

CLEANING

People Talk About Housework



Introduction

I have never been very good at housework. I like the result of a clean house, but there’s usually something else that I’d rather be doing. Nevertheless, I spend hours each week engaged in some kind of cleaning activity, just to stave off chaos. During my third round of dishwashing one day, it occurred to me that I almost never discuss this part of my life with other people. I began to wonder why.

An obvious answer is that the work of cleaning has low social status. It’s not something you bring up at a party in response to the question, “What have you been up to?” But I wanted to have conversations about cleaning. I wanted to know how people made sense of the never-ending cycle of messing and tidying. I wanted to know whether they resented the work, the way I often did. I wanted to know what it meant in their lives. This desire led me to interview the people who appear in this book.

I began most of the interviews with the question, “When I say ‘cleaning’ what image comes to mind?” Usually, people began by describing a cleaning task that held some special resonance for them, often because they particularly liked or disliked it. They described how they did the task and how they felt about it. From there, the conversation might go in any number of directions. Often they told stories about their families: memories about how a parent or grandparent cleaned, and memories of their own childhood chores. Gender and class came up

often. Sometimes they indulged in fantasies: how nice it would be to hire a maid, or to somehow “let go” of the work of cleaning altogether. More than one person referred to episodes of the reality show “Hoarders” as worst-case scenarios against which to measure their own cleaning habits. Perhaps most surprising to me were the existential depths sounded in our talks. Making meaning of the endless work of cleaning is akin to making meaning of life itself. I came to see that in talking about housework, people reveal their essence: the family histories, relationships, and priorities that shape their lives. I walked out of each interview feeling incredibly lucky to have heard their stories.

Because I’m a filmmaker, I also filmed each person engaged in a cleaning task. Fifteen of these video portraits became a ninety-minute film called *Maintenance*. I soon realized that I wanted to share more of each person’s story than would be possible to include in the film, so I began to edit the interviews into a book, taking as my model Studs Terkel’s thought-provoking collection of interviews *Working*, and collaborating with photographer Karin Johansson to document each person keeping house.

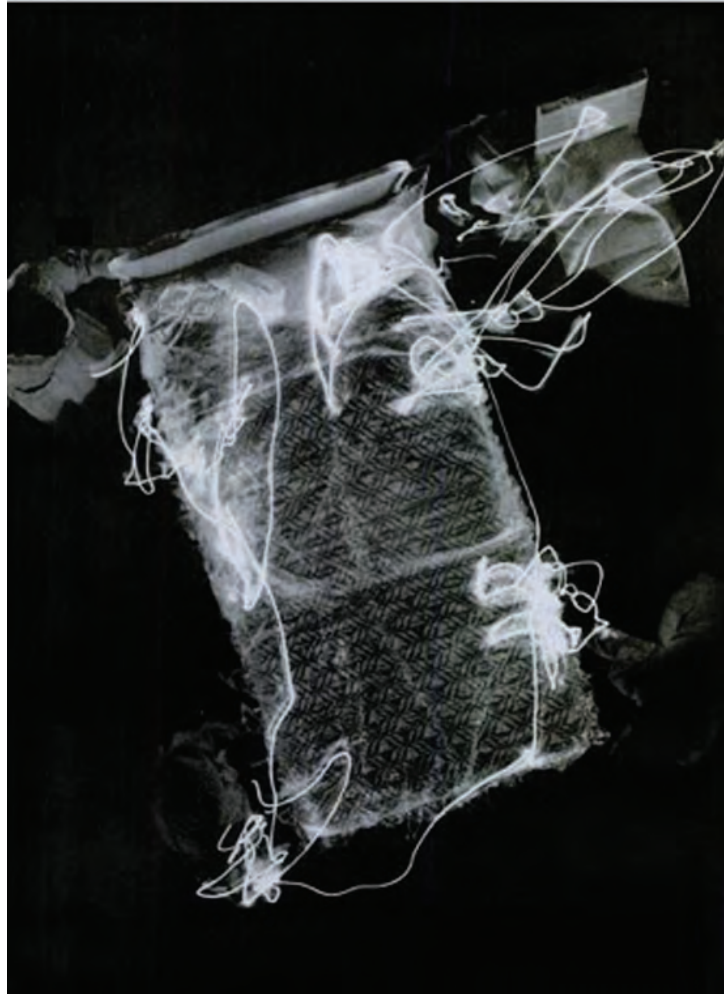
In the pre-modern era, when families lived on farms or ran cottage industries, there was less of a distinction between work performed to maintain life and work performed for money. Cooking, cleaning, tending children, harvesting a crop, and shoeing a horse would all have been seen as contributing to a family’s subsistence. The hierarchy between paid and unpaid labor did not yet exist. When this hierarchy did begin to develop, as members of the family began to sell their labor outside of the home, women suddenly found their sphere of work in the home devalued. In fact, it became doubtful whether keeping house counted as work at all, as evidenced by the question too often posed to women: “Do you work?”

Philosopher and historian Ivan Illich calls housework “shadow work”: unpaid labor that enables our roles as paid workers and consumers. It is work that must get done to sustain life but does not itself provide for subsistence. This helps explain why so many housewives found themselves depressed over the last century, and why they struggled to gain access to employment outside the home.

While housework is no longer exclusively the domain of women, it still bears the stigma of being largely unpaid work, a legacy also linked to the history of slavery and indentured servitude. For those who are paid to clean, wages and working conditions are often substandard. Domestic workers are the last major group of workers who have yet to receive basic legal protections such as overtime pay and breaks for meals. Cleaning remains a despised and undervalued category of work.

In 1969, American artist Mierle Ukeles wrote a “Manifesto for Maintenance Art,” in which she questioned the higher value accorded the creative work she did as an artist compared to the maintenance work she did as a wife and mother. She proposed to rectify this situation by mounting an exhibition that she called “Care,” comprised of her own action dusting, mopping, and otherwise maintaining an empty gallery space for several weeks.

Clean your desk, wash the dishes, clean the floor, wash your clothes, wash your toes, change the baby’s diaper, finish the report, correct the typos, mend the fence... change the sheets, go to the store...I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother (random order). I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also (up to now separately) I “do” Art. Now I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them as Art.
—Mierle Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*



Ukeles' artwork made me reflect on the ways that I undervalue housework in my own life, always assigning it less importance than other pursuits. Not long after I saw Ukeles' work, I ran across this photograph by Gjon Mili.

I stared at it for a long time, trying to puzzle out what I was seeing. To make the image, Mili had attached a light to a woman's hands while she made a bed in a darkened space. Leaving the camera's shutter open for several minutes caused all of her movements to collapse into one image. That compression of time, along with the aerial perspective, seemed to ask me to take a big step back as a viewer, to look afresh at something as familiar as making a bed.

I discovered that Gjon Mili created the bed-making photograph in 1946 as part of a commission by Life Magazine to illustrate efficient housekeeping techniques (September 9, 1946, p.97-107). A few years later, he used the same technique to make time-lapse photographs of Pablo Picasso drawing with light. I recognized the photographs of Picasso; I had probably come across them on a postcard in a museum gift shop. They have become well-known representations of his virtuosic artistry. I found myself comparing the arcing line of light in the Picasso photograph with the squiggly line of light in the photograph of the woman making the bed. What did they represent? Both reveal movements of the hand, but the work performed by Picasso is much more highly valued than the work performed by the housewife. The photographs exist on opposite sides of a dichotomy deeply rooted in Western culture: creation, immortality, genius, and spirit on one side; and maintenance, the ephemeral, grunt work, and the body on the other side. Part of the purpose of this book is to shed light on this dichotomy, and all of the other cultural conceptions we bring to the work of keeping house.

The interviews and photographs in this book invite you to take a "big step back" in looking at housework, to pay close attention to the humble and often neglected labor of maintaining a home. I hope that the stories told here will stir your own memories and cause you to reflect on what the daily work of cleaning means in your life.

