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1996

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Mensing, Margo, "Laundry as Ritual" (1996). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 856.
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Laundry as Ritual

Whenever I mention I am going to give a talk on laundry, almost every listener responds with a personal recollection. Susie Brandt, an artist whose work attends to the details and obsessions of daily life, was reminded of her laundromat days in Chicago when she was a graduate student in the Fiber Department at The School of the Art Institute. In her neighborhood were many recent immigrants from Mexico. She noticed that they washed their clothes with the washers' lids open, swishing their hands in tandem with the agitators' motion. Was it disbelief in the power of the machine to do a thorough cleaning? Or was it desire for a manual task to authenticate the cleaning process? Susie's story suggests that the physical task remains the essence in the ritual of laundry.

Laundry has the power to elevate one's spirit. Kathleen Norris wrote "Laundry has an almost religious importance for many women. We groan about the drudgery but seldom talk about the way it saves us, the secret pleasure we feel at being able to make dirty things clean, especially the clothes of our loved ones, which possess an intimacy all their own. Laundry is one of the very few tasks in life that offers instant, gratifying results."¹

This is one view of laundry, but ritual encompasses demeaning repetition as well as celebratory renewal. Laundry, and especially the occupation of laundress, is seen as one of the great subjugators of women. Praising laundry for its ritual component may result from the ease with which it is completed today. What was in the past an onerous task becomes pleasant activity because the drudgery is removed. Whatever the reasons, finding delight in the ritual acknowledges the ceremonial significance. The sacredness that laundry implies is cleanliness; *to launder* is prized because both the activity and the result sanctifies. Cleanliness is next to godliness, and a goodly amount of power rides on that.

Spanking clean clothes draw power from the visual, but it is the appearance of cleanliness more than the actuality. Mark Wigley, in his recent book, *White Walls, Designer Dresses*, equates white walls, promulgated by LeCorbusier in his early writings, with whiteness in clothes, particularly white shirts. Wigley observes: "In the extended history of the concept of cleanliness, architecture joins the doctor's white coat, the white tiles of the bathroom, and the white walls of the hospital. Yet the argument is not about hygiene but a certain look of cleanliness, a hygiene of vision itself. Whitewash purifies the eye rather than the building. Indeed, it reveals the central role of vision in hygiene."²

He goes on to say: "the white surfaces that traditionally mark cleanliness do just that, they mark rather than effect it...Putting on a new white shirt was equivalent to taking a bath. Cleanliness was the visual effect that marked social class rather than the state of one's body. To mention linen, then, and associate it with whiteness, was to associate it with a certain condition... The whole economy of hygiene remains fundamentally visual rather than sensual."³

Wigley points out the primacy of the visual. But it is doing laundry that connects the physical to the sensual, and that experience, gained through repeated body knowledge, gives the ritual of laundry its appeal. In the power of

whiteness as the embodiment of cleanliness, this correlation between architecture and the ritual of laundry is significant. While the visual carries certain social information, it is the *act*, doing the laundry, that sanctifies. The ritual of laundry satisfies through repetition and through sensual pleasures of touch and smell. With ritual it is the process more than the product that matters. *To launder* appeals in the intersection of the physical— labor—and the constructed— appearance.

Laundry is rich subject matter for contemporary artists because of its duality; it satisfies a human need for cleanliness (as well as Wigley's statement—the look of cleanliness) and it has historically fallen on the poor and the oppressed.

In the September 1996 in the inspirational magazine, *Guideposts*, the cover story makes the most of the virtuous power of laundry. "Miss McCarty: The Laundress Who Gives Scholarships" depicts a smiling older woman seated in an old-fashioned metal lawn chair, an equally beaming young woman kneeling with her arm on the chairback, and bright, colored laundry pegged with wooden clothespins in the background.

While watching her mother wash clothes in a big, black pot, boiling them clean, young Osceola McCarty learned to wash and iron her school clothes. Her teacher asked her to do her ironing and paid her a quarter instead of the requested dime. Miss McCarty put the money under the pink lining of her doll buggy and added her accumulating laundry earnings. In the sixth grade she dropped out of school due to her aunt's illness. She writes: "I was sad to miss out on learning, but felt good about helping my aunt. The next year my classmates had moved on, I felt so far behind I never went back to school."

This life is portrayed as one of great satisfaction not sacrifice. She expresses no desires for herself. Her only material acquisition is "one cedar chifforobe." She opens a bank account and is helped by the bank officers to move her deposits from a checking account, to savings, to CD's. At age 86 she retires because of creeping arthritis. She writes: "At the bank one day they asked me where I wanted my money to go when I passed on.

'I want to help some child go to college,' I said. 'I'm going to give my money to the University of Southern Mississippi, so deserving children can get a good education. I want to help African-American children who are eager for learning like I was, but whose families can't afford to send them to school.'

The bank officer looked at me funny and said, "Miss Osceola, that means you'll be giving the school a hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

Osceola McCarty's magnanimous gift does not go unnoticed. President Clinton honors her with a Presidential Medal. She is invited to the United Nations. While it is her selflessness that garners her fame, we can not neglect that the instrument of her faith is the power to do a good job through doing other people's laundry. Nor can we ignore the fact that Miss McCarty is African-American. It has been the role of black folks to do white folks laundry. ⁴

Lynn Yamamoto is an artist raised in Hawaii now living in New York. Her installations, *Ten in One Hour*, *How I Remember Her*, and *I hang up my hat after work* offer an opposite reflection on the effects of a lifetime of doing other

people's laundry. As a picture bride Yamamoto's grandmother immigrated to Hawaii where she was a washerwoman for most of her life. There are no direct references to the ritual of laundry in Yamamoto's work but rather she presents bodily evidence that takes on the attitude of limp laundry drying on the line. Long hanks of hair dangle like garroted heads. Slivers of soap appear as specimens, worn down nubs from which every possible ounce of use has been wrung. The artist draws a parallel between her grandmother's suicide and the force of performing a service for others.

The performance of any ritual is accompanied by the instruments which make the ceremony possible. Yamamoto's installation connects soap and the performance of laundry, that is, the ritual not the result. Yamamoto's cast glass resemblances to human legs, live grass, hair, and shredded soap connect the body and laundry, the cycle of growth, death, and decay.

Soap manufacture, the tools, the process, and the distribution are a prominent part of the text on the cultural history of laundry. The importance given to soap making suggests that rituals attached to cleanliness are carried in the making of the tool as they are in the performance of the tool's function. In Philip Levine's poem "Growth", soap is the metaphor for growth in the adolescence of the city as well as the boy. Levine's scene is overhung with an edge of grime and decay. There is strong disillusionment, like that in Yamamoto's installations, that effaces the satisfaction of ritual cleansing as described in the McCarty story or the Norris quote.

Growth

In the soap factory where I worked
when I was fourteen, I spoke to
no one and only one man spoke
to me and then to command me
to wheel the little cars of damp chips
into the ovens. While the chips dried
I made more racks, nailing together
wood lath and ordinary screening
you'd use to keep flies out, racks
and more racks each long afternoon,
for this was a growing business
in a year of growth. The oil drums
of fat would arrive each morning,
too huge for me to tussle with,
reeking of the dark, cavernous
kitchens of the Greek and Rumanian
restaurants, of cheap hamburger joints,
White Towers and worse. They would
sulk in the battered yard behind
the plant until my boss, Leo,
the squat Ukrainian dollied them in
to become, somehow, through the magic

of chemistry, pure soap. My job
was always the racks and the ovens—
two low ceilinged metal rooms
the color of sick skin. When I
slid open the heavy doors my eyes
started open, the pores
of my skull shriveled, and sweat
smelling of scared animal burst from
me everywhere. Head down I entered,
first to remove what had dried
and then to wheel in the damp, raw
yellow curls of new soap, grained
like iris petals or unseamed quartz.
Then out to the open weedy yard
among the waiting and emptied drums
where I hammered and sawed, singing
my new life of working and earning,
outside in the fresh air of Detroit
in 1942, a year of growth.⁵

The collusion between the soap ovens in Detroit and the gas ovens in concentration camps is clear. The narrator's youth, his growth is pitted against another actuality, one that he and the world is unaware of in 1942. Like war, this world of manufacturing and commerce is sinister. It is only outside the factory, when the poet is making the tools to make the soap that he feels alive and clean.

Before bleach, before dryers, the sun was the route to the prized whiteness that clean laundry offers. Nor was the clothesline even necessary. Both newly woven linen yardage and laundry were stretched in the sun to dry. Clothes dried outside smell differently, and, many would say, better than clothes from the dryer. Jane Kenyon's poem associates the intimacy of sweet smelling laundry and the loved one:

Wash Day

How it rained while you slept! Wakeful,
I wandered around feeling the sills,
followed closely by the dog and cat.
We conferred, and left a few windows
open a crack. Now the morning is clear
and bright, the wooden clothespins
swollen after the wet night. The monkshood has slipped its stakes
and the blue cloaks drag in the mud.
Even the daisies—goodhearted
simpletons—seem cast down.

We have reached and passed the zenith.

The irises, poppies, and peonies, and the old
shrub roses with their romantic names
and profound attars have gone by
like young men and women of promise
who end up living indifferent lives.

How is it that every object in this basket
got to be inside out? There must be
a trickster in the hamper, a backward,
unclean spirit.

The clothes—the thicker
things—may not dry by dusk.
The days are getting shorter.....
You'll laugh, but I feel it—
some power has gone from the sun.⁶

There is a terror afoot in the laundry, laundry performed by the speaker takes on its own life. It operates outside the poet's safe knowledge, that is, the domestic world. It is the sign of natural world, "a trickster in the hamper, a backward, unclean spirit." We usually see laundry only as extension of human effort and so Kenyon's inversion, her naming the laundry as the agent and the poet as the recipient, delineates this power zone, this place where cleanliness may be more than godliness. It may become godliness.

In Emily Severance's installation, which she constructed during her post baccalaureate studies in Ceramics at The School of the Art Institute, laundry lines fill the whole room, gray and stiff. There is a basement air of clothes drying when it is raining outside; clothes turning sour. Severance dipped hundreds of cloth fragments in slip, hung them in crisscrossing lines at eye level.

The artist extended the conjunction between home and laundry by including her classmates, asking each for a dreamed destination. The answers ranged from Philippines to Las Vegas. Severance wrote those names in lint. She placed the lint mats in the bottom of plastic laundry tubs and filled the tubs with water. Tellingly, the answer HOME was the one to which her classmates most responded. In doing laundry lies daydreams. Whereas the physical evidence, the slip-dipped cloths, suggest tedium and bedraggledment, the lint words remind that the tedium of ritual is also the opportunity to daydream.

Historically, the place to do the laundry was at the river. The laundromat is like the age-old gathering site where people came to talk as well as wash their clothes. The laundromat is site of suspended time, a place where one is captive. It is a hiatus in the rushed schedule and, for many, a time of forced frittering.

But the laundromat is different from the river, it is a polyglot mix of strangers—an opportunity to observe others without necessarily socializing. The confusion, the noise make it difficult to concentrate so it is a place to simply be quiet, to reflect. There is a similarity to the house of worship in the enforced stilling of the hands and the mind.

Greg Vendena made and bound a book of photographs and text meant to be kept and read at the laundromat. His interest in laundromat as site grew from his architectural studies that later moved to art. In Vendena's *Laundry Book* the text of the Jorge Borges's parable, *The Lottery in Babylon*, is superimposed on photographs of the interior of the laundromat while the responses of the customers are superimposed on photographs of their hands. Vendena asks questions, such as, "How long have you been coming here?" or "What do you think of gentrification?" or "What do you think about prejudice and racism?"

By definition a lottery is democratic, anyone can buy a chance and all chances are equal. But Borges inverts the rules of the lottery. The narrator begins: "Like all men in Babylon, I have been proconsul; like all, a slave." Losing is more than not winning. The ticket holders could win a sum or they could be forced to pay a fine. In the end the terror of chance spreads to all actions, assuring the absolute power of the Company, the government.

The residents in Babylon seemingly make choices but are controlled in this autocratic game of chance. The Borges story is initially organized around coins but the lottery soon permeates every decision. In reading Vendena's book the equal placement of the two texts makes them appear equal, but gradually the Borges dominates. The survey questions pale beside the terror of *The Lottery in Babylon*.⁷

Laundry, apparently so democratic, undertaken by all classes and walks of life in this laundromat, is perhaps not such a leveling activity after all. For in reality only a certain stratum of society uses the laundromat. Wealth frees one to buy appliances and/or drop it off at the local laundry and dry cleaners.

The laundromat is usually viewed through the eyes of the customer. In the film, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the perspective is from the entrepreneur. The film indicates how economic power changes political power. Set in London in the mid-1980s the immigrant population of Pakistanis economically threatens the existing class structure. The hero, Omar, is an outsider both because he is Pakistani and gay. The story revolves around his success in converting a laundromat from dingy to designed. He makes it into *the* place to do one's laundry. In an early scene Omar hangs out his laundry on the balcony of the tenement flat where he lives with his father, a displaced intellectual subsisting on vodka and the past. Unable to help his son, the father advises Omar to go to his brother, the uncle who has successfully "squeezed the tits of the system" as he puts it. The uncle sets up his nephew with a rundown laundrette ("There is money in muck").

The nephew relies on the physical strength of his lover, a bloke, to establish the business, to keep away the riffraff, the bloke's former gang. The two young men remodel the laundrette, originally named CHURCHILL'S LAUNDRETTE, and open it as POWDERS. The uncle and his mistress, Rachel, waltz on the new linoleum floor while the lovers make love in the back and the crowds wait to enter. Life is not this wonderful for long.

Omar's father finally confronts himself, his disillusionment, his son's success. The uncle loses Rachel. And perhaps most significantly the power

structure is undone by the disenfranchised, the first neighborhood occupants who, in fact, were never in power but exert power through violence.

Laundry and power flow through the film in an undercurrent which crystallizes the complexities of women's historical, societal role in doing the laundry viz a viz the pleasures that the ritual may deliver. The uncle's mistress demonstrates what it means to be ostracized from the world of women. She is present in the male world of the garage and the laundrette, which in this instance *is* a place of power, because we see it from an economic perspective. Rachel is powerless in the domestic world. The uncle's daughter says to this rival who undermines her mother, "I don't like women who live off men." The mistress replies, "You must understand, we are of different generations, different classes. Everything is waiting for you. The only one who has ever waited for me is your father." Rachel's constructed appearance entitles her to another kind of power, one which is divorced from menial labor and domesticity.

Today laundry is divorced from menial labor. Historically laundry has separated one class from another, either you could afford to have someone do your laundry or you must do your own. It was complicated and required skill to do correctly. Today almost every one does her or his own and it involves practically no know-how. The economic barometer is whether or not one's living conditions and income permit the luxury of owning machines. Even if a visit to a coin laundry is necessary, the relatively small cost of operating automatic washing machines and dryers enables doing effortless laundry at little expense of time or money.

As the labor of laundry lessened, the task and the implements attached to the procedure were romanticized. The early machines for home use are often seen with nostalgia. The 1930s and 1940s are pivotal because women were freed from drudgery but not from their traditional role. Nostalgia ties laundry to washboards, enormous irons heated on wood stoves, clothes blowing on clotheslines, wringer washers and mangles. There is an ambivalence in the memory of the physical labor and the subjection that laundry evokes. The ritual endeavor carries the dark side as well as the invigorating side that often slips into nostalgia. The intersection of these two memories come together in remembering and reenacting a ritual that has lost much of the deliberate, repetitious steps of ritual. It combines both the communal and the private. Laundry is silence as much as it is the conversation of a community gathering.

At Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in the summer of 1996, Sheri Simons's fiber students spontaneously struck up a performance staged at the entrance to the dining hall. Dressed alike and muzzled with latex mouthguards, they called to each other, "hello, hello," while they ironed with irons or tea kettles. The viewers, especially the women watching, were disturbed. They wanted to remove the women's muzzles but the performers wouldn't let them. The outsiders were not allowed into this closed community. Though their actions and their constructed appearance represented the subservient, in fact a definite power clung to them.

¹ Kathleen Norris, "It All Comes Out in the Wash," (*The New York Times Magazine*, August 18, 1993), p. 16.

² Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), p. 5.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Osceola MaCarty, "Set Aside a Portion," *Guideposts Magazine*, September 1996, p. 1-5.

⁵ Philip Levine, "Growth," *What Work Is*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), p. 10.

⁶ Jane Kenyon, "Wash Day," *Let Evening Come*, (St Paul, MN: Greywolf Press, 1990), p. 59.

⁷ Greg Vendena's *Laundry Book* resides in the Able Fabric Care Coin Op Laundry Dry Cleaning, San Francisco, CA. All quotes from a conversation with the artist, August 1996.