

~~***Negotiating Domesticity: Gendered Perspectives on Art, Home and Labour***~~

~~***Art vs Domestic: Negotiations***~~

Not at Home: Negotiating Perceptions on Art, Labour and Domestic

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Introduction:*Art maintains a certain anxiety about the home*

Whenever I mentioned that I am writing a paper on art and negotiating domesticity, I have been given similar examples of art engaged with issues commonly associated with home (namely memory, displacement, alienation or family relationships) or of anyone using traditional craft methods.

This paper is not about such practices. It is about negotiating myths such as modernist perception of private vs. public and about moving on from these binary discussions. It focuses on female artists, not because such negotiations belong to the sphere of feminine, or because they featured strongly on the past feminist agendas, but rather due to the fact that these artists have moved onto new perspectives on art/society/politics using the platform of the domestic.

When discussing the domestic, it is important to deal with the myths derived from high modernism and its negation of domesticity. Domestic sphere, namely its activities, objects and interests became associated with political conservatism, intellectual apathy and aesthetic traditionalism.¹ Walter Benjamin furthered this perception in his writings by separating the type of experience offered by private space of bourgeois interior (interiorised impressions of 'Erfahrung'), as opposed to modern street (the effect of shock in 'Erlebnis').² Artists responded through denial of decoration in favour of ascetic focus on art. Architects, such as Adolf Loos or Le Corbusier, put forward designs that replaced the desire for domestic comfort with 'machines for living'³

The postmodern era has started re-evaluating the home through two different approaches, treating the domestic as a site of ongoing repression (postmodernism of reaction) but also as space of rising autonomy and empowerment (postmodernism of resistance).⁴ How can therefore the contemporary artist relate to the home?

¹ The division between public and private space started already in the nineteenth century and only became more pronounced during modernism. As Hilde Heynen explains in her introductory essay: 'the term [domesticity] refers to a whole set of ideas that developed in reaction to the division between work and home'. See *Negotiating domesticity: spatial productions of gender in modern architecture* (eds.) Hilde Heynen and Gülsüm Baydar (London: Routledge, 2005), 7.

² Matthew Wickman 'Stevenson, Benjamin, and the Decay of Experience', *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, Issue 2 Spring/Summer (2007).

³ Le Corbusier set down his radical ideas his 1923 manifesto *Vers Une Architecture* ('Towards a New Architecture'). 'A house', Le Corbusier announced, 'is a machine for living in.'

⁴ *Not at home: the suppression of domesticity in modern art and architecture* (ed.) Christopher Reed (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 257.

Part One:

Domestic vs. Institution

In 2003 a Dublin show *Superbia* was funded through a council regeneration programme to develop contemporary art that would enrich the lives of local communities. The curators responded to the social impact of the Irish construction boom that led to reframing home as a commodity. In *Superbia* an ordinary family home becomes a gallery. The familiarity of domestic environment is challenged and the meaning of home reframed, private-domestic is transformed into public-receptive. Visitors are made up from local neighbours as well as typical art viewers. Domestic here is a challenge to the art institution and the concept of the 'white cube'.⁵



Figure 1 *Superbia*, The Coultry Estate , Ballymun Road. Dublin, 2003

This challenge could be analysed through the essay of Boris Groys 'The Logic of Equal Aesthetic Rights', who poses a question why one would need an intermediary of an art system, curators and art critics to appreciate art.⁶ However, Groys promptly reminds us that the museum strength is in ability to 'resist the dictatorship of contemporary taste'. The mass media (and other unmediated channels) the sell an illusion of the new: different, innovative, challenging and authentic. The function of institution, according to Groys, is to re-assess 'the fundamental aesthetic equality of all the images in a historically given context'.

In response to this traditional argument, one could propose that the site of *Superbia* has become a 'domestic third space' that is positioned between the art world and the 'everyday'. Geographer Edward Soja propositions the concept of 'thirdspace' as another space where the conventional dualism can be broken and projected.⁷ Thirdspace is neither inherently positive nor negative, but rather that of chaotic experience; it is where difference is achieved through a subversion of the existing power structures. This is what is at the core of *Superbia* exhibition: a real space that provides a bridging between the art institution and the open market.

⁵ Jane Humphries 'Crossing the Threshold: the domestic house/home as a site for contemporary Irish art installations', paper presented at 1st Global Conference: Space and Place. Exploring the global issues, Oxford, September (2011).

⁶ Groys, Boris, 'The Logic of Equal Aesthetic Rights' in *Art power*, Boris Groys (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2008), 18.

⁷ Soja appropriates and expands on the idea of 'trialectics of spatiality' by the French theorist (1) *spatial practice* (material or functional space); (2) *representation of space* (conceived space of signs, codes and concepts); and (3) *representational space* (lived space of everyday experience). See *Gender Space Architecture: an Interdisciplinary Introduction* (eds.) Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 103. This in-between space, borderline could be also discussed as spaces of transition (Bhabha), deterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari), counter-hegemony (Gramsci), diaspora (Said), the Matrixial (Ettinger) among others. See Fetson Andersen Kalua 'Collapse of Certainty: Contextualizing liminality in Botswana fiction and reportage', PhD Thesis submitted at University of Africa, November (2007).

Do you also bring your work home?

It is not necessary to even force the overlap nowadays. The emphasis of Post-Fordist economy on the immaterial production of information and services, combined with increased mobility and new technologies created ever more precarious conditions for working and living. In particular, a spatial reorganization of home office and the domestication of work through online media create a requirement for constant flexibility and a schizophrenic condition of presence/ remoteness. There is a move from 'spatialized time' where the logic of the place dictates the activity (office/work, library/reading) to 'temporalized space' where the activity defines the place (train/temporary workstation, café/internet site). These 'other' temporary transitional places give rise to new possibilities and home can be viewed as a space to negotiate a better future.⁸

This is the opportunity taken in a video installation *Three Performances (After Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic, and Bonnie Sherk)* by Diane Borsato. The artist re-enacts the famous performances in the setting of her own apartment. The original works used wild animals and there was a danger element to them.⁹ Borsato substitutes the animals for her cat and domesticates the somewhat heroic acts. The key aspect here is not the fact that an art work is performed in a domestic space, but rather that iconic works of art are re-appropriated through the domestic environment. These works are given a new critical perspective and are brought back refreshed to the audience that might only be familiar with historical records of these works.



Figure 2 Diane Borsato, *Three Performances (After Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic, and Bonnie Sherk)*, Performances for video / 3-channel installation, Toronto, 2008.

The location and humour of the performances subverts the traditional systems without diminishing the value of original works. Being filmed in her private space and then shown publicly in a gallery, these video works thrive on the existence of both spaces. This action also remaps Diane Borsato's home, and shifts the balance of privacy towards the public. In words of Anthony Vidler, 'private space is revealed as infinitely public, private rituals publicized' and 'connected to the public matrix'.¹⁰

⁸ In 1972 Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro initiated a project *Womanhouse* where a group of female artists where allocated a space within a rundown house. These works opened up a pathway to future discussions where focus moves away from the binary opposites of private/public and male/female. See *Not at home: the suppression of domesticity in modern art and architecture* (ed.) Reed (1996), 254.

⁹ In Joseph Beuys' performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) the artist, armed only in a large felt blanket and a shepherd's crook, lived in a gallery space with a coyote. Marina Abramovic in her series *Dragonheads* (1990-1992) was sitting motionless in a ring of ice with snakes circling around her. For her performance *Public Lunch* (1971) Bonnie Sherk took her lunch at the San Francisco Zoo in a cage next to the lion and tigers feeding and tearing at their raw meat. See Bridget Moser 'Working from Home: Acts of Domestication in Diane Borsato's *Three Performances*' *Concordia Undergraduate Journal of Art History* Vol. 5 (2009).

¹⁰ Anthony Vidler 'Homes for Cyborgs' in *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (ed.) Christopher Reed (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 178.

Part Two:

Home vs. Mobility

The anthropologist Shirley Ardener proposes that space and behaviour are interlinked – so called multidimensional ‘social maps’ are formed of structural relationships, hierarchies and patterns etc.¹¹ Increased physical mobility renders these maps changeable and temporal.¹²

Mobility and ‘social maps’ are at the core of the practice of Andrea Zittel. Zittel combines art with industrial design to provide service. She created for herself a corporate identity of *A-Z Administrative Services* that offers bespoke models of ‘life management’ to individuals.¹³ One of the concepts was a series *Carpet Furniture* designed to optimise a small living space and replace different furniture units. The carpet would normally hang on the wall and set down when needed to fulfil a specific activity like sleeping or eating. Ideally, the carpet could become the only hardware required to fulfil typical needs.



Figure 3 Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Carpet Furniture: Bed with 2 Nightstands, Small Desk and Chair, Chair with Table*, 1993.

This reduction of living concerns’ is a theme obsessively reconsidered in Zittel’s other works like *Living Units* (compact structure systems to facilitate living in small spaces), *Escape Vehicles* (capsules reminiscent of camper vans) or *Homestead Units* (cabins avoiding building permits of San Bernardino County). Zittel perceives her life as the perfect site for testing her ideas and her house performs both a function of home and laboratory. Domestic problems that require solutions lead to new works and her home becomes the site of ongoing performance. The work only becomes separated from the artist’s life through the corporate identity of *A to Z Administrative Service*.

Andrea Zittel finds it interesting what people do with her works once in their possession, what it reveals about their values. It is her intention to disrupt the relationship with the consumer system through empowering; she proposes that individuals should examine their own goals, talents and options, and then begin to invent new models or roles to fulfil own needs’.¹⁴ It is a question of a ‘citizen’ versus a ‘consumer’. Consumerism allows us to only choose from options presented but ‘we need to remember ... that there’s a whole other world of possibilities beyond what we’re being offered.’¹⁵

¹¹ *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps* (ed.) Shirley Ardener (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 12.

¹² Mobility is to a certain degree decided by the constraints of physical space but also by other factors such as race, age or gender. For example, whilst there might be social limitations enforced on the female mobility in certain cultures (e.g. Islamic), employed women in Western societies might be even more active than men due to extra obligation such as shopping or driving children. There is furthermore a tradition of restricting the spatial mobility of a female body through aspects of clothing (corsets, high heels), social and family obligation (care for child or parents) or reduced access to transport (discouragement to operate certain modes of transport). See *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps* (ed.) Shirley Ardener (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 21.

¹³ The concept of artist as designer has been explored by groups such as the Bauhaus, the Russian Constructivists and De Stijl. Zittel is inspired but also departs from these movements by working with contradictions and problems encountered in these works. See interview with Andrea Zittel by Benjamin Weil ‘Home is where the art is’, *Art Monthly* No. 181 (1994).

¹⁴ Stefano Basilico, ‘Andrea Zittel’, *Bombsite Bomb* 75, Spring (2001)..

¹⁵ Arty Nelson ‘Be your own guinea pig: Entering Andrea Zittel’s Critical Space’ *LA Weekly*, Vol. 29 No. 21 (2007).

Re-housing Undesirables

There is a need for more temporary solutions to the idea of home, especially one that addresses dislocation. Home-space or home-nonplace.¹⁶

Spread across the mediums of art, fashion and architecture are projects of the British artist Lucy Orta who aims to re-situate the body in space. The series *Refuge Wear* (1992-1999) would zip over the head to form a protective sack and was designed for use in shelters, railway stations and squats. Weather resistant and microporous fabric is supposed to mimic the property of the skin becoming architectural second skin.



Figure 4 Lucy Orta, *Refuge Wear*, 2011.

Orta's skin-like solutions go beyond the concept of unfixing architecture as they attempt to re-situate and re-house those that have been systematically excluded from cultural/economic/political infrastructures. Orta's works are 'a form of re-socialization'. Her garments re-instate the bodies that were marked as social outsiders; make them palpable, haptic and visible. They offer their wearers an opportunity for survival in an urban environment.¹⁷

Lucy Orta's community projects of shared garments are equally effective in their re-mapping social relations within public space. *Body Architecture – Collective Wear* connects individual *Refuge Wear* into a larger inhabitable structures (domes, cabins, foyers, tents) resembling a temporary family unit. This transformation is reversible and replaceable. Garments, though individual, can be removed and reattached, effectively creating mobile communities. These wearable shelters provide a proposition for public housing that is contingent and temporarily, specific to the situation, visible and individualized.

¹⁶ A non-place is 'a space devoid of the symbolic expressions of identity, relations and history: example include airports motorways, anonymous hotel rooms....' See Peter Dibers and Lars Strannegord 'Head Home' in *Living in motion: design and architecture for flexible dwelling* (eds.) Mathias Schwartz-Clauss and Alexander von Vegesack (Weil am Rhein: Vitra Design Museum, 2002), 245.

¹⁷ The concept of body-architecture was developed in late 60s and 70s (like David Greene's *Inflatable Suit*, 1968) and was aimed at dissolving the solidity and fixedness of the architectural wall. See Jennifer Johung, *Replacing home: from primordial hut to digital network in contemporary art* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 105-8.

Part Three:

Housework or Artwork

The other domestic sphere that has historically been removed from the power structures including art institutions is housework. Housework has not and is not really viewed as work (not regulated or contracted) but rather a repetition of ordinary and endless effort. It was important to Marxist politics as an example of labour requiring equal contract between the employer and employee. Then domestic work became modernised through space-improving ergonomics, labour-saving appliances and Taylorist work routine. Modernism saw it as liberation of the housewife while Socialism viewed it as an abolition of the wage. It is a tension that continues to persist today.¹⁸

Housework should be viewed as a political site similar to artistic work, where both seem to remain outside of the social relationship of value-labour. Both housework and artwork cannot be economically valorised as they do not really produce anything and therefore reject commodification of human activities. These parallels were drawn by conceptual artists in 60s and 70s who performed housework as art (resulting in works such as Marta Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*).

An architect Elisabeth Diller mimics such ideas in her architectural project *Bad Press*. A series of origami-like instructions are set out to fold and iron a number of shirts into useless structural forms. Ironing skill is not treated within the early feminist framework (housework as art), but is re-appropriated for a new (architectural) function and becomes a form of aesthetics of efficiency.¹⁹



Figure 5 Elisabeth Diller, *Bad Press: Dissident Housework Series*, 1993-1996. Custom ironed shirts, two single-channel videos. Dimensions variable.

¹⁸ Marina Vishmidt 'Self-Negating Labour: A Spasmodic Chronology of Domestic Unwork' in *The Grand Domestic Revolution Goes On*, edited by Binna Choi and Maiko Tanaka, Casco, Office for Art, Design and Theory in Utrecht and Bedford Press in London, 2010, 82.

¹⁹ Elisabeth Diller 'Bad Press' in *Gender Space Architecture: an Interdisciplinary Introduction* (eds.) Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 385-396.

'After the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?'²⁰

The housework is not a matter of the past. In high-technology sectors, over 90% of scientists and technologists are men. Working long hours in environments that require flexibility in response to organizational requests poses a question: who does the domestic labour?²¹ This is the question that is picked up by Mierle Lederman Ukeles.

The concept for Ukeles' work started when she became pregnant as an art student. Faced with impossibility to connect the new position with traditional art perception, Ukeles devised 'The Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969'. She defined herself as a mother, wife and artist who has responsibility for numerous activities maintaining domestic life and allowed herself an artistic freedom to decide what value these actions have. In her own words 'Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art.'²²

In 1973 Ukeles decided to carry out the cleaning works in the Hartford Museum (*Hartford Wash. Washing Tracks, Maintenance Outside* and *Hartford Wash. Washing Tracks, Maintenance Inside*). She spent eight hours on her hands and knees polishing, scrubbing and washing the entry steps and inside space of the gallery - a miniscule figure engaged in a futile attempt. Instead of a direct act to oppose the repression of an institution, it was a subversive action drawing attention to the work that is invisible and is made to stay invisible in order for the 'real' work of arts to be appreciated by the viewer. Through her action, the viewer becomes aware not only of the labour that maintains the pristine and timeless fantasy, but also of the countless workers that are providing it on a daily basis.



Figure 6 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation, 1978-80*. City-wide performance with 8,500 NYC Sanitation workers. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

What also differentiates the approach of Mierle Ukeles a directness her acts.²³ Afterwards, Ukeles self-appointed herself as a resident artist for The City of New York Sanitation Department. In *Touch Sanitation* (1979 – 1980), Ukeles spent 11 months following garbage trucks in every borough in New York and personally sought out and greeted each of the 8,500 sanitation workers with a salutation 'Thank you for keeping New York City alive.'²⁴ Mierle Ukeles' work presents us with some existential questions: How do we value different kinds of work in our society? and Which are the most important tasks to be taken care of?

²⁰ Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, 52.

²¹ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 104-5.

²² Mierle Lederman Ukeles 'Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969! Proposal for an Exhibition "Care"' (1969).

²³ I agree with Miwon Kwon it does not exist in more recent performative events like cooking by Rirkrit Tiravanija or sweeping by Glen Seator. These performances, apart from different historical context, seem to objectify the ordinary life in a gallery context; instead of bringing the 'everyday' closer they lead to its further alienation. See Miwon Kwon 'In Appreciation of Invisible Work: Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the Maintenance of the "White Cube". *Documents* No. 10, Fall (1997): 17.

²⁴ Max Andrews 'The Whole Truth' *Freeze* Issue 147, June-August (2007).

Part Four:

The Grand Project

In 2009, Casco – Office for Art, Design and Theory initiated a long-term research project to ‘question and challenge the very notion of social design’.²⁵ It was titled The Grand Domestic Revolution (GDR) after the 90s essay by an architectural historian Dolores Hayden.²⁶ Hayden aimed to challenge a division existing both physically between public and private domains, as well as financially between the domestic and political economies. She proposed a creation of new kind of spaces where these separations are addressed, including communal kitchens or housewives’ co-ops. Inspired by these methods GDR aims to investigate how re-framing of the domestic can drive change in local communities and the society at large.

GDR invited artists, designers, architects, theorist, union workers, local residents and activists to collaborate in a ‘living research’ that included residencies, workshops, publications, townhall meetings, commissions and a programme of exhibitions. Exhibitions (like the one in The Showroom, London last would reflect the vastness of the scope. Included in the show were historical paradigms like scanned copies from Mary Kelly’s 1975 catalogue ‘Women & Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry’, which flags up wage disparities between men and women working in a metal-box factory in Bermondsey and the domestic labour. There were also nods to the Occupy movement, and the exhibition picks apart the word ‘occupation’ to explore its related meanings as tenure of space as well as the labour that ensures that tenure. A ‘cooperative sitcom’ OUR AUTONOMOUS LIFE? followed the interpersonal relationships of a fictional group of squatters. A Dutch artist Matthijs de Bruijne collaborated with Domestic Workers Netherlands to create a Brechtian operetta of four parts, where the characters come together at the end of each narrative to sing about their concerns. There was also an extensive library and research of theorists and students.

Although GDR residency site has been closed, the scope of the initiative is sprawling and GDR continues to collaborate internationally as a ‘travelling project’ to be undertaken at different scales, locations and languages. Methods used by GDR would be a demonstration of art occupying the spaces that have up till now been neglected or omitted. Hito Steyerl, a filmmaker and art theorist, proposes that in many areas of work-life-art, the category of ‘labour’ (focus on the outcome) is increasingly replaced by ‘occupation’ (the process of ongoing mediation).

‘At the end of the day, people might have to leave the site of occupation in order to go home to do the thing formerly called labor: wipe off the tear gas, go pick up their kids from child care, and otherwise get on with their lives. Because these lives happen in the vast and unpredictable territory of occupation, and this is also where lives are being occupied. I am suggesting that we occupy this space.’²⁷

²⁵ The manifesto of the project is presented on Casco website <http://www.cascoprojects.org/gdr/User/Exhibition>.

²⁶ Dolores Hayden’s proposition became known as a ‘material feminist’ movement. See Nick Aikens ‘The Grand Domestic Revolution’ *Freeze* Issue 147, May (2012).

²⁷ Hito Steyerl ‘Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life’ *E-flux* Issue 3 Vol. 12 (2011).

Conclusion:*Home is place no more*

This paper has hopefully shown though that the potential of home as art territory goes much further than the phenomenological and semiotic discussions. The 'thirdspace' of the domestic is fluid and porous and the overlapping of the work/play/home creates interchangeable meanings. It can deterritorialize art-site and art-institution relationships as in *Superbia* and performances of Diane Borsato. Through its examination and paring down to essential needs, it offers an opportunity to challenge a commodity system (Zittel). When dealing with the invisible/undesirable bodies, it may inspire a form of re-socialization as in Lucy Orta's garments or Ukeles' maintenance art. Simultaneously, it poses a site for occupation (mediation) which is explored through collaborative projects like The Grand Domestic Revolution.

Home is place no more but a 'temporalized' transient space.²⁸ Extension of contemporary art into such spaces creates opportunities for new debates. As Jacques Rancière confirms:

'Politics in general is ... about the visibilities of the places and abilities of the body in those places, about the partition of private and public spaces, about the very configuration of the visible and the relation of the visible to what can be said about it.'²⁹

The Private is Political.

²⁸ bell hooks summarizes this condition: 'home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference.' See Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, 171.

²⁹ Rancière, Jacques. 'Ten Theses on Politics', *Theory and Event* Vol. 6 No. 4 (2004).

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Illustrations

Fig. 1. *Superbia*, The Coultury Estate , Ballymun Road. Dublin, 2003

Fig. 2. Diane Borsato, *Three Performances (After Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic, and Bonnie Sherk)*, Performances for video / 3-channel installation, Toronto, 2008.

Fig. 3. Andrea Zittel, *A-Z Carpet Furniture: Bed with 2 Nightstands, Small Desk and Chair, Chair with Table*, 1993.

Fig. 4. Lucy Orta, *Refuge Wear*, 2011.

Fig. 5. Elisabeth Diller, *Bad Press: Dissident Housework Series*, 1993-1996. Custom ironed shirts, two single-channel videos. Dimensions variable.

Fig. 6. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation*, 1978-80. City-wide performance with 8,500 NYC Sanitation workers. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.