

“I’m no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind’s hand.”
/Sylvia Plath: *Morning Song*/

“We are well aware that children suck our blood and gnaw our
flesh. This is true, so from time to time we need to get rid of them
for a while. Sometimes mom needs to breathe freely, eat out or go
to cinema with her spouse so her child can get back a more
relaxed and chewable mother. The mother’s well-being is
paramount in order that she could rejoice her life and her child and
does not just suffer from them and her countless chores.”
/Interview with Tamás Vekerdy¹/

house: According to one of its primary meanings, it is a feminine
symbol, the protecting bosom of the Great Mother (*Magna Mater*).
Akin to the cave and the grave, the house evokes the mother’s
womb, an embracing eternal shelter bearing a possibility for
revirescence.
/In: Pál József–Újvári Edit: *Szimbólumtár*²/

What is love?

House Work

An exhibition of Clare Gallagher & Csilla Klenyánszki

What is love?

Or, to be more precise, what could love mean within the economic system of capitalism?
The market economy transforms the diverse manifestations of love, along with the practices
of sex, caregiving, and housework, to fit into the logic of capital accumulation. The process
by which the re-creation of life becomes part of the capitalist production can be denoted by
the terms ‘reproduction’, ‘social reproduction’, or ‘reproductive work’. This umbrella concept
of reproductive work – including inter alia caring for the elderly and children, cooking,
cleaning, and other household chores – encompasses a myriad of seemingly independent
activities, all essential to sustaining human life at individual, communal, and societal levels.
These tasks are unequally distributed between the two genders – they are far more
burdensome for women than they are for men. Moreover, to date, these typically unpaid
activities that are carried out mainly within the private sphere of life require the largest
amount of time from people in every society over the world. “Its private nature and the
institutionalized myths surrounding social reproduction – such as that reproductive activity is
not work but an instinctive response, or that no value is created within the household – make
reproductive work invisible. And it is this invisibility that allows capitalists to systematically
extract the added value generated within the household.”³

Home as studio

¹ Tamás Vekerdy (1935–2019) Hungarian psychologist and author.

<https://www.baon.hu/bacs-kiskun/kozelet-bacs-kiskun/frusztraciok-tomege-teszi-agresszivve-a-gyerek-et-374737/>

² Pál József–Újvári Edit: *Szimbólumtár*, Balassi, Budapest, 1997

³ Csányi Gergely–Gagy Ágnes–Keréky Ágnes: Társadalmi reprodukció. Az élet újratermelése a kapitalizmusban, In: *FORDULAT* 24, 2018/2, 6. o.

Through their series of photographs presented at the *House Work* exhibition, Clare Gallagher and Csilla Klenyánszki provide an insight into their own homes, into the intimate environments and scenes in which they live their daily lives, simultaneously operating two roles – the mother's and the photographer's. Their pictures, the evidence of their artistic practice that even traditional economic theories readily accept as productive work, manage to make some of their various reproductive activities visible showing them through homely window panes, familiar bathroom doors, completely mundane objects like cleaning supplies, crumpled paper balls, boxes, books, clotheshorses, ladders, tissues, glasses, and houseplants that are numerous props of invisible work. Being practising mothers, parenthood, their children, home events, and the family home's objects became their central themes, whilst the time and space they set aside for artistic creation got almost entirely merged with their everyday lives. The studio, this classic topos of art history usually embodying the master's genie in every square centimeter, appears under a slightly different angle at Klenyánszki and Gallagher. It is the entire house that has become a creative space, where, instead of work sketches, equipment for photography, laboratory supplies, and shelving systems jam-packed only with high-impact art books, the living space of a family can be seen. In this manner, via the interior details they chose to showcase, we can get an insight into both their artistic lives and the private microcosms of their families.

***Pillars of Home* – a playful race against time**

The arrival of their child(ren) rearranged the studios and living spaces of both photographers, and concomitantly their disposition of time. Csilla Klenyánszki engaged the theme of this transformation⁴ in many of her works, including her *Pillars of Home* project. The series features 98 images of balancing pieces that the photographer built and shot in her own home – sometimes putting herself as well inside the compositions – during those thirty-minute windows while her baby boy was asleep. She and her partner live in the Netherlands as expats; thus when the child was born, they had nobody from the extended family around to help, and since the daycare was too expensive for them, they did not have the opportunity to share the parental tasks with anyone. For one year and a half after their infant was born, the living room, the kitchen, the bedroom, and even the stairs became a studio for Klenyánszki in the short working sessions scheduled by the biorhythm of the baby. Besides this basic pressure of time, her creative work was also regulated by the requirement of undisturbed *stillness*, because if something crashed, the baby could wake up and “the studio would have vanished right away.” So the images of the *Pillars of Home* series are literal still lifes showing attributes surrounding the young mother who has just recently entered adulthood from household cleaners through sports equipment and the artist's own body, shakily towering on each other in the most absurd situations. The composition on the verge of collapsing as a symbol of temporality and human thrown-ness into transiency⁵ is also present in a number of Dutch and Flemish still lifes that are antecedents of

⁴Klenyánszki initiated the [Mothers in Arts Residency](#) program in 2016. The project was based on the public domain know-how created by artist Lenka Clayton for *An Artist Residency in Motherhood (ARIM)*, which is an on-line art residency project developed specifically for mothers. With the support of the Mondriaan Fonds, Klenyánszki made this unusual program happen in real life in Amsterdam over a period of three months. Ninety people from all over the world applied to the open call, three of whom were eventually chosen to join the *Mothers in Arts Residency* event. During the trimester spent together, everyone was working on a separate project; the daycare was at the Klenyánszki's home; they organized an exhibition and a studio visit and also made a documentary film.

⁵ Cf. artists from [Willem Claesz Heda](#), through the [Fischli & Weiss](#) and the [Lernert & Sander](#) duos.

Klenyánszki's work in art history. In the ludic settings of *Pillars of Home*, the strange, enigmatic positions of the objects also refers to the tense state of the juggler, who is this time the mother, trying to balance between her most important duties.

***The Second Shift* – a collection of visual poems on reproductive work**

In her work both as an artist and a university lecturer,⁶ Clare Gallagher deals with everyday home experiences that she observes, records, contextualizes, interprets, and then shares in various forms. After the birth of her first child, she directed her focus of attention within this domain towards the human condition of being a mother and the pile of household duties towering before a mother like a pillar.⁷ In *The Second Shift* project on display, she, a full time working mother of two, reflects on the never ending grind of her second shift as a manager in charge of her family's household, raising the children, doing the laundry, washing the dishes, cooking the meals, and cleaning the house. To this day, with rare exceptions, the full responsibility of all of that falls to the lot of the mother in the nuclear family, leading to gender inequality and resentment over being treated unequal.⁸ “[It's a] quietly angry book,”⁹ Gallagher describes the volume made out of *The Second Shift* project, in which the multi-genre pictures and various texts about household chores are organized following a poetic principle. This project includes still lifes too, however, Gallagher's attitude is radically different from Klenyánszki's – she does not do staged photography or arrange scenes, instead, like a professional observer, she aims to visually record her environment with the simplest instrument causing the least disturbance possible.¹⁰ Her photographic attitude combines the mother's attention to intimate situations, significant moments, and emotions with a distanced, anthropologist-like attitude. Gallagher documents her invisible work at home from the position of the participant-observer avoiding influencing her environment or the behavior of her children. Although, while documenting, she never intends to convince people about the objectivity of the things represented, rather she wants to picture the way she experiences these moments as a mother and a photographer. *The Second Shift* is a lyrical documentary work¹¹, telltale of the personal perspective of its maker in each piece.

⁶ A photography lecturer since 2003, Gallagher teaches on the BA and MFA programmes at the Belfast School of Art, Ulster University. She recently completed a PhD using photography and video to research the hidden work of home and family.

⁷ In addition to her latest project *The Second Shift* she deals with the same subject in her previous work *Domestic Drift*: “*Domestic Drift* is concerned with everyday life - the ordinary activities, states of mind and conditions of existence that fill time outside the moments of drama and spectacle. It examines the sense of ordinariness inherent in the repetitive, habitual work of home while trying to appreciate the experience as simultaneously mundane and precious.” Source:

<https://www.claregallagher.co.uk/domestic-drift>

⁸ “I grew up in the 1970s. My generation were told that we were equal and that, if we worked hard enough, we would be as good as anyone, so we applied ourselves. Instead, we have the illusion of equality. There is a silence about that still – not least because it suits half the population to help prop up a system that maintains that illusion.” In: ‘Even dust can be interesting’: the woman who photographs housework, In: The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jan/05/even-dust-can-be-interesting-clare-gallagher-photographs-housework>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “I’m not into all the masculine stuff of big, expensive toys. I could as easily make work on a phone with a camera. Essentially, I want a tool that doesn’t get in the way. I’m really not interested in the status of the camera.”

¹¹ Cf. artists from photographers like Walker Evans, Helen Levitt, Rinko Kawauchi, etc. to lyrical documentary filmmakers including Chris Marker, and Humphrey Jennings.

Blood-stained tissues, snail trails, steam; remains of cooking, half-smiles, children's napes, hands, soles, locks of hair, humps of laundry, and swirling dishwater lead us through different scenes, moods, and tense or casual, scared or funny, but ever intimate moments.

Personal is political

Selfless caregiving is an ultimate case of donation through which the mother sacrifices her time for the ones she cares for. This gift of her time spent is impossible to be reciprocated; that same period of time can never be returned to the giver, since the economy of love does not work that way. And this might be the reason why this kind of act remains invisible and unquantifiable within the scheme of capitalism. The artists featured in the *House Work* exhibition bring this issue belonging to the private life of women to the forefront of publicity, highlighting that it is a result of an unjust system working against their favor. Even though both series are deeply personal, the thoughts that spring from the artists' delivery of the themes constitute an important addition not only to understanding the general phenomena of care, love, motherhood, artist-motherhood, and invisible work, but also to framing gender inequalities and many other social constructs regarding gender.

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