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Service: Cleaning the house on the hill

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Introduction

The role of the service worker has been widely addressed in artistic practice for decades, employing strategies of performance and social engagement as well as other forms of media within the scope of feminist critique. It continues to provoke interest amongst artists, progressing the discourse through works such as the longstanding *Maintenance* and *Sanitation Art* work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles¹ and newer dialogues added by artists such as the Philadelphia group going by the name of *Service Art*.² This ongoing interest may be because it remains a highly politicised subject matter and we haven't quite finished talking about it yet. (After all, it was only 2 years ago that the International Labour Organisation introduced a treaty for domestic workers giving them the right to a minimum wage, fixed working hours and regular rest periods. The treaty was made law in September 2013)³. Closer to home, we all perform small or large acts of service on a daily basis although not really focussing on how fundamentally those acts contribute to the welfare or wellbeing of another person.

¹ Mierle Laderman Ukeles artwork generally focuses on service labour. Her 1969 Manifesto for Maintenance Art can be found at <http://sites.moca.org/wack/2007/07/25/mierle-ukeles-manifesto-for-maintenance-art-1969/>.

² The Facebook page for *Service Art* can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/ServiceArt>. Their byline describes the project as a participatory art movement using services as a framework for art works.

³ Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (no.189)
http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C189



Figure 1 Domain House, The Queens Domain, Hobart, Tasmania

I have added my concern to this dialogue through my involvement with a project that was situated in an old house sitting on a piece of public land in Hobart, Tasmania. The project was a curated group exhibition titled *Domain: a Contested Landscape* which was included in the Tasmanian biennial arts festival Ten Days on the Island in March of 2013⁴. I was one of a team of 19 artists who were invited to address various environmental, historical and social aspects of the house (named Domain House), an abandoned 150 year old gothic mansion perched on The Queens Domain in the heart of Hobart. I focussed on one of the lesser but more constant aspects of the house, that of its daily cleaning. This paper is an analysis of the outcomes of my contribution to the project, how it relates to my studio-based research and begins an artistic investigation into the notion of service as a supportive foundation for achievement. It is also about my first foray into performative practice and the challenges that confronted the assumptions I brought with me to the work.

My studio practice is concerned with notions of the every day, overlooked and discarded and closely relates to the value we place on how we choose to occupy our time. I am driven by an intense need to make things and use methods that are both labour intensive and repetitive. I use objects that have been pre-used or loved which, even when cherished, held little actual value. Both the materials and the techniques can be linked to hobby crafts and DIY projects. Embedded in this way of working I also explore concepts of contradiction and disappointment between expectations and reality.

⁴ <http://tendaysontheisland.com/2013-program/domain-a-contested-landscape>

The primary function of Domain House was education, beginning its life as Hobart Town High School in 1850. It then became the first home of the University of Tasmania in the 1890's to which it has now returned. Over the course of time other buildings emerged around it, a mixture of red brick and cement block, leaving the House an unusually impressive structure amongst a family of assorted institutional buildings. Left vacant and neglected for years it was allowed to fall into a condition nothing short of serious decay, producing a rich and textured environment, a challenging environment for both artists and curators to work in.

Our first visit to the house revealed a complication of stairs and corridors unfolding into various sized rooms, foyers and halls that led one into the other without any obvious logic, making it easy to get lost. The walls and floors revealed an overlapping record of subsequent eras. Little was removed to make way for the new. A variety of lighting and heating features littered the building in various states of disrepair. Mission brown and beige were dominant colour schemes throughout, although punctuated by the occasional confident yellows and purples of the late 1980's.

Familiar odors jolted my memory of the rental houses I shared when I was young - old carpet laid over old carpet over hessian underlay, musty and damp. Years of dust covered ledges and skirting boards. Blue, black, red and green mould, crumbling stone, peeling paint and wallpaper, tattered curtains, broken windows, collapsed ceilings, piles and piles of rat, mouse and possum shit, liquid stains, drafts, banging, crunching and creaking noises filled the house. I walked through keeping my hands clasped in front of me, trying to make myself smaller so that I wouldn't accidentally touch something putrid.

After being in the house less than five minutes I decided to clean it. It was an instinctive and grounding decision. Like drawing, it would give me an immediate and tactile connection to the house, except that I would be removing rather than adding the marks. In a way, it felt powerful. The only force I needed was the one generated by my body. The promised outcome - a soft transformation from neglect, to care and attention. Maybe some shiny bits too.

It should be no surprise that of all the activities to have been removed from the house, the ones that asserted their absence the most were the cleaning and

maintenance. Ironically, the leftovers of higher education were feeble and sad, hanging by a thread, hardly there at all. One large cupboard crammed with files and a white board in the staff room, declaring *Deb's a hotty* scrawled in fading marker pen, were two of the few direct indicators of prior occupation. The thing about cleaning is that it is, universally, a task that goes unnoticed unless it isn't done. So there it was, cleaning noticed for its absence. To reverse the position, I had to remove the dirt and become invisible doing so.



Figure 2 Service station



Figure 3 Service uniform, Image credit Ruth Frost

I borrowed and bought cleaning equipment and made myself a uniform. I set them up in the room that I shared with the invigilator. The corner where I kept the bucket and mop, broom and vacuum cleaner, a chair and a kind of desk for my journal, became

the *Service Station*. I approached the work daily, during open hours, with the intention of cleaning as much of the house as I could for the duration of the exhibition. I first assessed the areas that needed the most attention and then systematically moved through the house, completing one room before beginning on another leaving small cards in each area indicating that it had been serviced.



Figure 4 'Serviced' card



Figure 5 Service cleaning, Image credit Ruth Frost

Although the daily motivation that fueled the work was to conquer the dirt and clean the house, the intent was to recognize that cleaning was one of the systems remaining constant and fundamental throughout all of the changing occupations of Domain House. The work was necessarily performative in order to trigger first hand engagements with visitors to the exhibition and I took seriously the question Shannon Jackson asked about what would happen if performance challenges the strict

divisions about where the art ends and where the rest of the world begins (Jackson, 2011). So, feeling quite righteous about the task ahead I launched into *Service* with the following array of assumptions which were quickly and easily tested:

Assumption 1: The work *Service* and all its component parts would be recognised in its whole as artwork—meaning me performing the task with the equipment in my chosen location. All persons coming across any part of the work would respond accordingly including the festival going public, who were used to engaging with performative, non-gallery based artwork, give or take a few inquisitive tourists who just wanted to look at the house, and by the various professionals associated with the project.

The things that challenged this assumption mostly occurred in the week leading up to the exhibition but continued through to the final day.

- The cleaning equipment was considered available for use by anyone needing it and I had to go looking for it a few times.
- The *Service Station* was used to store other people's belongings. The chair was moved around the room.
- The chair was taken to another part of the building to support a display board.
- Given the size of the house it was suggested I could keep a secure eye on things whilst I was cleaning, to help out the invigilator.
- I was asked to clean a specific area prior to a public function.
- I was asked to perform some cleaning during the same function, perhaps even to interrupt it.
- I was asked to direct visitors to parts of the house they may have missed.
- Some visitors, who were students at my work place, followed me with questions about matters relating to their studies.
- Friends and acquaintances stopped to chat, one sitting down next to me on the stair that I was scrubbing.

And most interestingly:

- A group of visitors (who happened to be art professionals) closed the door to the room they were talking in because it was difficult for their conversation to be heard over the noise I was making with the vacuum cleaner.

Matters of the equipment that went roving into other areas and the duties that I was asked to perform were the most difficult and perplexing for me to grasp given that the protagonists had prior knowledge of my role in the exhibition and the work I was doing. I couldn't help feeling that it wasn't being taken as seriously as I felt it

deserved by the people who I thought should have known better. But, I came to the conclusion, that it was probably just a blurring of boundaries. I was known to most of these people as an administrative officer at my workplace. They were used to seeing me help out where needed and not minding adding extra duties to my workload. Of course I wouldn't mind. In this situation, the switch from administration to cleaning, albeit a performative artwork, was not a great leap. It was still a service with me in the role of service provider.

During the exhibition there were, of course, the expected interrogations by the general public about what made this work Art. Sometimes the explanation they received was satisfactory and at other times it wasn't. What interested me most, and I believe what made the work successful, was that behaviour around cleaners is so entrenched that the visitor responses were more commonly that of people coming across the cleaner during their normal working day rather than an artist mid performance. I was stepped over, avoided, greeted politely, told I had a hell of a job to do, sympathized with for having to work on a Saturday and told off for doing it during open hours while people were trying to view the exhibition.

The social reaction to a cleaner in the sphere is generally one that everyone shares. They are largely ignored, left to get on with their work and if there is a willingness on both parties to acknowledge each other, there may be a salutation. Place the cleaner in an exhibition and the conditions change. Interaction becomes much more variable and more confused. Visitors therefore, whether recognizing *Service* as one of the artworks or not, widely behaved in a similar manner, that of leaving me to get on with my work.

Assumption 2: I would become *Service* and immerse myself in an aura of impenetrable rigor and seriousness inspiring respect and quiet observance in the viewer.

This was the first time I had done any performative work and wasn't quite sure what the rules were, or indeed if there were any. I was not going to approach the work lightly, however, I knew that my notion of assuming a position of impenetrable rigour was ultimately beyond my power as a person drawn easily to distraction. Therefore:

- I was annoyed for being ignored
- I was annoyed for being noticed.
- I was frustrated when dirt returned to areas I had recently cleaned.

- I hated people walking across the wet floor.
- I was upset nobody noticed how shiny the copper stoop was.
- I grew tired of maneuvering my way around visitors to clean an area.
- I grew tired of people asking me questions.
- I wore headphones to give people the message that I wasn't available to engage in conversation yet I took them out and chatted after seeing them trying to catch my attention.
- I took a couple of afternoons off.

Assumption 3: Performance art needs an audience.

Alan Kaprow suggested eliminating the audience entirely so that all elements of the performance could be integrated (Harrison and Wood, 1992)⁵. He was talking about happenings but by taking steps to make *Service* an authentic undertaking, the chances were that the audience would either be tricked into thinking I was a real cleaner or they would unconsciously revert to normal ways of behaving around cleaners, either response achieving the same result. All elements become integrated as the audience become collaborators. Having said that, the fact that I had made a uniform, a costume, meant that I had intended being seen. But I didn't mean this to be a performance. For this to happen I thought I must assume the role of the actor who pretends, but I wanted to clean the house for real. So *Service* was performative and the viewers became part of the action, allowing the realization of my intent.

Assumption 4: The strongest connection to develop from the work would be with another artist, who will 'get' what I'm doing.

I made arrangements to borrow some cleaning equipment from the university contractor which was delivered to the house by the business owner, Annette. She found me a mop and roller bucket, broom and vacuum cleaner, the type I could wear like a backpack. She didn't ask for an explanation of what I was doing until the day we met at the house but then was keen to know. I didn't go into too much detail but she asked a lot of questions and loved the idea. She advised me on the most practical clothes to wear while working.

⁵ From the essay *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings*, 1965, Harrison and Wood, p 708.

When I set the equipment up at my station I realized that the vacuum cleaner had been vacuumed. It was old, but there was no dust in it. Half way through the project she came to the house to see how it was going and we met again on the front steps. She told me that she noticed that the house was looking a lot cleaner.



Figure 6 Annette (the real cleaner) and the artist

Conclusion

Service has many definitions—assistance, help, aid, courtesy, kindness, maintenance, ministrations, usefulness, utility, supply, resource, accommodate, repair and devotion but they all amount to the same thing—the performance of labour by one person for the benefit of another. Service labour is a support mechanism allowing for the successful function of the core business. The cleaning was expected to be carried out unseen and without interfering with the main operation of the space. It is also an undervalued profession performed for minimal reward.

Domain House fell into a state of decay directly because the services of cleaning and maintenance were removed, after the dominant functions that required them no longer existed. *Service* aimed to recognize one of these systems that remained constant throughout the many occupations of Domain House, including the exhibition that took place in it earlier this year. (*Service* may have inhabited the house for 16 days of the exhibition but the cleaning contractors were still engaged to remove rubbish and clean the toilets).

This work may have resulted in unexpected outcomes and certainly would have been a different experience for me had it been performed in another city where I wouldn't be known as a service worker in real life. But having said that, the intention to validate the place of the daily task of cleaning in the history of Domain House was realized. The junctures where art and real life bumped up against each other as expected positions of visitors and peers were reversed and my own feelings turned into real feelings of frustration and boredom, created interesting conundrums and extended the project beyond its primary goal. The uniform and the cards were added as indicators of the art but were they enough or indeed were they necessary? The cleaning was real, and as such, performed a service for the visitor, curatorial and administrative bodies and fellow artists and contributed in small part, to the success of the exhibition.



Figure 7 Service, Main Hall, Image credit Ruth Frost

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