, must take isolated breaks in the toilet or work through hunger and pain.

Yet, without shared space to be able to meet, socialize and share work experience with others, we found that very few people feel able to complain about oppressive working conditions. This can have serious physical and emotional repercussions. It can lead to a lot of what we call "uncomplaining bodies"[50] – bodies that struggle with debilitating symptoms for having to perform a healthy body and happy self by internalizing and stifling complaints.

We want to invoke the staffroom as a transformative space that can break free of its limitations to a single space of work. An intersectional analysis of the staffroom, as a microcosm of working conditions, is needed, where we can make connections across sectors, and across workplaces, make interventions, adaptations and recommendations for social, spatial and material justice. In the university context, this means creating time and space for cleaners, security guards, students, administrators and academics to meet, share experiences and organize together.

To help us in this work of fleshing out a transformative staffroom we are collecting oral histories of the staffroom; stories of how we care for ourselves and others at work and what kind of spaces we have to do this. We have pointed out through the work of Marie-Louise Richards the

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importance of paying close attention to the unseen operations of space upon different individuals and the importance of a diversity of voices in contributing to the production of a transformative staffroom, one that accommodates informal, unplanned and unseen meetings and discussions. We want to continue to learn from these histories in order to grow a staffroom for the politicization of care that centers aching, exhausted bodies and critiques and dismantles the white supremacy within the concept of the staffroom, and its entwinement with a fixed workplace and paid worker.

Harle refers to her interest in a post-work imaginary[51] and the possibilities beyond wage labor. This brings us to the question of what role the staff room plays in this post-work imaginary? While the staffroom is both a consequence of the world of waged labor, and wrapped up in the history of capitalism, it is also a site of refusal, rethinking and re-imaging physical and emotional relationships to work. As Jane Rendell has explored, how we misuse space, and the functions it has been designed with is a practice of undoing architecture.[52] The staffroom can be seen as both a microcosm of wage relations and a temporary escape from these dynamics and embodied exploitations. It is playing with these spaces, intervening into them, such as Boys' coworkers lying on the floor, which can shift these dynamics, the permitted bodies that use these spaces and the kinds of care and conversations that can occur in them.

Manual Labours (Sophie Hope and Jenny Richards) is a practice-based research body exploring physical and emotional relationships to work. Since 2013 we have carried out research with workers in different sectors, including UK based call center workers, people working with complaints, commuters and cultural workers. Our methods include workshops, performances, reading groups, film screenings, writing collaging, and artists commissions. Each phase of the research culminates in a published manual, which you can download from our website at www.manuallabours.co.uk

Sophie Hope is a lecturer and practice-based researcher at Birkbeck, University of London in the Film, Media and Cultural Studies Department. Her work is often developed with others through the format of devised workshops exploring subjects such as art and politics in the year 1984, physical and emotional experiences of immaterial work, stories people tell about socially engaged art commissions and the ethics of employability in the creative industries. Recent projects include: *Meanwhile in an Abandoned Warehouse with Owen Kelly*, *1984 Dinners*, *Manual Labours* (with Jenny Richards), *Social Art Map* and *Cards on the Table*.

Jenny Richards' research focuses on the politics of work, health and the body, often developed through collaborative and collective practice. She is

a doctoral candidate on the KTD programme at Konstfack and KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. Her project 'Against the Outsourced Body' examines the effect and resistance to the expansion of commercialized, individualized and outsourced care. She was previously co-director of Konsthall C, Stockholm where together with Anna Ahlstrand and Jens Strandberg they developed *Home Works*, an exhibition programme exploring the politics of domestic work and the home. *Manual Labours*, initiated in 2012 is an ongoing collaborative research project with Sophie Hope investigating physical relationship to work.

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Acknowledgements

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