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SMP Essay

I am drawn to things that have a history, that are used or useful: an old blanket, household tools, a wooden spoon, mason jars, cleaning supplies, a worn broom. I have a complex relationship with these things. They are familiar, friendly, worn, insignificant reminders of domestic labor that I enjoy and I resent. In time the objects make me aware of the space they compose: the bedroom, the laundry room, the cleaning closet, the kitchen. These spaces are manageable and managed, made by social and architectural boundaries.

Architectural boundaries are a metaphor for social boundaries; each structures our behaviors and routines, shaping our lives. In my life, I often feel pressured by domestic limits that feel inevitable and unchangeable. Through my work, I am in search of what these limits really are, and how I can change them. Part of me will always exist in the domestic boundaries that I question, but I seek ways to make new routines, spaces, and images that shape a world where I can define what lifestyle makes me happy.

To make *Achilles* (Image 1), I began thinking about a ritual of sweeping and cleaning in my home. Using the object of the broom, I sweep our house every day. I find it sort of calming, maybe almost meditative. I began to think about how my action through the broom maintained the space of the house; keeping the kitchen clean, preventing pests, making the floor a surface that is desirable to walk on with bare feet. I created a video and an installation that would show the accumulation of my labor and its impact on the space. While the video and the dirt represents this repeated action, the loop of the video also makes the pile of things swept periodically disappear. Habitual actions of cleaning, like sweeping, are often forgotten-essential but ignored maintenance of spaces that we use every day. With my video I wanted to recall the time invested into cleaning, make it visible, and recognized for the labor that it is. Just as the perspective of the display is shifted to something that is normally beneath our vision, I hope that this video can cause us to reconsider what we pay attention to as well.

My installation *Breakup* (Images 2, 3, 4) takes these ideas even further. I gathered objects in my home that I use often, that I think little about, or even just those that have a nice aesthetic. Then, in my studio, I set up mirrors on two facing walls. I shot a video into the mirror, so that the images were a reflection of what I was doing behind the camera in the space. The room full of mirrors breaks up the architectural boundaries of the space through multiple reflections. The mirrors serve a double purpose- they reflect the boundaries that exist, but also work to subvert them. With projected video performance, I refill the room by performing domestic routines

with the objects I chose. I wonder if domesticity can be reconsidered as the architecture is, as the routines in the video--cleaning, preparing food--are also fractured and projected or reflected into the same space with the viewer. I hope that viewers will see themselves, within these boundaries, but able to recreate them. I see myself in this space, and because it is not one space, but many, I can ask myself what is possible to build anew.

Robert Smithson has been a very influential artist for me. Much of Smithson's work deals with physical representations that are made to call attention to themselves as a representation. Mirrors and maps (or 'logical pictures') in Smithson's works represent or 'reflect' a place while simultaneously showing the place as separate from its representation. By rupturing these two 'truths,' reality is questioned against the act of depiction.¹ Such self-conscious representation can be seen in many of Smithson's works, like the *Yucatan Mirror Displacements* (Image 5) and also several *Non-sites* (Image 6). In the mirror displacements, Smithson places mirrors into a site. The effect is that the mirrors create a representation of the site (a reflection) that is also visibly *not* the physical site itself, as the reflections display images that are discontinuous from the landscape they are placed within. The non-sites similarly disrupt an assumed truth between a place and its representation. The non-sites consist of materials gathered in one location and arranged in a gallery as an abstracted representation of the initial location. This physical displacement of elements of the first site exposes the abstraction for what it is and the artifice or inadequacy of the representation is made evident.² These disruptions also implicate the viewer and reveal their authorial position of what is seen as real or representation.

In my own work, I am also interested in exposing modes of representation. Using mirrors, videos, and architecture in spaces I create, I ask the viewer to see themselves and consider the reality of the space they are in. Moments and spaces are culturally constructed and are unresolved rather than a present absolute. Although Smithson often discusses time in reference to geological change in a way that I am less interested in, I feel an affinity with his evocations of time as an element of change. In my work, time allows me to implicate domesticity as present in the viewer's experience. I have an interest in objects as well as the space they exist in, while Smithson seems not to have cared much for the social meaning of an object aside from how it could be shown to be in a state of decay.³ I am interested in fragments of the past or social ritual for how they may cause viewers to recognize their construction of self in the present.

Like Smithson's non-sites and mirror works, I also have an interest in revealing the artifice of a constructed representation. Geography has something to do with my work that I haven't quite figured out yet, but even more so than representation of location (after Smithson) I think I am

interested in some kind of representation of the individual. I would like to call attention to the viewer's perception of self, so that they do not only view a work but in viewing a work they see themselves. I would like to specifically implicate the viewer.

My desire to implicate the viewer led me to also consider the artist Mary Kelly. Through her artwork, Mary Kelly investigates psychological constructions of gender. She explores gender roles and their connections to parenthood, labor, and war. Kelly examines gender roles by manipulating objects that traditionally constitute gender.⁴ Critics often write about Kelly's work as dense works on Lacanian theories of desire and gendered fetishization,⁵ but they are relevant to me because Kelly is deconstructing gender to reveal how it is socially formed.

Like Mary Kelly, I am interested in exploring the construction of gender roles. I want to find where they exist, and also how they may be broken down for greater equality. However, I am less interested in using text or the psychology of desire. Several times I read about critics that felt Kelly's work was hard to understand for the theory that it brought into the work. I don't think that is necessarily a bad thing (theory can be interesting) but I realized I have more interest in approaching lived experience through mundane things for themselves, versus through theories of how constructions are made. I understand objects, spaces, and lived actions intuitively. While there is theory behind the objects I collect or spaces I decorate, I think treating my representations of reality with intuition allows my work to captivate viewers more, as they can recognize their experiences in the work more easily.

Kelly also takes sexual desire or the fetishization of objects as qualities that define gender, and she explores how this theory can be resisted and subverted. Female desire and its objects, in Kelly's work, becomes a way for women to break out of a male-constructed world. I think that this work comes from an interesting moment in psychoanalytic theory, but I don't want to pursue sexual desires as strongly in my work. In my opinion, sexual desire is not wholly constitutive of identity, even if Kelly is attempting to remake possibilities for what desire can be. I am also more interested in possibilities for women's labor and recognition than I am in positing a purely female desiring gaze.

Reading about Kelly's work has also encouraged me to reinvest my energy in the materiality of my artwork. She works carefully to align the meaning of her materials with the concepts that she wants to evoke.⁶ Last semester, I created several works that invoked domesticity or gender construction, but my sculptures and videos were viewed as disconnected from my conceptual interests. Earlier this semester, I created works that explored the perceptual effects that I am interested in, but I felt that they lacked the materiality and content that allowed me to explore

the boundaries of the domestic or the every day. Instead, I was exploring how people see and recognize their viewership. While the theoretical discussion of recognition was interesting, and is similar to concepts explored in some of Kelly's work, the videos only encouraged viewers to become self-conscious, not self-conscious of themselves as actors in a social environment. Both groups of work explored aesthetics, perceptions, and material options that I can explore in my work. Looking at Kelly's work has helped me realize that I need to push these connections much farther. I want to think more carefully about what my materials have to say for themselves, and how I can use it. Specifically, I am interested in domestic objects for their use associations rather than as they are fetishized.

[1] ----- "A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites." In *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Housefield, James. "Sites of Time: Organic and Geologic Time in the Art of Robert Smithson and Roxy Paine." *Cultural Geographies* 14, no. 4 (2007): 537-61. AND Smithson. "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects." In *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. 863-68. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1992.

[4] Apter, Emily. "Fetishism and Visual Seduction in Mary Kelly's "Interim"." *October* 58, no. Rendering the Real (Autumn, 1991) (1991): 97-108.

[5] Mulvey, Laura. "Post-Partum Document Review." In *Post-Partum Document*, edited by Mary Kelly. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1976

[6] Pollock, Mary Kelly and Griselda. "Conversation with Griselda Pollock (Extract)." In *Mary Kelly*, edited by Mary Kelly. 130-37. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1989; Richard, Frances. "Mary Kelly: Postmasters Gallery." *Artforum International*, May 2012 2012, 306.

Image List

1. *Narcissus*, video performance, 6:00 minutes



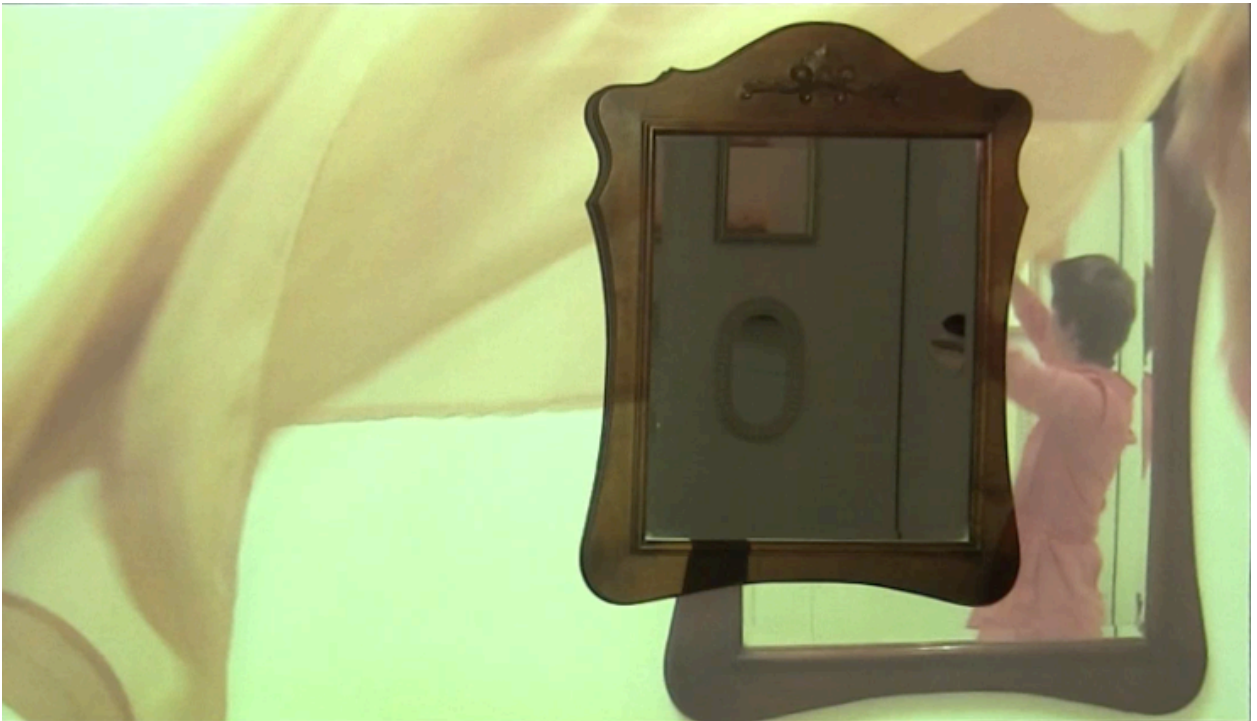
2. *Breakup*, video performance and found object installation



3. *Breakup*, video performance and found object installation



4. *Breakup*, video performance and found object installation



5. *Yucatan Mirror Displacements*, Robert Smithson, 1969



6. *Non-site: Palisades-Edgewater, NJ*, Robert Smithson, 1969

