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// Elke Krasny

THE UNFINISHED FEMINIST REVOLUTION. RADICALIZING REPRODUCTION IN FEMINIST PERFORMANCE ART

"The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?" Artist Mierle Laederman Ukeles raised this question in her 1969 *Maintenance Art Manifesto*.[1] It serves as my starting point to examine polarizing conflicts in social reproduction as they are central to understanding why the feminist revolution has remained unfinished. Since the late 1960s the nature of work, including reproductive work, has undergone dramatic changes. This is owed to the neoliberal turn in the capitalist economy and in political governance for the public sector and public welfare. The ground for feminism is shifting. On the occasion of International Women's Day on 8 March 2019, publishing house Verso launched *Feminism for the 99%. A Manifesto* by Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser. Refusing a neoliberal version of achievement feminism, they fight for anticapitalist, "internationalist, environmentalist, and anti-racist" feminism (Arruzza et al 2019: 9). In summer 2019, in Austria, where I work and live, "the Parliament approved the controversial law to all 12-hour work days" (Freedom News 2019).[2] At this present historical conjuncture, I modify the artist's question: After a 12-hour work day, who's going to pick up the garbage the next morning before leaving for work again? After a 12-hour work day, who has the creativity to imagine a general strike? After a 12-hour work day, who has time and energy to organize the feminist revolution?

This essay is dedicated to the unfinished feminist revolution focusing on social reproduction as reason for its being unfinished. The continuation of life including human and planetary survival depends on caring labor. As struggles over social reproduction worsen, it is increasingly difficult to imagine a feminist revolution will succeed in achieving general social and ecological justice any time soon. Yet, the struggles have to continue. They are connected to the deep wounds of coloniality within feminism with its painful conflicts among women over race, class, and reproduction. They are owed to the damaging neoliberal erosion of solidarity. Committed to advancing feminist politics that keep alive the feminist revolution and to connecting art to the social and economic conditions of the world at large, my analysis focuses on a critical constellation of three feminist performances: Mierle Laderman

1) For further elaborations see Molesworth 1997, Molesworth 2000, Krasny 2014.

2) Austria: 12-hour work day approved by the parliament, 8 July 2019, see Freedom News 2019.

Ukeles' *Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance (Outside* and *Inside)* at the Woodsworth Atheneum in Hartford Connecticut in 1973; Suzanne Lacy's *Cleaning Conditions* at the Manchester Art Gallery and Manchester Arts Festival in 2013, and Patricia Kaersenhout's *The Clean Up Woman* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2016. In very different ways, the performances raise the issue of maintenance in the public sphere of the museum. Given that historically the modern museum has occupied a central position in constituting the modern regime of public visibility regulating subjects as they visit the museum and objects considered of general importance and value to be held in collections or exhibited temporarily, these performances offer insights into feminism's predicament with this visibility regime underpinned by gendered, racialized, and classed divides of productive and reproductive labor under modern capitalism.[3] The performances span a period of almost half a century starting with the revolutionary feminist moment in the 1960s up to today's rise of feminism. During these fifty years struggles over reproduction have exacerbated. The turn to neoliberal capitalism has massively increased global corporate office space and infrastructures for global mass tourism in need for a globalized service force.[4] And it has given rise to the ideology of 24/7 productivity with damaging effects on self-care and caring labor needed for kin and friendship relationships.[5] During the 2010s a new feminist movement emerged, indication for the unfinished feminist revolution under today's actual economic and social conditions with its feminization and racialization of huge parts of the labor force, in particular the reproductive labor force.

THE UNFINISHED FEMINIST REVOLUTION Starting in the 1960s, the feminist revolution had enormous impact. On the surface, gains seem impressive. Star culture and celebrity royalty embrace feminism. With Beyoncé appearing as global feminist icon. With Judy Chicago's core aesthetics of her 1979 sculpture *The Dinner Party* discovered by netfeminists and celebrated on Instagram under "@vaginachina" or "@clubclitoris" (Eckhardt 2017). Cultural and social values celebrating personal freedom present a lasting result of the feminist revolution. Yet, we should ask if what appears to be a success has in fact everything to do with co-opting central tenets of feminism into the value system of neoliberal capitalism. Feminism is now a strong brand among other brands in a commodified cultural landscape and freedom an effect of advanced commodification. Nell Scovell's and Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* perfectly illustrates the

3) For further elaboration see Bennett 1996, Krasny 2017.

4) In her 2019 Vienna Lecture at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna Françoise Vergès has raised awareness for the immense increase of maintenance work needed due to neoliberal urbanism with its rise of office infrastructures, see https://www.akbild.ac.at/Portal/institute/kunstlerisches-lehramt/aktuelles/2019/formats-of-care (20 February 2020).

5) See Crary 2013.

fusion of capitalism and feminism. Their corporate feminist manifesto hails a feminism for the 1%. We have to ask: Who's taking out the garbage while very few women become feminist super stars and climb to the top of the corporate ladder?

Socialist-feminist Nancy Fraser has elucidated how second-wave feminism's push for women to enter into the labor market has energized capitalism. Her 2008 *Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History* offers a sobering analysis. The ambitions of women in the "professional middle classes determined to crack the glass ceiling" and of women belonging to the working poor "seeking self-betterment and liberation from traditional authority" have been "harnessed to the engine of capitalist accumulation" (Fraser 2008: 111). The cultural industry and museums are fully enmeshed in these conditions with very few women in top positions, many women professionals determined to crack glass ceilings, and a precariat providing maintenance. Artistic labor and maintenance labor are resources for the same mechanisms of aggressive exploitation and advanced forms of economic oppression. This is an important point for the analysis of the three feminist performances. I will continue by laying out the context for the three performances by turning to social reproduction struggles within feminism.

THE CRISIS OF REPRODUCTION

"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare", Black lesbian feminist theorist Audre Lorde wrote in 1988 (Lorde 1988: 130). Social reproduction, of oneself and of others, is necessary to the everyday renewal of human labor power, but equally to renew oneself and others for creativity, play, joy, love, friendship, or mourning. Inequalities resulting from the uneven distribution of reproduction are mostly understood in economic terms, yet they also have to be understood in social terms including participation in cultural and political life such as working for the feminist revolution. While the focus of Marxist feminist analysis on social reproduction has privileged the category of gender, it is important to recognize the racialization of reproductive labor. This centrally concerns the unfinished feminist revolution highlighting oppression and exploitation between women. In particular, historical conditions of slavery and post-slavery in countries like the United States of America or Brazil and today's labor migration for the service industry resulting in global care chains have inequality-heightening effects.[6] This condition within feminism has been called out by Audre Lorde in 1979. "If white american feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us,

6) See Ehrenreich/Hochschild 2004.

and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of colour? What is the theory behind racist feminism?" (Lorde 2017: 92).

While I have emphasized that self-care goes beyond the mere reproduction of labor power as it includes how lives can be lived and how oppressive conditions can be resisted, social reproduction always feeds the capitalist economy. This necessarily contradictory relationship, aggravated severely by neoliberal austerity cuts, has today, according to Silvia Federici, resulted in a situation in which "so many women now [...] live in a state of permanent crisis – of permanent reproductive crisis" (Vishmidt 2013).

WOMEN ON STRIKE Historically, mass labor strikes are connected to the factory system of industrialization. It is difficult to organize isolated women performing reproductive labor in the domestic territory into a mass strike. In 1974, in her speech on International Women's Day in Mestre, Italy, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, one of the founders of the *Wages for Housework Campaign*, called for a *General Strike*: "No strike has ever been a general strike. When half the working population is at home in the kitchens, while the others are on strike, it's not a general strike." I modify Ukeles' question: During the strike, who's going to take out the garbage, who's preparing food, who's looking after the ill, and the elderly? Not only is there a gendered division of labor, but also a gendered division of striking.

In 1975, Icelandic women's organizations called for a women's strike for economic and social equality. "Women were not to attend work if they had paid jobs, nor do any of the housework or child-care they normally did. The women's organizations spread word of the 'day off' quickly through the small country of 220,000 people. Employers prepared for the presence of large numbers of children who would have to come to work with their fathers. The strike was scheduled for October 24, 1975." (Icelandic Women Strike) Despite the differences between women, "90 percent of Icelandic women participated." (Icelandic Women Strike)

In the twenty-first century the idea of a general women's strike gained global traction. "The new feminist strike movement began in Poland in October of 2016, when more than 100,000 women staged walkouts and marches to oppose the country's ban on abortion" (Arruzza et al. 2019: 6). Spreading to Argentina, "Italy, Spain, Brazil, Turkey, Peru, the United States, Mexico,

Chile, and dozens of other countries", the strike is performed on the streets and online (ibid.). "For the last two years, its slogans have resonated powerfully across the globe: #Nosotros Paramos, #We Strike, #VivasNosQueremos, #NiUnaMenos, #TimesUp, #Feminism 4the 99" (ibid.).

On *International Women's Day* March 8, 2018, I went to the *International Women's Strike* at Russell Square, London. "On 8 March 2018 women will strike and refuse to work. We will walk out of our kitchens, universities, brothels, schools, bedrooms, factories, hospitals and offices. We will strike from all the work we do, whether it is paid or unpaid" (London Women's Strike 2018). In the announcement on facebook, the first sentence answered the question who's taking care of the children during the strike and who's feeding those on strike: "There will be activities and collective care for children of all ages and a collective kitchen will be operating all afternoon" (London Women's Strike 2018).

We can understand the three feminist performances chosen for analysis as strikes in reverse. They did not refuse reproductive labor but performed it as art in the public space of the museum. This exposed the contradictory nature of reproduction in full sight. While all three performances succeeded at that, none of the museums offered child care during the preparation and realization of these performances. Even though the artists did not employ public speeches or assemblies, like feminist strikes do, they performed striking maintenance as revolutionary acts. Striking being understood here also as impressive and noticeable. The performances made recognizable the dirty work as capitalism's underbelly. Today, such striking in reverse can be mobilized for the feminist revolution.[7)]

RADICALIZING REPRODUCTION: THREE REVOLUTIONARY FEMINIST PERFORMANCES

Revolutions are being remembered through imagery. We may think here of Eugène Delacroix's 1830 painting *Liberty Leading the People*. The collective memory of the feminist revolution consists of women marching, fists raised, holding banners with the Venus symbol. Feminist artists have not contributed to this collective memory through paintings of marches and strikes or portraits of revolutionaries. Much rather, they set out to revolutionize what kind of images are created by women, of women, for women, and with women. They set out to destabilize what art can be – and what art can do in performative terms in the Butlerian sense. They challenged the established order of who was denied to become an artist. Feminist art, even though re-discovered in

7) See for example: The 2014/15 *Maintenance "with" Mierle Laderman Ukeles*, artist Annette Krauss working with the Casco team as part of her longterm project dedicated to unlearning, https://siteforunlearning.tumblr.com/post/120954498391/maintenance-with-mierle-laderman-ukeles (20 February 2020).

block buster exhibitions in the 2010s, occupies a marginal position when it comes to the collective imagery of the feminist revolution. By and large, revolutionary images created by feminist artists are contained within the narrow confines of the art context.

My motivation here is multifold. As a daughter, a mother, a scholar, a curator, a writer, an educator at a public university, and a feminist I am interested in extending the conversation on revolutionary imagery in feminist art to make them a resource for the general historical memory of the feminist revolution. Equally, my interest is on how such imagery can be mobilized today in the context of transformative learning as it takes place during a new wave of feminism. I am also interested in feminist resonances over time, as feminist performances critically draw on each other. Lastly, my interest is on how art-based images connected to the feminist revolution help us understand better why the feminist revolution has remained unfinished and what remains to be done.

MAINTENANCE AS ART Had I been at the Atheneum in Hartford Connecticut on Sunday, 22 July 1973, I would have seen a woman on top of the stairs leading to the main museum entrance. She kneeled on her heels and poured water down the steps. A little later I would have seen her scrub the steps, then moving around the water with "very dramatic strokes" in front of them (Hickson 2018). An art audience in 1973 might not immediately have understood that this was an artist's performance. But they might have been puzzled that the museum had its maintenance work done on a Sunday and that it was done so very visibly. I was eight years at the time the performance took place. Having observed my mom at home doing similar work, scrubbing and mopping the floor, brushing the few stone steps leading up to the entrance of our late 19th century family home, I might have grasped that my steps, alongside with the movements of many other museum visitors, were the cause of dirt and consequently maintenance.

On smarthistory there is a 5 minutes and 48 seconds long video showing historic video footage and photographs of Ukeles's *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance* accompanied by a 2018 conversation between Patricia Hickson, Curator of Contemporary Art at Wadsworth Atheneum, and Beth Harris, one of the smarthistory founders. Ukeles, who was young mother at the time, "found herself spending her day maintaining the life of a child" (ibid.). And people would say to her "oh, now you're a mom, you're not an artist anymore" (ibid.). This reflects the general belief of reproductive labor and productive labor as mutually exclusive with the work of

the artist in particular, as it was historically gendered male and racialized white. In their conversation, they place the performance in art history relating it to Marcel Duchamp's readymade and Jackson Pollocks's action paintings. With maintenance a found action rather than a found object, and with sweeping the water seen as action painting. This validates the performance as art, yet removes it from the feminist revolution. Even though resembling the everyday act of cleaning, the clothes and hairstyle, the gestures, and the public presence of cleaning make it clear that this is an artist and that she is not to be mistaken with one of the museums' maintenance workers. This sets art apart from maintenance and re-produces the difference that is being challenged. Even though it was difficult to achieve that maintenance was accepted as art and Ukeles approached several museums before being accepted by the Atheneum, the performance shows an artist's singular move, rather than an idea to organize reproductive labor differently. This points to a central struggle in the unfinished feminist revolution. Angela Dimitrakaki has pointed out "how the absence of the mother-worker from her designated site of labour is compensated for, since another (most often female) worker must be hired to do the maternal 'affective' work" (Dimitrakaki 2013: 112). In short: Who's taking out the garbage, while someone is making art?

GROUPS OF SWEEPERS In June 2013, I might have come across a call for volunteers for a performance art work by Suzanne Lacy at the Manchester Art Gallery, as part of the *Do It* exhibition curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist. The project was called *Cleaning Conditions* and conceived of as an homage to Allan Kaprow, who had given the following instructions to Obrist for his long-term *Do It* collection in 1995.[8] "Sweeping the dust from the floor of a room, spreading the dust in another room so it won't be noticed. Continuing daily" (Lacy 2013). The call stated that Lacy's interpretation would be "through the lenses of gender and arts activism" with issues of "immigration, labour, living wage and the role of women in the care and service industries [...] raised through a series of conversations within this two week performance" (ibid.). Given my scholarly interests, I might have considered applying. Given my decades-long experience in cleaning starting from when I was little following the movements of my mother and having cleaned all my different homes and also in many self-organized art spaces, I would have been motivated. Yet, I would not have fitted the profile as the call targeted specific groups. It stated that "teams of 'sweepers' from local labour and immigration organizations will

8) *do it* began in 1993. It is a curatorial investigation on instructions given to curator Hans Ulrich Obrist by artists, passed on to and activated other artists resulting in numerous exhibitions round the globe with more than 300 artists having contributed. In 2013, the *do it* compendium was published to mark the 20th year of the project's running.

clean the galleries" (ibid.). Photographs on Lacy's website show the teams representing different genders, age groups, and ethnicities. They wear bright red T-Shirts and perform striking actions with sweeping movements between showcases, but also around museum visitors. In terms of the art system, Lacy honored her mentor Allan Kaprow and partook in the hyper-visibility of the curatorial turn which since the 1990s has led to globalized star-curators.

While Hartford Wash had been motivated by the experience of a mother-artist juggling the double burden of domestic labor and art making, *Cleaning Conditions* looked at the structural conditions of the cleaning industry. Catherine O'Donnell, who was one of the volunteers, has written a first-person account. "We were there for different reasons: some had been invited by MAG to take part in order to highlight particular issues (at the performance I participated in there were women representing migrant communities from China, Poland and Somalia, in other performances invitees included representatives from the cleaners' strike in London and campaigners for a living wage); others already volunteered at MAG; some were artists; and I was there to research how participatory approaches could highlight some of the issues we cover at the PHM" (O'Donnell 2013). The sweeper-performers were "taught how to sweep by two of the museum's cleaning staff. After sweeping the galleries they distributed information cards on organisations and campaigns such as Migrant Workers North West, Living Wage 4 Manchester and the Greater Manchester Poverty Commission on the floor (see ibid.). The sweeper-performers were "instructed not to talk to any of the museum visitors" but allowed to talk amongst themselves. After having finished their sweeping, they assembled in front of Ford Madox Brown's 1852 painting *Work* showing different types of workers, and different social classes, around a construction site in Victorian London. The painting was explained to them by Meg Parnell, Lifelong Learning Manager at Manchester Art Gallery, before they entered in a discussion. "We discussed how we felt when sweeping, feelings of invisibility, gender, experiences of women migrant workers, and wider social issues" (ibid.).

Analyzing whose instructions the sweeper-performers were following is illuminating for understanding the contradictory nature of *Cleaning Conditions*. They followed the instructions given by Allan Kaprow and the instructions of the Manchester Art Gallery cleaners. They also followed the instructions of Suzanne Lacy, who choreographed the piece. While this offered ample opportunity for exchange and learning and may have strengthened bonds for political organizing against cleaning conditions under

austerity, the work made use of corporate cleaning aesthetics and of two types of free labor joined together as one. Borrowing from the everyday aesthetics of uniforms used by cleaning companies, the sweepers wore red T-Shirts that had printed on them in white letters "Sweeping … continuing daily" and underneath in smaller letters Allan Kaprow. One could imagine a cleaning company happily using such a slogan. For the volunteers *Cleaning Conditions* made cleaning labor equal to artistic labor. While the project critically considered the precarity of cleaning, it relied on the exploitative mechanisms of the art system with its normalization of free labor.[9)]

THE ARTIST AS CLEANER I first saw an image of the performance *The Clean Up Woman* in a lecture by Patricia Kaersenhout in Vienna.[10)] Its close resemblance and profound difference to Mierle Laderman Ukeles *Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance* struck me. In art historical terms, Kaersenhout, a Dutch artist of Surinamese ancestry, employs appropriation by using iconic works of white Second-Wave feminist artists. Photographs of her three-hours long performance at the Stedelijk Museum in 2016 show a maintenance worker moving her cart. Nothing indicates that this is an artist. Nothing indicates that this is an art performance. The guise renders her invisible. "[F]riends and colleagues that were present simply failed to recognize her. Or better put, they looked right through her" (te Velde 2017: 76).

While Ukeles used the position of the artist to transform maintenance into art, Kaersenhout used the position of the artist to transform herself into a cleaner in the public space of the museum (see also Bartholomew 2017: 8). As a womanist and activist, Kaersenhout, while appreciative of the legacies of feminist art, exposes its shortcomings which have everything to do with the unfinished feminist revolution. Her performance exposes the racial divide within gendered dimensions of labor and the presence of black or brown bodies in European museums as cleaners or guards. Kaersenhout puts "everyday racism" on the agenda in the public sphere (Essed 1990).

The artist had not been commissioned by the Stedelijk team, but been invited to *Bell Invites: Global Performance*, a program co-organized by Australian Aboriginal artist and activist Richard Bell with guest curator Vivian Ziherl and co-curator Aruna Vermeulen in collaboration with HipHopHuis and the University of Colour. It was dedicated to explore what "'the global' can mean for art practice and for cultural agendas, what it can mean to the economies of art" (Stedelijk Museum 2016). In this context,

9) Collectives like the Carrot Workers' Collective and the Precarious Workers Brigade work on and organize around the conditions of free labor in contemporary economies, in particular the cultural sector and the art system.

10) Kaersenhout gave her lecture *The Third Dimension at Formats of Care*. This is a series of practice-based research events on questions of care and its gendered and racialized dimensions organized by Elke Krasny, Elke Gaugele, Gilly Karjevsky and Rosario Talevi. See: https://www.akbild.ac.at/Portal/institute/kunstlerisches-lehramt/aktuelles/2019/formats-of-care (20 February 2020).

Kaersenhout's performance, in which the artist appears as cleaner, sharply addresses the racialized feminization of care labor in the world at large and the global art system with its trophy-economies governing inclusions and exclusions of people of color, immigrants, diasporic or indigenous people.

… THE (UNFINISHED) FEMINIST REVOLUTION … TO BE CONTINUED

My hope is to make a contribution to continuing the feminist revolution for the 99 percent. The critical constellation of the three performances by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Suzanne Lacy, and Patricia Kaersenhout have much learning to offer about feminism, capitalism, and social reproduction and its histories of gender, racism, slavery, and immigration. In all three performances we see artistic critique as critique and plea for transformation. Contextual art historical analysis can be useful to connect feminist art making to feminist politics at large. Contradictory as these revolutionary performances of maintenance are, they provide important lessons which emancipatory and transformative art history can bring to the revolutionary feminist struggle. The sourball and the joy of the feminist revolution are that this struggle, much like reproductive labor, starts again every morning.

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