

Blue Collar/White Coat: Conceptual Art and Hygiene Semiotics

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“As for the heterotopias as such, how can they be described? What meaning do they have? We might imagine a sort of systematic description - I do not say a science because the term is too galvanized now -that would, in a given society, take as its object the study, analysis, description, and 'reading' (as some like to say nowadays) of these different spaces, of these other places. As a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live, this description could be called heterotopology.” Michel Foucault. *Of Other Spaces* (1967), *Heterotopias*.¹

In Foucault’s notion of heterotopia there is a dual relationship brought on by his appropriation of the term from the field of medicine. Heterotopia, at least as it is defined in medicine, is the displacement of an organ or other body part to an abnormal location. The paper will deal with those abnormalities as a force of disruption. *Heteros* meaning other and *topos* meaning place, for all intents and purposes, will frame many of the arguments put forth in this text. By heterotopic I want to clarify that I am referring to the Foucauldian distinctions embedded in social, political, and moral oppositions at such intersections as public and private, pleasure and work, knowledge and experience. Heterotopia may also be used to describe a variety of locales (such as museums, libraries or cemeteries) that serve as archival spaces of memory, remembrance, lineage and legacy. Each exists in conjunction with what Foucault would call diffused power that is neither benign nor neutral.²

1 Michel Foucault. *Of Other Spaces*, 1967, *Heterotopias*. Translated from the French by Jay Miskowiec
<http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html> (accessed March 5, 2010)

2 See Kramer, Lloyd. *Course Guidebook on Philosophy and Intellectual History Part 2*. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Teaching Company. 2002. p. 49

Semiotics itself is always already an(other) place and time and in language, but it is also a description of the social position of others. In semiotics, denotation is the surface or literal meaning encoded to the signifier, and the definition most likely to appear in the first reading of the dictionary definition. Denotative semiotic relationships are often physical and functional for example the white coat worn by professionals in the medical field functions as a vehicle to record the stains of everyday activity and contact with patients. Connotation arises when the denotative relationship between the signifier and its signified is inadequate to serve immediate cultural and social contexts.

Connotative comprehension (reinforced by cultural and social significance) also impacts one's reading and misreading, depending on the understanding of the context in which the action, or physical description of the subject resides. For example, a white coat in Tunisia, (where Foucault taught from 1966 to 1968)³, might be more readily associated with a teacher as white coats protected the instructor from the chalk of the chalkboard. In Tunisia the denotative reading would be that of a teacher's uniform. There is a temporal distinction as well. The Hi Red Center's performance *Cleaning Event* can never be read again the same way after SARS⁴ as it is further complicated by our own experience with pathogens or chemicals. Although these associations are strictly contemporary, since the clinical white lab coat did not come into common use until the last 100 years. More recently the semiotic use of the trusted white coat has been used commercially to sell everything from cleansers to cosmetics.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Origin of the crisis: Health officials declared in July 2003 that the global epidemic of severe acute respiratory syndrome was over, but in December 2003 and January 2004, China confirmed four new cases of SARS in the southern Guangdong province. CBC News Online | Updated April 22, 2004 (source: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/sars/>)

Rather than attempt to find the etymological roots of words through semiotics, I am proposing an exploration in the service of visual relations and processes. At best, I'll only be able to describe tendencies and variations, similarities and contradictions. My analysis will typify what I call the five tenets of hygiene semiology: 1) the space of labour (dealing with maintenance); 2) spiritual cleanliness (referring to notions of the body and purity); 3) gender and gentility hygiene (regarding social standing and polite society); 4) the clean line (concerning aesthetics); and finally, 5) medical hygiene (that concerns itself with infection/disinfection and disease).

The Space of Labour and Hygiene Semiotics

Artists have long flirted with Foucauldian notions of authority. By using the tropes of cleanliness that are commonly associated with class, gentility, gender and medical authority, artists have used the urban context as a performative stage and test-site for strategic ruse. Examples can be found as early as the 1960s in the performative works of the Hi Red Center, and in the 1980s AIDS related performances of General Idea. These schemes are even more recently found in works such as *Target Deception* (2007) by the Critical Art Ensemble. Lucy Lippard remarks that “Artists have an unprecedented kind of control over their own production but most lose it in the post-production period.”⁵ But I would argue that artists are only catalysts in a larger agonistic experiment.

At times these works take the shape of institutional critique in the public/private divide. At other times they are coupled with activist practice as proto-conceptual or post-conceptual work in other words they take into account other contexts and social

⁵ Lucy R. Lippard. *Activating Activist Art*. Circa Art Magazine. No. 17. July–August, 1984, p. 13

frameworks. But questions inevitably arise as to how far one is able to presume these to be “conceptual” activities if an activist agenda or a cultural aesthetic is thrown into the mix. At what point does the original intent of the semiotic reading breakdown, particularly when one considers the distance that both time and space create for the viewer? The distorted lenses of time and space take the shape of a socio-political and cultural dimension as we attempt to reconcile them with our own experience and that of others. How do their agendas differ in the deployment of varying strategies? What other artists use hygiene semiotics in their production and how do they go about dismantling structures of power within institutions that have so much at stake?

The word hygiene evokes a both a sense of purity and renewal, bringing to mind anything from the development of sanitation systems to the marketing of soap. Cleaning is primarily about erasure—the preparation or maintenance of oneself or something for presentation. It is at once a rebirth and a return of the object or even the subject as is the case with Marina Abramovic’s *Cleaning the Mirror* performances from 1995. In the act of cleaning artists use its generative aspect to effect change and symbolize renewal.

The Hi Red Center, comprised of Takamatsu Jiro, Akasegawa Genpei, and Nakanishi Natsuyuki, created their last politically-charged *Cleaning Event* in 1964.⁶ To frame the first work (a very specific work for a very specific time), one must understand something of the perception in the West of post-war Japan as an economic miracle. The performance took place on the seventh day of the Tokyo Olympic Games—an attempt to showcase Japan as a respectable member of the international community and portray the country as a post-war capitalist success story. The “cleaning” performed by the Hi Red Center parodied the hasty attempt of the city of Tokyo to modernize and beautify the

⁶ The group’s name is derived from the names of its members: taka (hi) aka (red) and naka (centre).

central district as they played host to the Olympic Games. And certainly parallels can be drawn with the preparations for the recent Vancouver Olympics, during which housing and venues were mounted at considerable cost, often displacing the City's poor—a gentrification of sorts, in which cleanliness was equated with social progress. And, in the case of Japan, it was a transformation that attempted to erase the trauma of the Second World War.⁷ The idea of showcasing the city was not just about architectural marvels but the mark of industrial and technological prowess.



Cat. 1

In Collectivism After Modernism, Reiko Tomii⁸ introduces the Hi Red Center as “the first collaborative unit” to infiltrate the public sphere as a site of operation in post-war Japan.”⁹ For their *Cleaning Event*, each member dressed as a healthcare worker in the performance that was also to be dubbed the *Campaign to Promote Cleanliness and Order in the Metropolitan Area*. The event was comprised of the key members and their

⁷ It is interesting, and perhaps ironic, to note that the 1964 Olympic Village was the former U.S. Army barracks of post-war Tokyo. The city also boasted new transportation systems, highways, and technologies of timekeeping to track the athletes as they performed.

⁸ Reiko Tomii is an independent art historian and curator, who investigates post-1945 Japanese art in global and local contexts. Based in New York, she curated the Japanese sections of *Global Conceptualism* (Queens Museum of Art, 1999) and *Century City* (Tate Modern, 2001).

⁹ Reiko Tomii. 2007. After the “Descent to the Everyday” In *Collectivism after modernism: The art of social imagination after 1945*. Blake Stimson, and Gregory Sholette ed. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 2007. p. 54

associates who meticulously cleaned the streets of the Ginza district using ineffectual cleaning tools—toothbrushes, cleaning fluid, floor brooms and deodorizer (amongst other things). The procedure was slow and methodical, invoking the surgical precision of pathological meticulousness (another trope we relate to conceptual art as being “abnormal” and verging on obsessive compulsiveness). Their performance was a ruse, allowing them to play with the codes of aesthetic urban beautification by acknowledging that place and time were essential to intent. Their attire gave them an officiousness, the authority associated with a medical expert mixed with the image of the sanitation worker doing the menial task of dirty, repetitive labour. As Tomii recounts “A policeman even thanked them for their diligent work.” As part of the event they issued a flyer announcing a call for participation under the heading “Metropolitan Environment Hygiene Execution Committee,” which also listed twenty co-sponsors both real and fictional. Lending an air of legitimacy among the co-sponsors were the Tokyo Metropolitan Cleaning Projects Department; the Anti-Pollution Countermeasures Headquarters, and the Imperial Palace Cleaning Volunteers, although the performance contravened official dogma as a guerrilla act. Even though the performance was devised in response to something very local, it had international ramifications, as Japan endeavoured to join an elite group of countries in a world influenced by Western ideals colonizing non-Western cultures.¹⁰ One compounded by the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, in a final act of aggression towards Japan by the United States in 1945. This, in itself, is a terrifying form of erasure. To this end the Hi

10 Under the treaty of peace with Japan, the (San Francisco Treaty), the country was force to relinquish some of its island holdings in the Pacific (divided between Russian and the United States). There were reparation payments, promises for non-aggression with countries in the region (Korea in particular). Japan was of particular strategic interest to the United States during the cold war. The plan for rebuilding was a result of many factors not just from the bombing of civilians but it was able to establish a U.S. presence in the region near what was to become the Soviet Union. Article 1-27 of the treaty bear this out.

Red Center emphasised anonymity on the streets (they were not willing to name themselves as artists), this was coupled with an anti-art stance. Their position was emphasised by a disdain for publicity in announcing their activities, and in this way may also be seen as a distinctly subversive action. The response to local government counted more than the moniker of artistic responsibility but in the end left little documentation unlike their Tokyo Fluxus counterparts.



Cat. 2

This notion of social relevance is also important in the performances of Joseph Beuys. By the early 1970's he was actively involved in politics, participating in demonstrations and sit-ins, and lecturing on democracy. In 1971, Beuys, participated in the *Overcome Party Dictatorship Now*, an action in Dusseldorf where over thirty participants proceeded to sweep the forest floor to protest deforestation, by now, his political activities and his work as an artist were intertwined. In *Ausfegen (Sweeping Up)*, 1972-85, after the left-wing May Day parade in Berlin, Beuys and two students used a bright red-bristled brooms to sweep up the trash that had accumulated in Karl-Marx Platz. The gesture of sweeping out the old to make way for the new was reflected in Beuys's disaffection with the ideologies of Marxism and Western capitalism had separated the two Germanies. The economic policies of Marxism revolved around the stringent binary

opposition of upper and lower class politics that failed to take into account the complexities of a larger social and economic life. This was also true of Western neo-liberal democracy that emphasised production at the expense of the environment. In

Joseph Beuys: Pioneer of Radical Ecology David Adams purports that,

Beuys recognized that the entrenched, exploitative attitudes toward nature characteristic of Western civilization were, in fact, fundamentally based on individual modes of thinking and self-imaging, as well as (more obviously) on an economy oriented toward unlimited material growth to secure profits for a wealthy minority at the expense of the common good. He summarized the external societal problem as “complicity between the power of money and the power of the state.” His solution for this was drawn from the anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner’s “threefold social order;” that is, he proposed to separate the workings of the economy, legislative politics, and culture, so that they operated as three separate spheres.¹¹

This is analogous to the glass vitrines favoured by Beuys, which are redolent of the museum practice of artefact presentation, removing objects from their context and displaying them for the purpose of study in a clean and scientifically isolated environment. Many of Beuys’ vitrines follow particular themes, emphasizing obsessive anthologies. In his other *blackboard* works he created when touring colleges and universities in Canada and the United States—one of which is *Untitled (Sun State)* of 1974 he emphasised cleaning through erasure. These *blackboard* works were open to the processes of exchange between student and teacher.¹² The irony however was that Beuys did some of these works during his participation in the public dialogue which ended up as an antithesis to his original intention. In “Art into Society, Society into Art” at The Art Institute of Chicago in 1974 the *blackboard* works ended up frozen in time, presented in

11 Adams, David. *Joseph Beuys: Pioneer of a Radical Ecology*. Art Journal, Vol. 51, No. 2, Art and Ecology. Summer, 1992, College Art Association pp. 26-34

12 Chalk and felt-tip pen on blackboard with wood frame, 47 1/2 x 71 1/8" (120.7 x 180.7 cm). Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller (by exchange) and acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (by exchange). © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. 1974

the unchanging environment of museum display. And so, one must ask the question, do these ever get cleaned and if not, are they rendered *carte blanche* in terms of the potential ideological and intellectual struggles that could have ensued through erasure and proposal?



Cat. 3

Gender Gentility and Hygiene Semiotics

Is there a link between gentility and hygiene semiotics within conceptual work? The art museum, I would argue, became the male counterpart to the female domestic space in the 1950s, not one of unseen and unremunerated labour but as a product of the market economy, power structures and, designed public space. This division is reinforced by the clean lines, not only of the conceptual work, but also much of the architecture that contains and becomes part of its subject matter. In Beverly Gordon's text she defines the division between domestic space and the broader working life of individuals, suggesting that, "Although the associations and identification of woman and house had existed since the seventeenth century, in the nineteenth century (women) were seen as part of the

natural order in an elaborated ideology of separate spheres.”¹³ One could argue that with the birth of gentility came the more tenacious appetite for specialized knowledge as the acceptance of home remedies were increasingly commercialized by organizations sanctioned and promoted by the burgeoning medical establishment, an elite group of “experts” working outside of the domestic space. Gordon goes on to attest to the continuing merger of the female body and domestic space when she confronts the integration of fashion and domestic décor, which took place after the French Revolution and coincidentally at the time that Foucault suggests that the birth of the clinic takes shape.

The severe suit completely replaced the lavish clothing that had been worn by prosperous merchants and professional men before the French Revolution; lace, ruffles, embroidered waistcoats, tight-fitting silk breeches, and powdered wigs had all come to be associated with the excesses and irrationalities of the aristocracy and were no longer considered “manly.” Women had no such restriction about advertising wealth and status; on the contrary, by their very economic idleness and concomitant elaborate dress, they now demonstrated the prosperity that the men they were associated with had achieved. Women thus became the primary consumers of fashion by the mid nineteenth century, and keeping up with changing silhouettes and developments in woven fabric, lace, and embroidery became an almost exclusively female concern. Men’s relationship with fashion became primarily a matter of production.¹⁴

Indeed male attire became associated with business through the uniform of the suit. This is also seen in the white coat as a moniker of professionalism and although the Hi Red Center’s performance shares some similarities with Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ performative activities the impetus for the work is remarkably different. Thus it is important to understand the broader historical references that inform the work. At the

13 Beverly Gordon, *Woman’s Domestic Body: The Conceptual Conflation of Women and Interiors in the Industrial Age*, *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 31, No. 4 and *Gendered Spaces and Aesthetics* (Winter, 1996). The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Inc.

14 Ibid.

time this manifesto was written in 1969 women's rights and the rights of minorities were just beginning to be written into American legislation. The Equal Pay Act, which restricted employers from changing the job descriptions of women workers in order to pay them less than their male counterparts, was not implemented until 1970. Affirmative Action under the Johnson's administration had only been enacted two years earlier, a move that helped American women, as well as minorities, enjoy the same educational and employment opportunities as their white male counterparts. And the 1969 cold war politics and the Viet Nam War, with its 33,000 American casualties, were all a part of Ukeles' experience.

In her 1969 *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* Ukeles inserts herself into the institutional, sanctioned heterotopic space when she exclaims, "MY WORKING WILL BE THE WORK."¹⁵ Here cleaning becomes a marker for the conservation practices of the museum itself but the act also evokes many other facets of domesticity and the division of labour along gender and class lines. What I find most fascinating is her use of the word "Maintenance" in the title. What is it that is being maintained? I would argue that it is not only objects but their subjects and even the institution's foundational premise. In this work Ukeles draws our attention to the notion that the austere unchanging institutional space and its perceived neutrality is supported by a host of workers that maintain this heterotopic space. This is a Post-Marxist critique of the superstructure. This notion of maintenance and unseen labour parallels the larger issues of patriarchy being upheld by immigrant workers,¹⁶ and large numbers of women that had

15 Miwon, Kwon, and Helen Molesworth, Mierle Laderman Ukeles. *Maintenance Art Activity* (1973). Documents, no. 10. 1997. p. 7

16 See Martha Rosler's serial postcard novel series, *McTowers maid* and *Tijuana Maid* both from 1975

not yet entered the (peace-time/post-war) workforce, in part due to some of the attitudes and barriers they faced.

A number of ideas are at play in her work. For Ukeles, the act of cleaning is a sort of intellectual scouring, a sifting through of a history of actions that are also based on the foundations of what it excludes and omits and the matter being cleaned from the museum's steps conjures a hidden and often-unseen labour as well as the artist's own relationship to her life as she writes in her manifesto "I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (Random order)."¹⁷

The stairs leading up to the museum entrance (in works such as Hartford Wash 1973) are also important as they signify a threshold from the unclean (unwashed) street to the sanctuary of the well-maintained museum. Ukeles acknowledges that she is working within a set of permissions even if on the surface it looks like a volunteer act. She is independent, but not immune from the bureaucratic decisions associated with heterotopic institutions that deny or grant access.

Much of the feminist criticism levelled at Foucault's analysis of heterotopia has included the absence of domestic space. Mary McLeod, an architect and scholar, maintains that, "Foucault seems to have an unconscious disdain for sites of everyday life such as the home, the public park, and the department store that have been the provinces where women have found not only oppression but also some degree of comfort, security, autonomy, and even freedom."¹⁸

17 Miwon Kwon and Helen Molesworth, Maintenance Art Activity (1973). *Documents*, no. 10. Fall 1997. P. 7

18 Mary McLeod. Other Spaces and Others. *The Sex of Architecture*. Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Weisman, eds. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996. p. 20



Cat. 4

In *Transfer* 1973, one of four performances that took place at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Ukeles confronts the distinctions between skilled and unskilled labour, public and domestic, by taking on the role of the custodian. She proceeded to clean a mummy case,¹⁹ stamps the case with an official artist stamp and proclaims the mummy case to be a “dust painting” (likely after Man Ray’s photo of Duchamp’s dust breeding from 1920). In this specific circumstance museum policy, and undoubted union sanctioned job descriptions, dictated that only the conservator had the authority to clean an artwork. And so Ukeles enlisted the conservator to maintain the new work, documenting the entire process. With the simple act of cleaning, Ukeles washed away and exposed some of the contradictions regarding labour hierarchy, sanctioned activity, the primacy of policy, notions of professionalism and the definition of roles within institutional frameworks. The parallel between Duchamp’s *Dust Breeding* and Ukeles’ “dust painting” is no

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that the object Ukeles chose was a mummy—an artefact that embodies the ancient art for the ritual cleaning and preparation of the dead.

coincidence. In Jake Kennedy's *Dust and the Avante-Guarde*, he gives an account of Duchamp's work when he says,

The inauthentic dust, and the inauthentic woman, are signs of horror because they dramatise "impurity." Dust and "gender-play" are also necessarily about "shame" then as they jostle traditionally "approved" domestic identities. As dust refuses borders it constitutes a real crisis in terms of the boundaries of bourgeois (heterosexual?) subjectivity. He goes on to state that, "If the modern bourgeois home is designed as a kind of prison or fortress—to keep the wife contained within and the world resisted without—dust connotes invasion and escape. Dust means breach. In this way, *Dust Breeding* illuminates the importance of feminine domestic occupations in the perpetual confirmation and buttressing of masculine, patriarchal identities. Dust, this other dust, is of the factory, the industrial site, the street, the carpenter's shop: to breed dust in the domestic environment is thus to critique the gender assignments and their subsequent power privileges. Men (including artists like Duchamp) make dust, apparently, and women remove it."²⁰

Both works are further complicated by issues of authorship. Are the authors in Ukeles' performance those doing the work? In the case of Man Ray's photograph of the Duchamp's work, is Ray the author? This confusion ironically makes clear the complicated relationship between work and authorship and more specifically domestic/private authorship and the role of the institution. As Ukeles re-imagines the museum space she addresses the the semiotic relationship between her assigned position within the capitalist economy by foregrounding the unremunerative notion of female domestic labour and its patriarchal counterpart.

The erasure of cleaning is cumulative in the way it maintains and yet wears down a surface. In Martha Rosler's, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, she teases out the relationship between objects and assigned tasks just as there are gender assignments. The apron becomes the uniform of domesticity and the acceptance of that role. Her investigations continue in works such as *Backyard Economy I* and *Backyard Economy II* (1974). As

²⁰ Jake, Kennedy. "Dust and the Avant-Garde." CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 7.2 (2005): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol7/iss2/4> (accessed March 18, 2010)

Helen Molesworth notes, “*In Backyard Economy I and II* (1974), we see the artist at work in her backyard. “While on the one hand, these short Super 8 films depict the banality of housework, with its endless cycle of repetition and its steady tedium, on the other hand, they also offer an idyllic image of the simple pleasures of life.”²¹ This juxtaposition is further heightened by Rosler’s elevation of her everyday chores into “high” art.

Like many feminist artists of her generation, Rosler insists that these everyday jobs perform double duty inasmuch as they stand as both housework and artwork.”²² As Moira Gatien further explains “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.”²³ But Rosler’s *Backyard Economy* is very different from the performances of Ukeles, who understood that larger class structures are at play. For Ukeles there is a marked difference between the caregiver and the caretaker. A caregiver is someone who is obligated to render services to the family while a caretaker is tasked with the maintenance of the institution. Both involve cleaning, but only one receives remuneration for their work. In one of the photographs from her performance *Transfer* (1973) there is a baby, in a perambulator, in the corner of the museum; in the foreground a custodian can be seen cleaning a museum case. The image brings to mind, not only a lack of childcare services but that the time that we labour domestically is divided between the public and private, sometimes as caretaker and caregiver.

21 Helen, Molesworth, *Work Ethic*. (Baltimore; University Park, Pa.: Baltimore Museum of Art; Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003). p. 137

22 Helen Molesworth, *Work Ethic*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007, p. 135

23 Helen, Molesworth. *House Work and Art Work*. October. Vol. 92. (Spring, 2000). P. 75



Cat. 5

Metaphysical Hygiene Semiotics

Cleanliness gives the impression of professionalism. Grooming, washing, trimming and clipping—we perform these tasks, for ourselves and often for others. Hygiene signifies health and longevity within the purview of the power structures identified here. But how does a hygiene semiotic relate to or form oppositions to the way power is diffused through the various strata of “blue collar” and “white coat” fields? How do its critiques proceed and in what contexts does it attempt to question larger power structures?

The other of clean is unclean. In examining the works of Ana Mendieta, one can see the spiritual and physical connection with the earth. By extension, our temporality is reinforced by Mendieta’s use of dust as a metaphor for loss and mourning. In *Série Arbol de la Vida (Tree of Life series)* (1977), Mendieta is covered in mud as if to suggest an aesthetic of camouflage; at once she is invisible in the visual harmony of foreground and background. Part of the metaphysic of the presumed purity of the body is dispelled by the discovery of our dependence on foreign organisms operating in concert with the systems of the body and the concomitant dangers of antibiotics interfering with this equilibrium. Mendieta revitalizes the notion of the animal body as being in opposition to the metaphysic of modernity, its clean body as pure and disease free. It is not so much her as

it could be any(body) in its obfuscation of any specific identifying marks.²⁴ Mendieta takes up similar themes in her *Silueta* pieces (1973-1978), which typically involved carving her imprint into sand or mud, making body prints or painting the outline of her body onto a wall. Thus the absent body becomes a metaphor for the unseen—the missing— body or homeland outlined by marks in the sand that disintegrate in ephemeral and ethereal conditions. Sometimes these pieces would be done within a littoral space that would wash away and return to a initial state. These works too are dependent upon the photograph and its indexical nature to bring to light their conceptual ontological resonance through the transposition and mediated forms that mirror absence.

Carolee Schneemann, in her *Interior Scroll: Preparation* (1975),²⁵ explores the taboos of the body in relation to the “unclean” politics of menstruation. Even from the time of Saint Augustine and the origins of Judeo-Christian thinking there have been specific rules and practices governing the female body.²⁶ The theme is further explored in Marina Abramovic’s *Art must be beautiful*, (1975) performance, with particular reference to grooming and her female appearance drawing our attention to the history of aesthetics one where the pleasure of viewing becomes painful experience of ordering ones body. If one examines them, one can conclude that they are reacting against prevailing attitudes that work outside of hygienic practices, as maintaining the body becomes a domestic activity ripe for marketing companies to sell disposable consumer items such as feminine

24 Ana Mendieta, *Untitled, Série Arbol de la Vida (Tree of Life series)*. 1977 colour photograph documenting earth-body work with tree and mud. Executed at Old Man’s Creek, Iowa City, Iowa. 20" x 13 1/2" Collection of Ignacio C. Mendieta Courtesy of the Estate of Ana Mendieta and Galerie Lelong, New York © Estate of Ana Mendieta

25 Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll: Preparation*, 1975, gelatin silver print printed in 1985. Photograph: Anthony McCall. Appeared in "High Performance" #6, June 1979

26 Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Female Blood: The Ancient Taboo and its Christian Consequences*, *Eunuchs for Heaven*, André Deutsch, London 1990, pp. 12-17. Also see: Hynes, Mary. 2009. Tapestry. radio program. Guest speaker Katherine. Ashenburg, Canada: CBC Radio, Air date, August 16, 2009.

hygiene products, contraceptives, soap and cleansing creams. These aforementioned products that maintain our corporeal self are echoed Abramovic's ontological performances *Cleaning the Mirror* (1995) in which the body, under the erasure of time in a mirror recalls Tibetan death rights that prepare disciples to come to terms with their own mortality. Abramovic dispels any notion of narcissism. In her "mirror of mortality" the skeleton, featureless, is a structural stand in for each of us. Notions of the beauty of the body fade and instead are fetishized by the object imbued with magical power, as if the energy of the living somehow transferred to the object and vice versa.

There is also a relationship to Schneeman's work as it involves a reversal of the religious rites of ritual purification regarding bodily fluid as something that is unclean. These associations to the past reference the use of water as a means of purification. The importance of water in cleaning should not be underestimated having many historical precedents. The lavabo for instance, was a device used to provide water for the washing of hands, usually before prayer since the third century B.C.E. Some consider the lavabo to be a forerunner of the modern sink. And there are myriad other rituals, baptism for example, which use water as a means of symbolizing rebirth.

The Clean Line: Modernity and Hygiene Semiotics

Conceptual art came about when aesthetics became an important issue (the object dematerialized) the emphasis on the idea become a trace, a mark, or subtle gesture. Accompanied by the tendency for dematerialization, the death of the author, institutional critique, issues concerning psychoanalysis, and sometimes minimalist and pseudo-scientific and bureaucratic aesthetics, conceptual art set itself apart from traditional art-

making practices. In this it offered something new, a break with tradition. It left open to question the function of art and our relation to representation and the object. If there is nothing there but an idea and a staunch belief in objectivity it becomes other to the notion of being unclean, biomorphic or organic or if it does involve these things it seems to take on the label of proto-conceptual work.

This aversion to subjective themes is in opposition to everyday life where a multiplicity of relationship play out in an undetermined manner and are informed by a complicated matrices of social, political, racial and sexual difference. The art object in the museum is denied these associations, because of its physical isolation from the objects and cultural distinctions, which help to contextualize it. This is particularly evident when one examines the history of performance. As Martha Buskirk writes “All too many works from the 1960s and 1970s can be only faintly apprehended through published and oral history accounts that have circulated after the fact, supplemented by sparse documentation often produced because someone just happened to be on hand with a camera.”²⁷ I believe this is what has been fuelling the more recent interest in the re-staging of historical performances and happenings, particularly the works of the late Allan Kaprow.

Photography is, by extension, an apparatus of modernity. It is a mass produced, and reproduced, mechanical instrument with the ability to freeze a moment in time with an indexical power. Digital technologies have challenged this truth of index while the “aura” (if I can employ such an overused term) of truth of the staged tableau remains with us. The mechanics of the camera are by nature clean if they are to continue to function, and

²⁷ Martha Buskirk. The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art. MIT Press. 2003, pp. 218-219

its chemical processes must be controlled to fix the image. This notion is exemplified in Jeff Wall's light box *Morning Cleaning* (1999).²⁸ The work not only forms a relationship with process and as Michael Fried points out in *Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday*, it is also clean in its presentation, in being illuminated and illuminating the clean surroundings of the gallery space. But, there is also something else going on here. In the work Wall acknowledges the unseen male labour of the caretaker that Ukeles focuses on in her 1973 performance *Transfer*. The subject of *Morning Cleaning* is an iconic example of modernist architecture of Mies van der Rohe's pavilion for the 1929 International Exhibition of Barcelona. The pavilion was reconstructed in the 1980s and is now permanently open to the public. Here Wall was interested in the labour required to maintain the brilliant transparency of the building, with its signature glass walls and marble surfaces. We see the pavilion's cleaner at work early in the morning before the building opens—another example of Wall's interest in activities that are normally unseen or overlooked.



Cat. 6

²⁸ Jeff Wall, *Morning Cleaning*, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona, 1999, silver dye bleach transparency in light box 73 187 x 351 cm, Collection of the Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis.

In Blake Stimson's text, *The Artiste*, he joins this photograph to the notion of the glass wall "with its transparency on the one hand, and its mirror effect on the other, the glass wall served as a superior figure for the grand bourgeois project of mediating inside and outside, privacy and publicity, individuality and collectivity. Indeed more than any other single form, it might be said, the glass wall has operated as a motif for both the promise and the failure of the enlightenment, and with it, both the promise and the failure of modernity."²⁹ Indeed what is austere, like the glass monuments of modernism must either be kept in such an inimitable state lest their semiotic promise of utopian materials and processes for better living collapse.

Fried however takes a different, and perhaps more formal, approach in his description of the work but midway through the paper he lets Wall speak through the text. "...in a short, dazzling essay of 1989, "Photography and Liquid Intelligence," Wall alludes to "a confrontation of what you might call the 'liquid intelligence' of nature with the glassed-in and relatively 'dry' character of the institution of photography." He continues,

Water plays an essential part in the making of photographs, but it has to be controlled exactly and cannot be permitted to spill over the spaces and moments mapped out for it in the process, or the picture is ruined. You certainly don't want any water in the camera, for example! So, for me, water—symbolically—represents an archaism in photography, one that is admitted into the process, but also excluded, contained or channelled [sic] by its hydraulics. This archaism of water, of liquid chemicals, connects photography to the past, to time, in an important way. By calling water an 'archaism' here I mean that it embodies a memory-trace of very ancient production- processes—of washing, bleaching, dissolving and so on, which are connected to the origins of technè—like the separation of ores in primitive mining, for example. I think that this 'prehistorical'

29 Blake Stimson, *The Artiste*, *The Oxford Art Journal*, 30.1. Oxford University Press. 2007. PP. 105-106

image of photography....can help us understand the 'dry' part of photography differently.³⁰

These austere spaces are also critiqued in Louise Lawler's photographs especially those depicting the work of Frank Stella being maintained by the its neatly polished and well kept surroundings, as if to suggest that things are valuable by contextual association and the presentation aesthetics of the organization. In the end its material is the trace of the event left to us through photography and ephemera not just to be remembered but to be remembered well in an archive that is subject to revisionism whether we like it or not. This failure of an account is not to say that the visual event recorded needs to be drained of its transformative power as its *telos* is amplified by the use of photography insofar as it is disseminated and discussed.



Cat. 7

Among conceptualists such as Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt and Lawrence Weiner a clean aesthetic prevails, particularly when one considers photographic or text-based work. Many proto-conceptualists bring this aesthetic into the urban context as if labour itself were able to control the chaos or dirty sphere of everyday life, even though this is

30 Michael Fried. *Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday*. Critical Inquiry. Vol. 33, No. 3. Spring 2007. University of Chicago Press.

only a temporary service or intervention. In many of the proto-conceptual performance works public space becomes the laboratory for these urbane planners, whether sanctioned by the state or not. Ironically, because these works are performative, temporal and improvisational, it is the clean technological apparatus of the camera or the clean printed page that, more often than not, conveys the event to the viewer. The critique of the supposed truth wanes with every new manipulation technology that pervades the media sphere and ultimately, makes its reception as truth, less palatable. But this clean aesthetic also stems from the mimicry of the bureaucratic institutions. During the Second World War capitalism was fused with National Socialism to increase production through Fordist practices, coupled with Taylorism, and the efficient management of time. There is a litany of company collaborators such as IBM and Ford to support these claims. The preponderance of improved efficiency also had an incredible effect on kitchen and bathroom aesthetics in post-war America. One sees this in the erudite text by Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller who expose the underpinning aesthetic of streamlined products as exemplifying modernity, rationality and speed. But there are other texts that draw associations to architecture and fashion both employing new materials and fabrication processes to create new clean spaces with mechanical precision.³¹

This orderly aesthetic counting, accounting and numbering, forms part of the structure of daily economic working life, one that is echoed in industrial design. The highly polished streamlined styles of post-war West were made manifest in the domestic sphere with the advent of labour saving devices integrated into kitchens and bathrooms. Lupton and Abbot further illustrate the influence of photography on notions of efficiency.

31 Ellen Lupton, J. A. Miller, *The Bathroom, the Kitchen and the Aesthetics of Waste: A Process of Elimination*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT List Visual Arts Centre, 1992).

The most elaborately developed industrial metaphor for the home was found in “Taylorism,” a management technique that breaks down the production process into a series of smaller tasks, divided amongst workers on an assembly line. Taylorism or “scientific management” used photographic time-based-motion studies to uncover wasted gestures; each worker became machine-like, repeating a single atomized task over and over. Beginning in the 1910s, Christine Frederick, Lillian Gilbreth and others borrowed the corporate cachet of Taylorism and turned it toward the private home, performing their own time-and-motion experiments to expose the inefficiencies embedded in domestic habits and conventional house plans.³²

It may be that to keep the post-war female factory worker industrious in the home, machines and the efficient management of time was the next logical step, as veterans returned home to fill their shoes.

Ukeles’ work is all staged for the camera, becoming part of the photographic record, but the conceptual component lies in the critique where cleaning and deconstruction are not so dissimilar. Deconstruction has often been described as housework in which one continually cleans, in the unending critique of ideology. Ukeles like all conceptualists and post and proto-conceptualists leaves her ideas open to imaginative speculation by preparing the ground for possibility. The spaces change their function under a process of renewal and reinvigoration, laying open to question larger themes of class, gender and power divides. In the film entitled *Not Just Garbage*,³³ Ukeles describes *Washing* (1974). Pointing to a photograph she acknowledges a group of students who surround her as she washed the streets in front of the A.I.R. gallery in SoHo. She comments on how the students witnessed the performance and started to take notes translating her actions into a written account. In the film she points to the

32 Ellen Lupton, J. A. Miller, Albert and Vera List. The Bathroom, the Kitchen and the Aesthetics of Waste: A Process of Elimination. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT List Visual Arts Centre, 1992), p. 13

33 *Not Just Garbage*, VHS. Directed by Julie Akeret, 1986, New York City, New York: J. Akeret, 1986.

photograph as if it were augmenting her memory. The discourse here is layered by referencing the integration of recorded information.

The Medical Gaze and Hygiene Semiotics

Cleaning as healing process and as a preventative measure for populations facing threats of contagion has been around in its more modern form since the enlightenment. In our contemporaneous circumstance threats to the body are many, when one considers contagion on a global scale. Hand sanitizing stations are everywhere—instructions on what to do if you get flu symptoms are posted wherever populations congregate. Of course the irony is that the white coat and the sterilized environment of the hospital seem to be breeding grounds for germs and comingling microbes. According to Foucault,

The years preceding and immediately following the [French] Revolution saw the birth of two great myths with opposing themes and polarities: the myth of a nationalized medical profession, organized like the clergy, and invested, at the level of man's bodily health, with powers similar to those exercised by the clergy over men's souls; and the myth of a total disappearance of disease in an untroubled, dispassionate society restored to its original state of health.³⁴

Hygiene politics are related to practices not sanctioned by clinicians as they developed into more specialized fields of knowledge. In 1912 when the practice of medicine became standardized, the Medical Council of Canada formed and the practice midwifery was systematically eliminated across the country.³⁵ After this time midwifery was a registered practice. This is also the time when women were excluded from medical schools. The bastion of specialized knowledge forced midwifery, a historically feminine

34 Michel Foucault. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. Vintage. A. M. Sheridan Smith, trans. New York: Vintage Books. 1975. PP. 31-32

35 *A Summary of the History of Midwifery in Canada*. Association of Midwives of Newfoundland and Labrador. Memorial University, 2009. <http://www.lib.murdoch.edu.au/libinfo/gdes/refgdes/cite/cite.html> (accessed March 20th, 2010).

practice, to the periphery, reinforcing the notion that it was an untrusted and unregulated profession. After this ruling midwifery fell under the umbrella of the heterotopic space of the hospital and purview of “specialists”. There have been recent attempts to retake some of this ideological space back into other spheres of public space and common knowledge through armature science.

In her exposé on the work of Steve Kurtz and Critical Art Ensemble, Claire Pentecost asks,

How do we evaluate BioArt? The category itself has various definitions, each implying a criteria, e.g., BioArt uses the imagery of contemporary medicine and biological research; or true BioArt should actually use and not merely represent biological material. It may follow the imperative that it perform activities loosely recognized as scientific; this requisite may be met by using scientific equipment and/or procedures, and/or making a hypothesis and testing it (no matter how inconsequential the motive question), or the project may be designed to further an inquiry usually considered the province of the life sciences. Or it may aspire to address a controversy or blind spot posed by the very character of the life sciences themselves. What are the problems that come with that turf?³⁶

The question of activism in all the works I have discussed thus far is a matter of degree. The story of Kurtz has been almost mythologized to the point where it has become the epitome of post-911 paranoia. The raiding of his home on May 11th in 2004, after his partner’s death, and the subsequent confiscation of his equipment by the FBI has been well documented. It has been the subject of a film and forms part of his art practice as a critique of the hegemonic mistrust of armature practice/science. This reaction is measured against the trust of corporate or funded science and institutions and is played out again and again in the various performances and events staged by the collective. It’s important to note that the Critical Art Ensemble tackles the problems of elitist agendas from

36 Claire Pentecost. *Outfitting the Laboratory of the Symbolic: Towards a Critical Inventory of BioArt. Tactical biopolitics: Art, activism and techno-science*. Da Costa, Beatriz, and Kavita Philip. *Leonardo*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008, p. 110

multiple points and this is a strategy that helps to problematise even their own strategic ruse.



Cat. 8

The mandate of the Critical Art Ensemble is as follows:

1. Demystify transgenic production and products
2. Neutralize public fear
3. Promote critical thinking
4. Undermine and attack Edenic utopian rhetoric
5. Open the halls of science
6. Dissolve cultural boundaries of specialization
7. Build respect for amaturism

In the performance GenTerra (a fictitious biotech company) Beatrice de Costa, Kurtz and other members of the ensemble set up an experimental lab within the Oldham Art Gallery space. The performance took place on the 5th of October 2003. The workspace was transformed into a temporary lab comprised of several computer workstations a lab tent, and a bacteria release machine. The public was invited to participate in a discussion surrounding transgenic organisms with the artists and scientists, who were dressed in white lab coats and rubber gloves. Upon first reading, the ambiguity between the professions is made manifest. Visitors, from children to adults, involved in questions of

risk management became actively engaged in releasing bacteria from one of the twelve Petri dishes provided. The participants were informed that eleven of the dishes had benign (non-transgenic) bacteria samples taken locally, and one contained the transgenic variant. If the dish containing transgenic variety was selected, the lid of the Petri dish would be opened for five seconds, and then replaced on the dish. Participants were informed that the transgenic bacteria was a crippled strain that is released in laboratories on a routine basis. In this instance the public was implicated in decisions typically awarded to the domain of a trained expert.



Cat. 9

In Martha Rosler's *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, (1977) an individual woman is physically measured as if to recount eugenics or to test for certain physical characteristics. There is also a peculiar association with dress fitting as if the construction of identity and body image were two sides of the same coin. This systematized procedural trope is analogous to many conceptual works. The measure becomes a standard to signify the body through the use of categories. It is a metaphor for measuring up to an expectation insofar as the objective gaze is always about power and

the trust of someone with perceived specialized knowledge. It is the professionals who have the equipment. In Foucault's Birth of the Clinic he remarks that "every symptom is a sign' by right, 'but not every sign is a symptom'"³⁷ This has a certain resonance in Rosler's work because the symptom in the thing that becomes measure against something else and it is this assertion of right that is particularly dangerous. Trauma (symptom) is the result of something it is measured against whereas a sign is a set of relations and not necessarily a measurement. The significance of the white coats worn by the performers in Rosler's work are magnified as they conduct and orchestrate a battery of tests. The "patient" is subject because she is both different and not part of a larger body of uniformed workers. The oppressive tactics come at the end of the work where an inventory of government photographs of women being measured are juxtaposed with the audio track of crimes against women. As in many of the other works studied in this text there is always something outside the main or initial reading that interrupts a normalcy.

Conclusion

The work of the artists discussed in this paper illustrate that a hygiene semiotic is alive and well. Their practices are varied and yet linked. I consciously attempted to avoid one reading of one artist because of the complexities that arise from different social, political and cultural climates. Of course there are many more artists who work within the purview of this exegetic analysis, one could mention General Idea's *Playing Doctor* (1992) as

³⁷ Michel, Foucault. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. Vintage. A. M. Sheridan Smith, trans. New York: Vintage Books. 1975. p. 93

exemplifying a critique of the way companies make available remedies procured by the science of the pharmaceutical industry.

There is a counterforce at work within the arts as a result of trauma, historical gender inequality, the history of socialization and sanitation within marketing and modernity and within fields of specialized knowledge that reinforce larger fields of knowledge and study. What matters is not that these forces are unmanageable but that there is a form of art, which operates to inform and dispel myths generating ideas well beyond their activity and document. In the personal experience of everyday life as work itself, one can see this take shape in the early performances of Ukeles such as *Maintenance Art Performance Series* (1973-74) or Bruce Barber's *30 hours of Community Service Scraping Gum* (2002). In each case a change and exchange is effected. Political notions come to the fore through the performance and ensuing documentation. One of the things I have noticed while studying these respective works is that we rarely see, for instance male artists working in domestic spaces doing cleaning activities this is not the case of their female colleagues namely Rosler and Ukeles both of whom traverse both public and private spheres.

In the more recent machinations of relational aesthetics, cleaning has been tied to the labour of everyday life. Reminiscent of Santiago Sierra's remunerated shoeshine works in the mid 1990s or Daily Services, a Berlin-based collective of Angélica Chio and María Linares, who provide shoe shining services on the streets of Berlin. They create situations in which the aesthetic value of everyday experience is emphasized to invite reflections on the social and economic nexuses of contemporary consumer society, human traffic patterns and socioeconomic status. These more recent works challenge the

status quo by interceding in matters that often go unchallenged and it is here where the work has particular poignancy in an antagonistic and agonistic free agency. Like the dual meaning of heterotopia, the dual meaning of agonism is both medical and democratic—from the physical responses of a receptor in biochemistry to emphasizing the positive effects of argument or political conflict. Perhaps it is in these combinations that a more deconstructive impulse is fostered.

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