

House Work and Art Work

Author(s): Helen Molesworth

Source: *October*, Vol. 92 (Spring, 2000), pp. 71-97

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/779234>

Accessed: 15-05-2016 22:36 UTC

## REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[http://www.jstor.org/stable/779234?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/779234?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



The MIT Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *October*

# House Work and Art Work\*

HELEN MOLESWORTH

*Laughter in the face of serious categories is  
indispensable for feminism.*

—Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990)

The much-noted eclecticism of 1990s art practice appears to have been countered only by a steady fascination with and revival of art from the 1970s. This interest, shared by artists, critics, historians, and curators, generated numerous exhibitions and publications dedicated to the feminist work of the period.<sup>1</sup> That such interest in 1970s feminist practice is long overdue perhaps goes without saying, although for many it has emerged as either a mysteriously forgotten moment or the return of the repressed. In both guises many of these stagings have continued, unfortunately, to consolidate a logic of “us” and “them,” a structure of bitter binary opposition, an intellectual disjuncture between feminist work based in “theory,” poststructuralism, or social constructionism, and work derived from the

\* This essay has benefited from many interlocutors. An audience at UCLA asked particularly probing questions, especially Michael Asher, who encouraged me to examine the work of Martha Rosler. Amelia Jones generously shared her thoughts and expertise on *The Dinner Party*. Moyra Davey, Rosalyn Deutsche, Christina Kiaer, Janet Kraynak, Miwon Kwon, Sowon Kwon, Frazer Ward, and Faith Wilding all helped as critical readers. An earlier version of this essay was published in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, ed. Michael Newman and Jon Bird (London: Reaktion Books, 1999).

1. In the past few years numerous exhibitions have taken place, to name but a few: Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document* was reassembled in its entirety by the Generali Foundation in Vienna, Austria (September 25–December 20, 1998); Martha Rosler is the subject of a traveling retrospective organized by Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, UK; Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Maintenance Art Series* was shown in its entirety at the Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York; Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* was the centerpiece of an exhibit curated by Amelia Jones at the Armand Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (April 24–August 18, 1996); “Division of Labor: Women and Work” was held at The Bronx Museum (1996); and the “Bad Girls” exhibition took place at the New Museum, New York (January 14–February 27 and March 5–April 10, 1994). So, too, books and journals have proliferated: this journal dedicated an entire issue



Judy Chicago. *The Dinner Party*. 1979.

so-called principles of “essentialism.”<sup>2</sup> Far from an attempt to set the record straight, or to ascertain definitively what did or did not happen, this essay is motivated by a need to rearticulate the current reception’s account of the relations between these two bodies of work. More precisely, it seeks to reconsider four artists at work in the 1970s—Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and Martha Rosler—artists whose works have been caught in an interpretive blind spot created by the current reception’s perpetuation of the antagonism between feminist art of the 1970s and ’80s.<sup>3</sup>

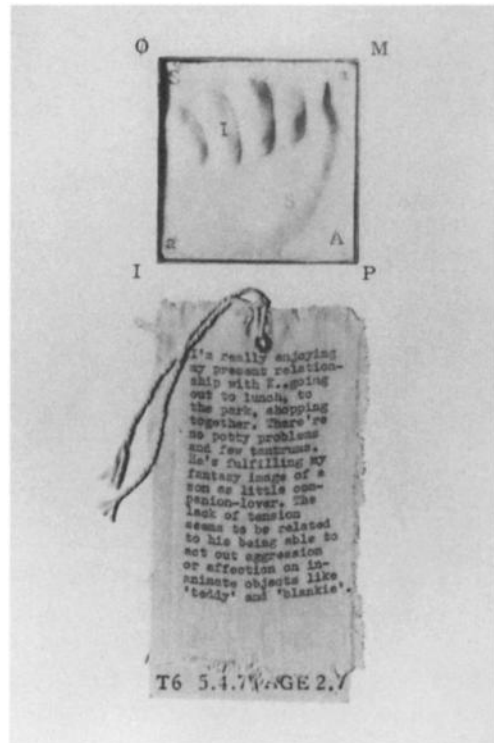
---

to the question of feminism, replete with a questionnaire and a roundtable (*October 71* [Winter, 1995]); Laura Cottingham produced *Not For Sale* (1998), a video essay designed for teaching feminist art; *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter* by Jo Anna Isaak appeared in 1996 (London: Routledge); Mira Schor’s award-winning *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997) also appeared recently; and *The Power of Feminist Art* brought together in one volume a commanding overview of American feminist art of the 1970s (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).

2. Under the umbrella of “essentialism,” I am referring to artists and critics such as Norma Broude, Mary D. Garrard, Judy Chicago, Harmony Hammons, Suzanne Lacy, Lucy Lippard, Ana Mendieta, Faith Ringgold, Miriam Schapiro, Mira Schor, Faith Wilding, the artists involved in Womanhouse and the Feminist Art Program. And with regard to poststructuralism, I’m thinking here of the work of Victor Burgin, Mary Kelly, Silvia Kolbowski, Barbara Kruger, Kate Linker, Laura Mulvey, Griselda Pollock, Cindy Sherman, and Lisa Tickner.

3. For a more elaborated account of this debate, see my “Cleaning Up in the 1970s: The Work of Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly and Mierle Laderman Ukeles” in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*.

Mary Kelly. *Post Partum Document*. 1979.



Despite the breadth and complexity of the issues—the diversity of practices within each, somewhat loosely defined, “camp”—a certain reduction has taken place in the current reception of 1970s feminist work, an intellectual fault line broadly described in generational terms. And as the disjuncture between feminist practices from the 1970s and ‘80s is repeatedly historicized as a permanent rupture, we currently receive these strained relations in the form of a caricature. This situation is perhaps most problematic and prevalent in the classroom, where the debate is often hypostatized into an art-historical compare-and-contrast, iconically represented by two seemingly antithetical art works: Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* and Mary Kelly’s *Post Partum Document*, works taken to be exemplary of an essentialist approach in Chicago’s case, and a theory-based feminist practice in Kelly’s case. Although both works were completed in 1979, they have been rendered crudely oppositional and hierarchized, and are often asked to bear the weight of a generational split—from the 1970s to the ‘80s—as well as presenting, equally self-evidently, the “progression” in feminist art *from essentialism to theory*.<sup>4</sup> The language of progress is used across the board; listen as Lisa Tickner argues

4. Given that the works were made during the same period, clearly this is not the case. However, they were made in different geographical locations within which extremely different types of feminist discussions were taking place. See Mary Kelly’s remarks to this effect in “A Conversation on Recent Feminist Art Practices,” *October* 71 (Winter 1995), pp. 49–69.

that the “adolescent vitality of 1970s feminism matured successfully into a body of rigorous 1980s art and criticism.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Griselda Pollock demarcates a shift from a politics of “liberation” to a “structural mode of analysis.”<sup>6</sup> And Faith Wilding, a member of Womanhouse, described some 1970s artistic experiments, particularly cunt imagery, as “crude . . . precursors for a new vocabulary for representing female sexuality and the body in art.”<sup>7</sup>

The logic of progress has done much to codify this classic pairing of post-1960s art into a stale binarism: all contrast, no comparison. Yet perhaps we can loosen the starched opposition of essentialism “versus” theory, by acknowledging that the model of compare-and-contrast need not *only* produce dismissive hierarchies, or generational or oppositional binarisms. It is a model equally well designed to elaborate on moments of affinity and shared concerns (not yet acknowledged), *as well as* moments of contestation and difference (which have been insisted on more forcefully).

Despite various challenges to this generational/progressive frame, it has stiffly endured. The tenacity of the division occludes a more pedestrian question: Why is this particular art-historical debate so problematic? For instance, why don't we simply say “Both sides have strong and weak points,” and pluralistically be done with it? As unproductive as this debate has been, merely to paper over significant aesthetic, ideological, and philosophical differences would be to run the risk of consolidating the category heading “feminist art.” As a codified “movement” (however internally fractured), feminist art is stripped of its transformative power.<sup>8</sup> Rendered separate and distinct, and hence easier to marginalize, it is unable to challenge and modify our definitions of other artistic categories, the result of which has been to prohibit articulations of the connective tissue between these works and the putatively “dominant” conversations simultaneously being held in the art world.<sup>9</sup> One way, perhaps, to reread the theory/essentialism split is to see artists during the 1980s—in the Pictures group, for instance—as consciously

5. Lisa Tickner, *October 71* (Winter 1995), p. 44.

6. Griselda Pollock, “Painting, Feminism, History,” in *Destabilizing Theory*, ed. Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 154.

7. Faith Wilding, “The Feminist Programs at Fresno and CalArts, 1970–75,” in *The Power of Feminist Art*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), p. 35.

8. Mary Kelly has frequently argued against the category “feminist art.” Arguing against the notion of a cohesive “style” of feminist art, she proposes instead the notion of art “informed by feminism.” See the exchange between Kelly and Silvia Kolbowski in “A Conversation on Recent Feminist Art Practices” in *October 71* (Winter 1995), pp. 49–69.

9. This is the effect of Laura Cottingham's video essay, designed for pedagogical purposes, *Not For Sale*. This tape's structure is based on that of the art history survey: it casts a wide net, includes a barrage of artists without explanation or justification for their inclusion (save their gender). The effect of which is that we are left with an alternative “canon.” The separatist quality of the tape means that the practice of many artists is radically de-contextualized and the work of nearly all the artists is ghettoized. For more on this tape see my “Not For Sale” in *frieze 41* (Summer 1998).

working with ideas such as the theory of representation precisely as a way to avoid the problems of the marginalization of “feminism.”<sup>10</sup> So, too, we could see that it was clearly important for feminists to be able to disagree, and even fight with, previous generations of feminists, as a way both to open the field of inquiry and to proliferate its influence. Currently, however, the continual rehearsing of the theory/essentialism debate, only to choose sides at the end, has disallowed other interpretive formations to arise. For instance, the division may serve to maintain, rather than expand, the rather limited range of feminist theory that operates in the art world. There currently exist critical feminist discourses other than Anglo-American empiricism and continental theory; and the chasm between them has been navigated, most notably, by political philosophers. In other words, we need not only be bound to the interpretive models that have traditionally accompanied each body of work, but we can also look to the tools and interpretive possibilities offered by the feminist critique of political philosophy.

In *Feminism and Philosophy*, Moira Gatens has staged the feminist debate in terms of those who privilege a model of equality and those who think in terms of difference.<sup>11</sup> These terms are analogous to the essentialism/theory split and Gatens astutely problematizes both positions. First, she sets out to dismantle the idea of equality. She argues that the problem with the model of “equality in the public sphere” is that

... the public sphere is dependent upon and developed around a male subject who acts in the public sphere but is maintained in the private sphere, traditionally by women. This is to say that liberal society assumes that its citizens continue to be what they were historically, namely male heads of households who have at their disposal the services of an unpaid domestic worker/mother/wife.<sup>12</sup>

These services have become so naturalized that “clearly, part of the privilege accorded to members of a political body is that their needs, desires, and powers are converted into rights and virtues.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, Gatens suggests that the political realm within which women struggle for equality, such as democracy, must be disarticulated, not presumed a priori to be a “neutral” system, except for *its inability to grant women equality*. The system is founded on inequality; hence “equality in this context can involve only the abstract opportunity to become men.”<sup>14</sup>

10. My thanks to Janet Kraynak for a discussion of this point.

11. Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

12. Moira Gatens, “Powers, Bodies and Difference” in *Destabilizing Theory*, p. 124.

13. Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality*, p.138.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 124–25.

Democracy's dependence upon inequality has been naturalized as the public and private spheres have been used to shore up distinctions and inequities between men and women, particularly in that the private sphere has been "intricate[ly] and extensive[ly] cross-reference[d] . . . with the body, passions, and nature."<sup>15</sup> This critique of equality (as found in much Anglo-American feminist theory) reveals the very notion of equality and its symbolic representation in the public sphere to be historically dependent on the unacknowledged (and unequal) labor of the private sphere.<sup>16</sup>

Gatens is also suspicious of the discursive move from equality to difference. Noting that feminist writing and art practice, after freeing itself from the tyranny of nature, took up explorations of female sexuality, she cautions that such a move runs the risk of reducing women's subjectivity to their sexuality. While Gatens is sympathetic to critical feminist explorations of psychoanalytic models of subjectivity fundamentally rooted in sexuality, she counters the ahistorical logic of psychoanalysis by submitting it to a Foucauldian analysis that conceives of the body as "an effect of socially and historically specific practices."<sup>17</sup> She argues that "bodies are turned into individuals of various kinds" by "discourses and practices [which] create ideologically appropriate subjects" and "practices [which] construct certain kinds of bodies with particular kinds of power and capacity."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, "to insist on sexual difference as *the* fundamental and eternally immutable difference would be to take for granted the intricate and pervasive ways in which patriarchal culture has made that difference its insignia."<sup>19</sup> She is wary, then, of feminists who place sexuality (as the extension of or outcome of sexual difference) at center stage, theoretically or aesthetically. One effect of Gatens's critique is to register the extent to which *both* groups of feminist work explored issues of sexuality to the exclusion of other attributes of subjectivity and also to the exclusion of political philosophy's critique of the role of the private sphere in the democracy-capitalism covenant.

As Gatens problematizes the equality/difference dichotomy through a feminist analysis of political philosophy, so, too, a similar operation can be performed on the iconic pairing of the *Post Partum Document* and *The Dinner Party*, by considering them in conjunction with Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Maintenance Art Performances* (1973–74) and Martha Rosler's videos *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975)

15. Ibid., p.122–123.

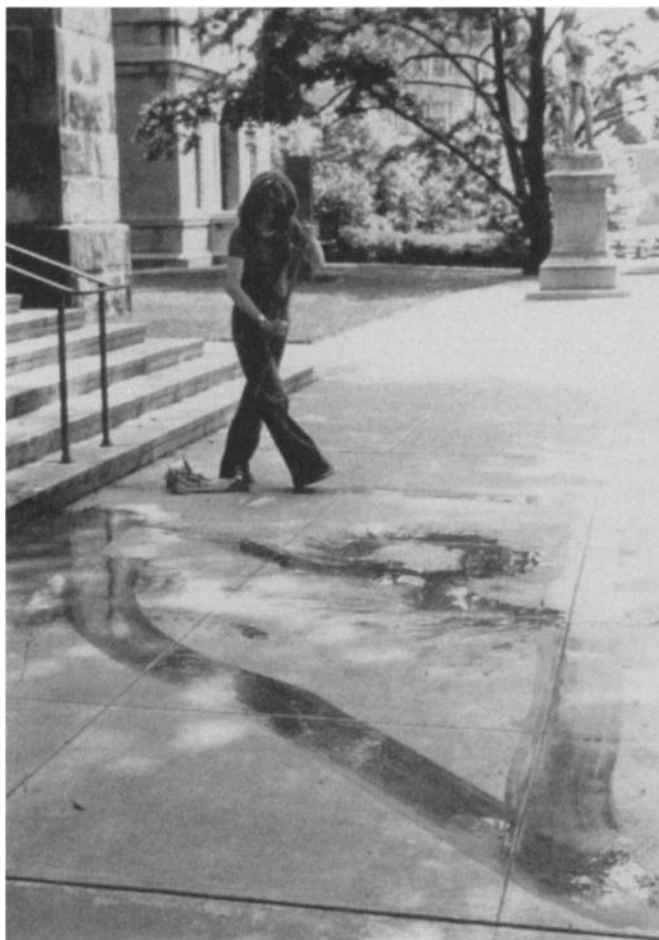
16. For an elaboration of this argument see Carole Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988). This critique elaborates on the problem of "equality" within liberal thought that is based in part on the inability of capitalism to function without the unpaid labor of maintenance. This subsequently permits a critique of democracy's historical dependence upon slavery. Here the implications of political theory are indispensable for thinking through the perennial blind spot of both Anglo-American and continental feminism, the problem of racial and ethnic difference.

17. Gatens, "Powers, Bodies and Difference," in *Destabilizing Theory*, p. 131.

18. Ibid., p. 128.

19. Ibid., p. 135.

*Mierle Laderman Ukeles.*  
Hartford Wash: Washing  
Tracks, Maintenance  
Outside. 1973. Wadsworth  
Atheneum, Hartford, CT.



and *Domination and the Everyday* (1978)—works produced around the same time and under similar cultural pressures. Ukeles's and Rosler's work is explicitly concerned with how "ideologically appropriate subjects" are created, in part, through the naturalizing of unpaid and underpaid domestic labor. By placing the *PPD* and *The Dinner Party* within this expanded interpretive field, labor, particularly domestic or maintenance labor, emerges as a thematic shared by these four artists (as well as many others of the period). The introduction of the problem of such labor leads, in turn, to a consideration of the relations between public and private, which emerges as a defining issue in the discussion of 1970s art and the legacy of feminism's intervention in it. The problematic of public and private spheres is, of course, present in both *The Dinner Party* and *Post Partum Document*, but the essentialism/theory debate has occluded its importance, disallowing the debate to be framed in terms of a *political* economy as well as a bodily or psychic one.<sup>20</sup>

20. Additionally, the essentialism/theory debate may also have restricted feminist discourse to



In her 1969 "Maintenance Art Manifesto" Ukeles divided human labor into two categories: development and maintenance. She writes:

Development: pure individual creation; the new; change; progress; advance; excitement; flight or fleeing. Maintenance: Keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight.<sup>21</sup>

Ukeles's manifesto insists that ideals of modernity (progress, change, individual creation) are dependent on the denigrated and boring labor of maintenance (activities that make things possible—cooking, cleaning, shopping, child rearing, and so forth). Incisively, Ukeles does not refer to maintenance as domestic labor, or housework, for it is evident that such labor is not confined solely to the spaces of domesticity. Included in this manifesto was a proposal that Ukeles live in the museum and perform her maintenance activities; while the gallery might look "empty," she explained that her labor would indeed be the "work."<sup>22</sup> Her offer went unaccepted.

In 1973, however, the Wadsworth Athenaeum agreed to the *Maintenance Art Performances*. In *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Inside*, Ukeles scrubbed and mopped the floor of the museum for four hours. In *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Outside*, she cleaned the exterior plaza and steps of the museum. She referred to these activities as "floor paintings." In *Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object*, she designated her cleaning of a protective display case as an art work—a "dust painting." Normally this vitrine was cleaned by the janitor; however, once Ukeles's cleaning of the case was designated

---

notions of the subject that reside (rhetorically) outside of the dominant structure of capitalism, hence further marginalizing the political potential of feminism, and art that operates within its concerns.

21. For a reprint of Ukeles's "Maintenance Art Manifesto" in its entirety, see "Artist Project: Mierle Laderman Ukeles Maintenance Art Activity (1973) with responses from Miwon Kwon and Helen Molesworth," *Documents* 10 (Fall 1997).

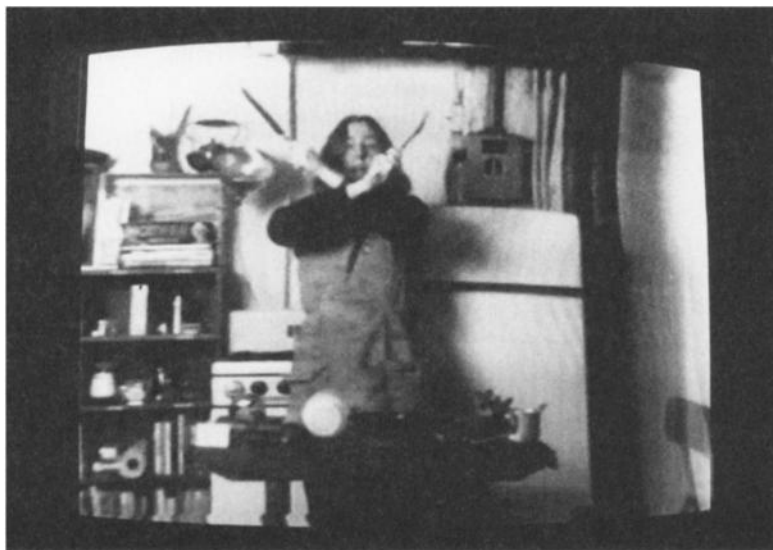
22. It is Ukeles's insistence on the structural aspect of everyday maintenance labor, as opposed to a fetishized notion of the "everyday," that distinguishes her performances from recent practices that merely represent or stage the everyday, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija's recent exhibition in which he placed a facsimile of his apartment in the gallery and allowed visitors to use the space as they saw fit. For instance, part of the "Maintenance Art Manifesto" included an exhibition proposal called "Carc," in which Ukeles proposed to do the following: "live in the museum as I customarily do at home with my husband and my baby, for the duration of the exhibition, (Right? or if you don't want me around at night I would come in every day) and do all these things as public Art activities: I will sweep and wax the floors, dust everything, wash the walls (i.e., "floor paintings, dust works, soap sculpture, wall paintings"), cook, invite people to eat, make agglomerations and dispositions of all functional refuse. The exhibition area might look "empty" of art, but it will be maintained in full public view. MY WORKING WILL BE THE WORK." Needless to say no one ever accepted this proposal. For an account of Tiravanija's practice, see Janet Kraynak's "Rirkrit Tiravanija's Liability," *Documents* 13 (Fall 1998).

as “art” the responsibility of the cleaning and maintenance of this case became the job of the conservator. The fourth performance, *The Keeping of the Keys*, consisted of Ukeles taking the museum guards’ keys and locking and unlocking galleries and offices, which when locked were subsequently deemed to be works of “maintenance art.” In each performance Ukeles’s role as “artist” allowed her to reconfigure the value bestowed upon these otherwise unobtrusive maintenance operations, and to explore the ramifications of making maintenance labor visible in public.

Martha Rosler’s videos *Semiotics of the Kitchen* and *Domination and the Everyday* also critically engaged the problem of housewifery. In the relatively new medium of video, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* humorously skewered both the mass-media image of the smiling, middle-class, white housewife and theories of semiotics, suggesting that neither was able to provide an adequate account of the role of wife/mother/maintenance provider. Informed by Marxist and feminist critique, *Domination and the Everyday* considers the everyday household labors of women in



*Ukeles. Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Inside. 1973. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT. (Photo: Zindman/Fremont)*



*Martha Rosler. Semiotics of the Kitchen. 1973–74.*

tandem with global politics. Like the *Maintenance Art Performances*, *Domination* suggests that the domestic chores of cooking and child rearing are not exclusively private, but, instead, that such labors are intimately connected to public events, and furthermore that unpaid and underpaid maintenance labor needs to be thought of as equivalent to other forms of oppression.

What happens if the *Maintenance Art Performances* and Rosler's early video work are insinuated into *The Dinner Party* and *Post Partum Document* binarism, creating a four-way compare-and-contrast? Might such an expanded field allow us to see previously unacknowledged aspects of each of the works? For instance, as well as seeing the stark contrast between Chicago's cunt-based central core imagery and Kelly's pointed refusal to represent the female body, we might also see that all four artists deal in varying degrees with putatively "private" aspects of women's lives and experience: motherhood, cleaning, cooking, and entertaining. Similarly, as opposed to the intractable contrast between the lush tactile quality of *The Dinner Party* and the diagrammatic aspect of the *Post Partum Document*, we might see the importance of text in each of the works. The women's names that cover the floor and place settings mean that reading is also integral to viewing *The Dinner Party*. Rosler's *Domination and the Everyday* contains a running text at the bottom of the screen and Ukeles's works contain charts, posted announcements, and the "Maintenance Art" verification stamp. Each artist participated in the assault on the privileged role of vision in aesthetics, as did so many of their 1970s contemporaries. When the binarism is undone we can see that these works were directly engaged with the most "advanced" artistic practices of the day—Minimalism, Performance, and Conceptual art—and that they were also in the process of form-

Rosler. *Domination and the Everyday*. 1978. (Photo: Visual Studies Workshop.)



ing the practice of Institutional Critique.<sup>23</sup> This is, again, to insist on the linkages between art informed by feminism and most of the advanced or critical artistic practices of the 1960s and '70s that took as part of their inquiry the institutions within which art is encountered. The artists who worked in this manner—whose work's content was bound up with domesticity or maintenance and its structural relation to the public sphere—have been by and large neglected by the historians and archivists of Minimalism, Conceptual art, and Institutional Critique.<sup>24</sup> Their omission was caused not by active suppression but rather a fundamental *misrecognition* of the terms and strategies they employed. The overtly domestic/maintenance content of such works was read as being equivalent to their meaning. Therefore, little or no attention was paid to these works' engagement with the Duchampian legacy of art's investigation of its own meaning, value,

23. Griselda Pollock has argued that the "radical reconceptualization of the function of artistic activity—its procedures, personnel, and institutional sites—is the major legacy of feminist interventions in culture since the late sixties." See Griselda Pollock, "Painting, Feminism, History," in *Destabilizing Theory*, p. 155.

24. For instance, no women artists are discussed in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990), although Hilla Becher and Hanne Darboven are mentioned in passing. More recently, Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, *Reconsidering the Object of Art 1965–1975* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995) included only eight women out of a total of fifty-six artists. More recently, however, this seems to have changed. For example, Peter Wollen included numerous women artists in the North American section of the "Global Conceptualism" exhibition.

and institutionality. What has not been fully appreciated are the ways in which this usually “degraded” content actually *permits* an engagement with questions of value and institutionality that critique the conditions of everyday life as well as art. Hence, when we compare *The Dinner Party*, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* and *Domination and the Everyday*, and the *Post Partum Document* with Ukeles’s explicit feminist address of the museum, we are able to reframe them in such a manner as to see that they were each bound up with a critique of the institutional conditions of art. Among the four artists this critique manifested itself in varying degrees and was shaped by different concerns. There is no denying that Chicago’s work may seem to us now the most problematic of the four, in that her work supports a notion of genius and “artist” in keeping with the ideal model of bourgeois subjectivity offered by the Western art museum. Yet, despite the differences between the works (or because of them), the feminist critique of the institutions of art should no longer be misrecognized, for its understanding of the relations between “private” acts and public institutions will reframe the work of contemporaneous figures in the field. Such a comparison will ultimately expand our notion of Institutional Critique, precisely because the feminist critique differs so markedly from the paradigmatic works of figures such as Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, or Hans Haacke. For as we will see, it insisted on the reciprocity and mutual dependence of the categories of private and public.

\*

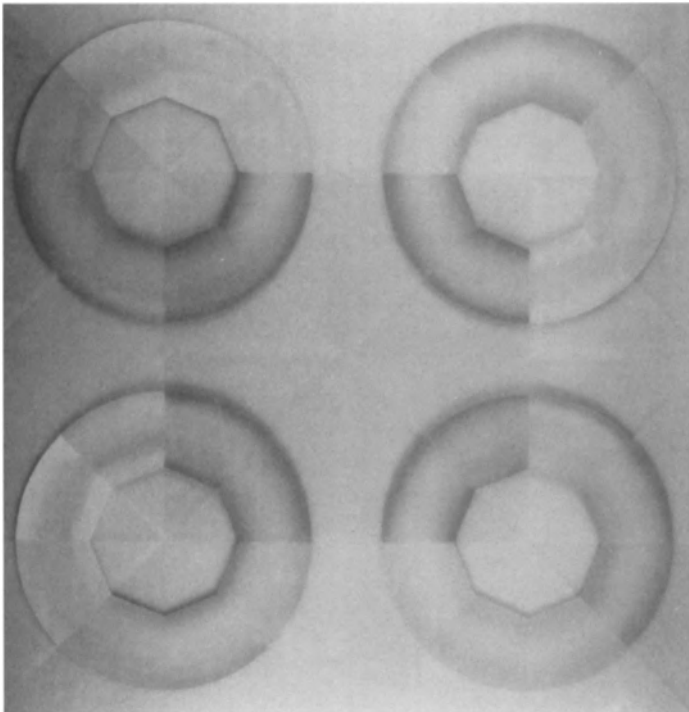
Ukeles’s performances, by establishing domestic (read private, natural) labor as “maintenance,” help to articulate the structural conditions of the relations between the public and private sphere. It is the “hidden” and unrecognized nature of this labor that permits the myth that the public sphere functions as a self-contained and independent site, a site devoid of interest (in classic Habermasian terms). However, by staging such labors in the museum, a traditional institution of the bourgeois public sphere, Ukeles’s work establishes maintenance labor as a subject for public discussion. For, as Rosalyn Deutsche has argued, “what is recognized in public space is the legitimacy of debate about what is legitimate and what is illegitimate.”<sup>25</sup> It is the very publicness of art, art’s traditional reliance on a public sphere for its legibility and value, that makes art such a rich terrain for feminist critique. Hence Ukeles’s performance of maintenance activities, in full view of the museum and its visitors, opens public space to the pressures of what it traditionally excludes, or renders invisible. The work of Chicago, Kelly, and Rosler does this too, each at the level of explicit content (although Kelly and Rosler do considerably

25. Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), p. 273.

more work at the level of form, as well). But when Ukeles renames domestic labor “maintenance,” she uses ideas and processes usually deemed “private” to open institutions and ideas usually deemed “public.” This gesture is in obvious sympathy with the 1970s feminist slogan “the personal is political,” but, more incisively, it supports political philosopher Carole Pateman’s contention that “the public sphere is always assumed to throw light onto the private sphere, rather than vice versa. On the contrary, an understanding of modern patriarchy requires that the employment contract is illuminated by the structure of domestic relations.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, one legacy of feminist criticism is to establish that it is the private sphere that can help us to rearticulate the public sphere, as opposed to the other way around. Ukeles’s exposure of this problematic animates the content of labor in both *The Dinner Party* and the *Post Partum Document*, pulling these works away from their more familiar interpretations.

To position this work as negotiating the terrain of public and private is to establish its links to, as opposed to its separation from, other postwar art practices.

26. Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, p. 144.



*Chicago. Pasadena  
Lifesavers. 1969–70.*

Chicago's early sculptural activity—in works like *Pasadena Lifesavers* (1969–70)—took the form of repetitive modular units fabricated from industrial materials, objects clearly in dialogue with Minimalism and its West Coast variant, “finish fetish.”<sup>27</sup> Chicago's repetitive formal structure, her use of the triangular shaped table, her fetishism of surface and texture, suggests that *The Dinner Party* continued her dialogue with Minimalism. However, by the mid-1970s, Chicago had imported explicit content into these otherwise generic structures. Specifically sexed bodies are offered as opposed to the nonspecific or universal body posited by Minimalism's understanding of phenomenology, and the “private” nature of genitalia, especially the vagina, is rendered spectacularly public. Likewise, historically under-recognized forms of domestic and decorative craft replace the lure (and perhaps just barely veiled decorative aspects) of industrial production. Minimalism also asked for a consideration of the logic of repetition; consider Donald Judd's oft-quoted “one thing after another.” Reading *The Dinner Party* through a hermeneutics of maintenance suggests that the logic of repetition is not exclusively bound to industrial production but exists as well—although with vastly different effects—in the perpetual labors of cooking, eating, and cleaning up: the women's work that is never done; work that is conspicuously absent in *The Dinner Party*, effaced as it was by its Minimalist counterparts.<sup>28</sup> And if Minimalism asked its viewers to distinguish what in the room was not sculpture, what in the room constituted institutional space, then *The Dinner Party* potentially asked viewers to articulate what in the room existed in the realm of the private and what belonged in the realm of the public.<sup>29</sup>

By tweaking and pinching Minimalism's suppression of the particularity of gendered bodies, *The Dinner Party* suggested that the (impossible) idea of a generic body helped to enable the historical bourgeois public sphere as a site of (fictional) disinterest, a site bound by the terms of patriarchy. Kelly's *Post Partum Document* similarly critiqued the terms of Conceptual art. Kelly's early work, done in Britain during the 1970s, was collaborative in nature and focused largely on the

27. For an account of Chicago's early work and *The Dinner Party*'s fetishism of surface see Laura Meyer, “From Finish Fetishism to Feminism: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in California Art History,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles: UCLA and Armand Hammer Museum with University of California Press, 1996)

28. *The Dinner Party*, it should be noted, is always exhibited accompanied by documentary photographs of the massive groups and collectives of women who worked on the project. In this regard the labor of making *The Dinner Party* is always registered, but in a peripheral, supporting role. *The Dinner Party* effaces the marks of labor within its boundaries, and in so doing presents itself like a traditional museum-oriented art object: the result of creative genius as opposed to manual labor (a distinction that perpetuates the power relations between the artist and those who work in his or her atelier), and, furthermore, the result of artistic labor only, not the maintenance labor that supports such labor.

29. For an account of Minimalism that argues that the sculptures pressured the terms of what is and is not sculpture, see Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” in *The Originality and the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).

struggle for women's equality in the workplace. Two works stand out: the curated exhibition "Women and Work" (1975) and the collaboratively made film *Nightcleaners* (1975), which documented the organizing of a women's cleaning union but refused the traditional methods of agitprop or documentary, opting for Brechtian strategies of distanciation.<sup>30</sup> "Women and Work" depicted two years of research into the sexual division of labor in a metal-box factory. By conceiving of the exhibition as the art work itself, "Women and Work" questioned both the autonomy of the art object and the fiction of the disinterested gallery space. The show's refusal of visibility, its negation of the art object as a commodity, and its challenge to the traditional role of the gallery within the distribution system all partook of Conceptual art's assault on art.

It would be *Post Partum Document*, however, that would launch a more thorough critique of Conceptual art. Following on Minimalism's investigation of the public quality of art, much Conceptual art sought to replace a spatial and visual experience with a linguistic one, or what has been called "the work as analytic proposition."<sup>31</sup> This meant that the art object could be radically de-skilled, potentially democratizing art's production. However, Frazer Ward has argued that while Conceptual art "sought to demystify aesthetic experience and mastery ('Anybody can do that'), [it] maintained the abstraction of content crucial to high Modernist art," hence, "if Modernist painting was just about painting, Conceptual art was just about art."<sup>32</sup> Just as Chicago exposed Minimalism's abstract viewer, similarly the explicit content of the *Post Partum Document* complicated Conceptual art's hermeticism.<sup>33</sup>

The *Document's* numerous graphs and charts, in their standardized frames (a repetition that rhymes with Chicago's), represent the labor of child care, labor normally obscured in Western capitalist culture. One effect of the category of the mother as essential and biological is to naturalize this labor, placing it outside of social conditions. (It is telling that the *PPD* emerges around the time of the idea of the "working mother," as if mothering weren't already a form of work.) Kelly's

30. The exhibition "Women and Work" was curated by Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt, and Mary Kelly; *Nightcleaners* was made by the Berwick Street Film Collective: Mark Karlin, Kelly, James Scott, and Humphry Trevelyn. For the best account of Kelly's early practice, see: *Social Process/Collaborative Action: Mary Kelly 1970-75*, exhibition catalog, ed. Judith Matsai (Vancouver, Canada: Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, 1997).

31. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969," p. 107.

32. Frazer Ward, "Some Relations between Conceptual and Performance Art," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1997).

33. In this light Kelly's *PPD* can be seen as a direct attack against the Conceptual art of someone like Joseph Kosuth, for instance, but not, say, the work of Hans Haacke. However, Kelly's work also does serve to problematize the dominant reception of Conceptual art as defined by male artists. For more on the historical context of the *Post Partum Document*, see Juli Carson, "(Re)Viewing Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document*," *Documents* 13 (Fall 1998).

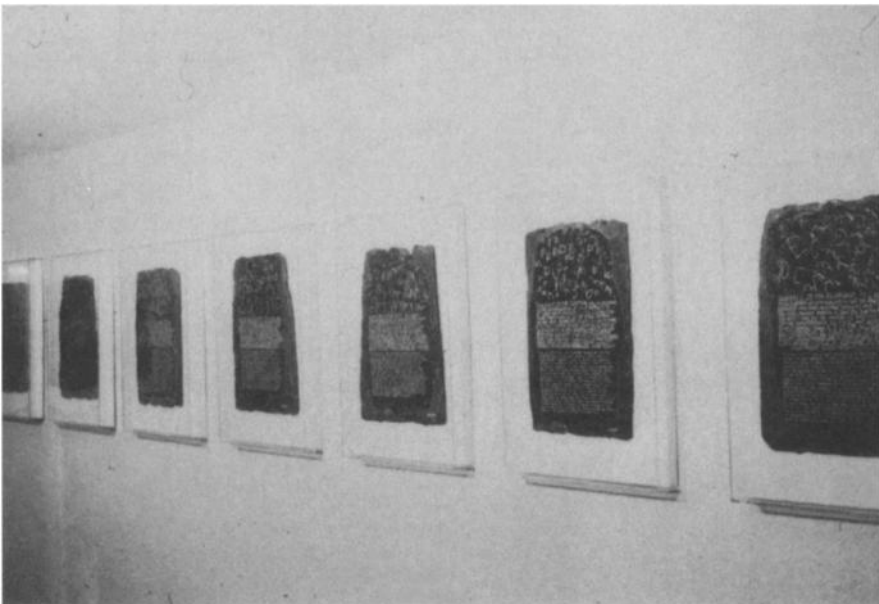




“archaeology of the everyday” permitted Kelly to represent two forms of labor—artistic and domestic—both of which debunk the myths of nonwork that surround both forms of re-production (artist as genius, mother as natural). *PPD* stages the relations between artistic and human creation as analogous, and by doing so interrogates the boundaries between public and private realms of experience. And if one premise of Conceptual art is that “anyone can do it,” then Kelly’s work suggests that the same is true of the labor of mothering, for to de-naturalize such labor is to make it non-gender-specific.

While Chicago and Kelly were extensively engaged with the public discursive fields of Minimalism and Conceptual art, Ukeles’s explicit address of the museum makes her work an early instance of Institutional Critique.<sup>35</sup> By taking the normally hidden labor of the private sphere and submitting it to public scrutiny in the institutions of art, *Maintenance Art* explored the fictional quality of the distinction between public and private. The performances demonstrated that the work of maintenance

35. I do not want to place these artists so firmly within specific categories that their work is seen to be either only an instance of that “style” of work, nor do I want to suggest that these “styles” are in any way internally coherent. Rather, I want to emphasize the ways in which these works are in conscious and explicit dialogue with the predominant movements of critical art of their period.



Post Partum Document.

is neither exclusively public nor private; it is the realm of human activities that serves to bind the two. Ukeles's use of performance—her insistence that her “private” body perform “private” activities in public space—seems to suggest that maintenance is a key component of subjectivity. Yet it is one that often goes unrecognized, and instead is naturalized through repetition into the status of “habit,” as opposed to being constitutive of identity. So one effect of Ukeles's performances is to show how institutions such as the museum unconsciously help to maintain “the category of artistic individuality that emblemizes bourgeois subjectivity” through its suppression of its dependence on the labors that keep the white cube clean.<sup>36</sup>

However, when the bonding between public and private realms is exposed, or when an identity delineated by maintenance, as opposed to artistic expression, is foregrounded, the “proper” functioning of the public institution is compromised. Ukeles's performances dramatize that when maintenance is put front and center, made visible, given equal value with art objects, the museum chokes and sputters. For instance, *The Keeping of the Keys* wreaked havoc on the museum's normal workday. The piece so infuriated the curators, who felt that their office and floor should be exempt, that when Ukeles announced that their office was to become a piece of “maintenance art,” all but one curator ran out of the office, fleeing both the artist and their own work. The work stoppage that resulted from the systematic privileging of maintenance work over other forms of work is a vivid instance of Carole Pateman's argument that it is absolutely structural to patriarchy and capitalism that the labor of maintenance remain *invisible*. When made *visible*, the maintenance work that makes other work possible arrests and stymies the very labor it is designed to maintain.

This work stoppage was not isolated. In *Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object*, Ukeles selected a female mummy housed in a glass case from the museum's collection. Traditionally, it was the janitor's job to keep this case clean. In a ceremony staged for the camera, the janitor relinquished his rag and cleaning fluid to Ukeles, who then cleaned the case as a “Maintenance Artist,” as opposed to a maintenance person, making what she called a “dust painting.” After the mummy case was cleaned she stamped both it and the cleaning rag with a rubber stamp certifying their new identities as “Maintenance Art Works.” The stamped rag and the cleaning fluid were then offered to the museum conservator, in the same ceremonial manner; for the cleaned case, now a work of “Maintenance Art,” could only be cleaned (or maintained) by the conservator.

The photographs of *Transfer* are accompanied by a hand-drawn diagram that resembles a low-tech flow chart and details the ramifications of the transfer, mapping how one job (cleaning) had been made the province of three different professionals (janitor, artist, conservator). The goofiness of the chart is a send-up

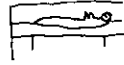
36. Frazer Ward, “The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity,” *October* 73 (Summer 1995), p. 83.

Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object © 1973

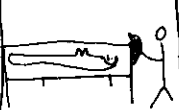

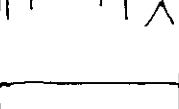
Museum Maintenance Rules: only the conservator is empowered to touch the art object, handle it, clean it.

1. Selection of the Art Object in the Museum:

Mummy (female figure) in glass case.



2. Activity: 3 people → same task → Museum → 3 powers

Activity	Person	Task	Result
	Maintenance Person	Clean the glass mummy case. (as usual).	A clean glass mummy case
	Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Maintenance Artist	Clean the glass mummy case; ("dust painting"). (Stamp glass case as Original Maintenance Art) (Maintenance Person can no longer touch it)	A Maintenance Art Work
	Museum Conservator	(Perform conservation condition examination: Art Work is "Dusty. Requires superficial cleaning.") Clean the glass mummy case	A clean Maintenance Art Work

of the clinical "aesthetic of administration" put forth by many Conceptual artists and practitioners of Institutional Critique, although here the diagram mimes managerial concerns with the division of labor as well.<sup>37</sup> This performance highlights the division of labor that supports the aura of the artist's signature, an aura the museum is dependent on for its legitimacy (and which it in turn legitimates), but in *Transfer*, anyone can use the maintenance art stamp, compromising the value of the artist's signature as a guarantor of art. More importantly, though, by insisting that everyone clean the mummy case, the performance intimates that anyone can perform maintenance. Once again the public exposure of maintenance gums up the work of the museum, complicating the smooth, seamless, efficient functioning of the institution.

Ukeles's *Maintenance Art Performances* combine slapstick humor and seri-

Ukeles. Transfer of the Art Object (Chart) from Maintenance Art Performance Series. 1973-74. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

37. The phrase "aesthetic of administration" is taken from Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's definitive "Conceptual Art 1962-1969."

Ukeles. Conservation  
Report Form from  
Maintenance Art  
Performance Series.  
1973-74. Courtesy  
Ronald Feldman Fine  
Arts, New York.

CONSERVATION REPORT FORM

Object: *Glass Case*  
Owner: *Let's talk with the Collection*  
Acc. No.: *none available*  
Artist:  
Date Examined: *7/20/73*  
Place Examined: *Maragon Building*  
Provenance: *20th Century*  
Period or Date: *-*  
Signature: *none*  
Medium: *Paint on Canvas*  
Frame: *wood*  
Primary Support: *-*  
Secondary Support: *-*  
Backing Material: *-*  
Varnish: *-*  
Dimensions: *75 1/2" (H) x 25 1/2" (W) x 18 1/2" (D)*  
Previous Treatment: *None*  
X-Ray Taken: *None*  
Photos Taken: *b/w*  
U.V.: *-*  
I.R.: *-*

Surface Condition:

*Sturdy. Requires surgical  
cleaning*

Damages:

*none*

Recommendations:

*Surgical cleaning with mild  
and soft cloth.*

*SP. 78. Conisb. f.  
Cannister*

ous critique. This aesthetic mixture (Karl Marx meets the Marx Brothers) is also found in the works of Martha Rosler. Rosler is perhaps best known for her two influential Conceptual pieces *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974/75) and *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977), both of which exposed the limits of representation and imported charged political content into the field of Conceptual art. Her early collages and video works are less familiar. Many of these works focused on various aspects of cooking: the disparity between starvation and gourmet meals; the cultural value placed on cooking, and the complicated hierarchies of who cooks and who serves what food. Several works transpose the language of cooking and the language of art, forming a composite that alludes to the similarity between the terms "artwork" and "housework." In all of these early works—be they videos, film scripts, or postcard pieces—Rosler frames the conviviality of food as a bodily necessity and pleasure that binds all human beings. Yet lest such commonality give rise to humanist myths (as is the case with Chicago's work) she also casts the production of food as a form of maintenance labor, and hence subject to the inequities of race, class, and gender, that

cannot be merely swept away under the guise of things “private” or “domestic.” Similar to Ukeles’s performances in both their rejection of traditional artistic media and their focus on various aspects of maintenance labor, video works such as *Semiotics of the Kitchen* and *Domination and the Everyday* turn a critical eye toward the relations between public and private that shape our daily lives.

Both videos employ various strategies of distancing, yet, as in Ukeles’s performances, such strategies are combined with a sometimes caustic, sometimes slapstick sense of humor. In *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Rosler stands in a kitchen and names various cooking utensils in alphabetical order and then mimes their uses (“bowl,” she declares, and stirs an imaginary substance). Rosler “performs” the role of cook as if the stage directions were written by Bertolt Brecht; straight-faced and purged of emotion, she discourages any identification on the part of the viewer. (However, in the background we can see a large book whose binding reads “MOTHER,” suggesting a possible root cause for the character’s bizarre behavior.) The tape also lacks a plot, offering a list instead of a story, further blocking “normative” identification. A broadly drawn spoof on television cooking shows, the tape further discourages identification in that there is nothing to cook, no recipe to complete, we are not asked to follow along with her activities. Yet Rosler’s deadpan delivery is held in humorous relation to her slapstick-like performance of nonexistent activities (recalling Charlie Chaplin’s *Gold Rush*, Rosler ladles an imaginary liquid and then tosses it over her shoulder; instead of “slicing” or “cutting” with the knife, she aggressively stabs at the air). The exaggerated sense of physical labor means that her everyday kitchen gestures border on the calisthenic. The work’s humor and deliberate foiling of the maintenance labor of cooking (if the kitchen had any actual food in it the set would have resembled the aftermath of a food fight) recalls Ukeles’s slapstick aesthetic. Indeed, to think of the two works in tandem is to heighten the way in which the works are designed in part to provoke an extremely ambivalent response on the part of the viewer. Should we giggle or shudder at the trapped quality of Rosler’s slightly maniacal home cook? Do we laugh knowingly at Ukeles’s “floor paintings,” with their explicit evocation of the grand painterly gestures of Jackson Pollock, or do we feel a tinge of shame at the public display of a woman who cleans up after us? Responses are rendered ambivalent, in part because both Rosler and Ukeles have combined an aesthetic of identification (traditionally associated with second-wave feminism) with one of distancing (usually affiliated with poststructuralist feminism); and they have done so, in large measure, by showing us the fault line between things considered private and things considered public.

Rosler deals with this problematic even more rigorously in *Domination and the Everyday*. Self-described as an “artist-mother’s ‘This is Your Life,’”<sup>38</sup> the tape

38. The tape is called this in the descriptive list of Rosler’s works found in *Martha Rosler: Positions*

begins with an image of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. The image track quickly becomes layered, as a steady stream of disparate pictures—family snapshots, mass-media advertising, photographs of political leaders and artists—fills the screen. Scrolling along the bottom of the screen is a dense theoretical text analyzing the problem of class domination and the relation between those who make culture and those with political power, arguing that “the controlling class also controls culture.” Deploying a classic strategy of filmic distancing, the sound and image track are separate. Accompanying this already dense visual field is a similarly doubled soundtrack, as we hear, simultaneously, the real-time conversation between Rosler and her young son as she readies him for bed, and a radio interview with the famous art dealer Irving Blum.

Here the everyday labor of mothering, of feeding, bedtime stories, and cleaning, is laid down next to humanist art discourse, Marxist analysis, and the cruel facts of political domination; their polyvalence renders them, if not entirely equivalent, at least impossible to hierarchize. As one track among many, it is hard to privilege the everyday labor of Rosler’s mothering, as hard as it is to keep any

---

*in the Life World*, exhibition catalog, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery and Generali Foundation, 1998).



*Rosler. Domination and the Everyday. 1978.*  
(Photo: Visual Studies Workshop.)

one of the tracks in focus above the others, as each interrupts, overlaps, synchronizes, and seems incommensurate with the others. To this end *Domination and the Everyday* does something slightly different from the *Maintenance Art Performances*. Rosler does not isolate the labor in order to show it, nor does she engage the literal public spaces of the museum. Rather, by placing maintenance labor as one competing factor among many, one ingredient among many that blend together to form the everyday, she shows it to be as structuring of our lives as other, seemingly invisible structures—political domination, for instance. For Rosler the question is how to make the connection between the brutal regime of Pinochet and the ideology of first world bedtime stories; how to understand the relays between Irving Blum's blather about the genius of Jasper Johns and the laconic address of mother to child, as she slowly persuades the boy to get ready for bed. What do all these things have to do with one another? The tape insinuates that they are related in our inability not only to recognize them (they are too layered; they compete too steadily for our individuated attention), but further, to draw any meaningful connections *between* them. A sentence scrolls by: "We understand that we have no control over big events; we do not understand HOW and WHY the 'small' events that make up our own lives are controlled as well."

*Domination and the Everyday* proposes that the public sphere is more than simply the space of the traditional institutions of the bourgeois public sphere (e.g., the museum). Instead, Rosler's work images a public sphere reorganized by, and shot through with, the effects of television (hence her use of video). Eschewing both the traditional venues and mediums of "art," she turned instead to mediums not sanctioned by the art establishment (video, postcards, and performance works), mediums that presented difficulty in terms of distribution—showing distribution to be as important an element in the art process as consumption or production.<sup>39</sup> While Chicago, Kelly, and Ukeles are explicit in their address of more traditionally defined public space, Rosler's work is an early instantiation of the changing parameters of such space, the very despatialization of public space. However, while notions of what constitutes the public may shift, the society of the spectacle hardly operates without the structural role of maintenance labor. And Rosler's works make clear that we not only have to value that labor as such, but that one way we might be able to do that is to articulate the relations among and between different forms of dailiness: the everyday for her being an ineluctable mixture of politics, culture, and maintenance activities. (This is one way Rosler refuses a fetishization of the everyday as a *retreat* from politics.) To perform this articulation is to be willing to tear away at the layers and veils of ide-

39. This is perhaps why *Vital Statistics* and *The Bowery* are her most well-known works, in that each could be disseminated more easily in the form of photography, and hence traveled better through the distribution network of art magazines, etc. (For instance, *Vital Statistics* is usually represented as a photograph, while the video is not often shown.)



ology that not only separate people from one another but also render various aspects of daily life radically disjointed. And it is here that the function of maintenance as an activity that forms a bond between public and private realms becomes so important. Rosler's work refutes the either unknowing or unwilling acquiescence of people to systems of domination, be they ideological, cultural, or political. Yet such refusals do not operate strictly in the negative, as *Domination and the Everyday* ends on a decidedly utopian note:

It is in the marketplace alone that we are replaceable, because interchangeable, and until we take control we will always be owned by the culture that imagines us to be replaceable. The truth, of course, is that NO ONE can be replaced . . . but there will always be more of us, more and more of us, willing to struggle to take control of our lives, our culture, our world . . . which to be fully human, we must do and we will.<sup>40</sup>

\*

*My work is a sketch, a line of thinking, a possibility.*<sup>41</sup>  
—Martha Rosler

I have been arguing that the aspect that binds these works together is their concern with the problems of labor and political economy and their address to the public institutions of art. By importing explicitly domestic or private content (Chicago and Kelly) or by substituting the notion of domestic labor with maintenance labor (Ukeles), or by insisting on the equivalence between maintenance labor and other forms of domination (Rosler), all four artists explore the interpenetration between public and private institutions. This is notable, for in each instance the various institutions of art have wanted precisely to suppress the public address of the works. This is why, for instance, *The Dinner Party* is accused of being too kitschy, for Chicago has smuggled the decorative and the domestic into the Modernist museum.<sup>42</sup> So, too, the familiar disparagement of the *PPD*, that it "should be a book," is a desire to deny its place in the public space of the museum, to suppress the non-naturalness of motherhood as a legitimate public discussion. Rosler's work has received the least "proper" art world attention (she was only recently the subject of a European-initiated museum retrospective). Her explicit

40. Rosler in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, p. 31.

41. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler," in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, p. 31.

42. For more on the charge of kitsch launched against *The Dinner Party*, see Amelia Jones's "The 'Sexual Politics' of *The Dinner Party*: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*.

desire to envision an art practice that addressed a more diffuse notion of the public sphere and a more expansive notion of art has meant that many of her early video works on food and cooking and her postcard pieces that deal with domestic labor remain difficult to see. Finally, and perhaps most telling of all, the Wadsworth Athenaeum kept no records of Ukeles's *Maintenance Art Performances*, recalling Miwon Kwon's observation that when the work of maintenance is well accomplished it goes unseen.<sup>43</sup>

Another aspect that binds these works is that each participates in what Fredric Jameson calls the "laboratory situation" of art.<sup>44</sup> All four works submit various "givens" about the way the world works to a type of laboratory experimentation. For instance, the body and perception are questioned by Minimalism; the status of the art object is queried by Conceptual art; the medium of video places a strain on both art institutions (in terms of distribution) and the viewer (in terms of expectation); and the regimes of power embedded in the museum are articulated by Institutional Critique. Yet I would contend that these artists add yet another layer to these "laboratory experiments," for embodied in each work is a proposition about how the world might be *differently* organized. Woven into the fabric of each work is the utopian question, "What if the world worked like this?" Chicago offers us the old parlor game of the ideal dinner party, and suggests that the museum could be a site for conviviality, social exchange, and the pleasures of the flesh. Kelly's work intimates the desire for a culture that would bestow equal value on the work of mothering and the labor of the artist; so, too, the work's very existence points toward a different model of the "working mother." Rosler images a polyvalent and dialectical world where the demands of work and pleasure, and the seeming separation between culture and domination, are held in a constant tensile relation to one another. Ukeles's work, again, may be the most explicit in its utopian dimension, its literalness a demand beyond "equal time equal pay" or the "personal is political," for hers is a world where maintenance labor is equal in value to artistic labor—a proposition that would require a radically different organization of the public and private spheres.

Feminism has long operated with the power (and limitations) of utopian thought. It is telling, then, that these artists have dovetailed the "what if" potential of both art and feminism. Yet they have not collapsed the distinction between art and life; rather, they have used art as a form of legitimated public discourse, a

43. Conversation with the artist, summer 1997. See Miwon Kwon, "In Appreciation of Invisible Work: Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the Maintenance of the White Cube," *Documents* 10 (Fall 1997).

44. Fredric Jameson, "Periodizing the 1960s," in *The Sixties Without Apology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 79. Additionally, Martha Rosler has said of her own work: "Everything I have ever done I've thought of 'as if': Every single thing I have offered to the public has been offered as a suggestion of a work . . . which is that my work is a sketch, a line of thinking, a possibility ("A Conversation with Martha Rosler" in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, p. 31).

conduit through which to enter ideas into public discussion. So while all of the works expose the porosity between public and private spheres, none calls for the dismantling of these formations. Fictional as the division might be, the myth of a private sphere is too dear to relinquish,<sup>45</sup> and the public sphere as a site of discourse and debate is too important a fiction for democracy to disavow. Instead, these pieces have articulated something similar to the utopian thought of feminists like Moira Gatens, and, more recently, Drucilla Cornell. As Gatens argues, "To effect the total insertion of women into capitalist society would involve the acknowledgment of the 'blind spot' of traditional socio-political theorizing: that the reproduction of the species, sexual relations and domestic work are performed under *socially constructed* conditions, not natural ones, and that these tasks are socially and economically necessary."<sup>46</sup> She suggests a new model of the body politic, one that would be able to account for the heterogeneity of its subjects and their *asymmetrical* relations to reproduction, sexuality, and subjectivity.

Such utopian language is vague, and for some time now such vagueness has produced frustration or dismissal. However, this is a utopian language without the problematic proscriptive nature of previous utopian thought. Similarly, it is not a theoretical language that ends with a description of a system or an ideology. Instead, it offers *speculation*. At the end of *Feminism and Philosophy*, Gatens calls for representations, both symbolic and factual, of future conceptions of sociopolitical and ethical life. And in *At the Heart of Freedom*, Drucilla Cornell writes, "There is a necessary aesthetic dimension to a feminist practice of freedom. Feminism is invariably a symbolic project."<sup>47</sup> It is within the tradition of art as a laboratory experiment that Chicago, Kelly, Rosler, and Ukeles engage in speculative feminist utopian thought, each attempting to rearticulate the terms of public and private in ways that might fashion new possibilities for both spheres and the labor they entail. But this is not a call for a utopian field in which all parties agree on the terms of the discourse, decidedly not. While all four artists are bound by their interest in labor, their address to questions of public and private, and their pointed complications of the (now) standard narratives of postwar advanced art practice, they clearly differ in contentious and important ways. While this essay has valorized a moment of obscured affinity, this is not to say that such affinities should be privileged as such. Difference is crucial for utopian thought, in that utopia (like democracy) has the potential to offer discourses marked precisely by

45. For more on the importance of privacy, see Drucilla Cornell, *At the Heart of Freedom: Feminism, Sex, and Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). Cornell despatializes privacy by insisting on the idea of an imaginary domain. The imaginary domain is a site (both imagined and actualized), where persons are free to articulate their desires with the historical protections of the idea of "privacy." By despatializing privacy she is able to unhinge it from notions of private property, notions which have been legally disadvantageous for women (with regard to domestic violence, for instance).

46. Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy*, p. 129.

47. Cornell, *At the Heart of Freedom: Feminism, Sex, and Equality*, p. 24.

disagreement and contestation. For some time feminism has labored under equally false ideals of harmony or superiority. What seems increasingly necessary in our putatively "postfeminist" age is a feminism vibrant enough to encourage dissension and conflict without closing off considerations of points of contact, moments of unexpected convergence. That 1970s art work informed by feminism is currently a site of intellectual energy is perhaps due to the problems of labor that shape our current public sphere: from the "end" of the welfare mother to home officing; from the new threats to privacy made possible by the ever-expanding role of the Internet in the lives of people in developed nations to the multinational corporate reorganization of public space. These issues seem to run through the fabric of our daily lives with astounding thoroughness. If the politics of the 1970s were marked by various battles for equality, and the politics of the 1980s were shaped by struggles over the politics of representation under the Reagan/Thatcher era, where the spectacle reigned supreme, then the core of contemporary politics may be shaped largely by the reciprocity and contested relations between the public and private spheres and the forms of labor that support them.