

Duration Performance: The Economy of Feminized Maintenance Work

Faith Wilding

This is a story about invisible hands.

This is a story about endless work.

This is a story about women's work of maintenance and survival.

This is a story about the laboring female body in the invisible feminine economy of production and reproduction.

This is a story about repetition, boredom, exhaustion, stress, crashes.

This is a story about tedious, repetitive, straining, manual labor harnessed to the speed of electronic machines.

clean, wash, dust, wring, iron, sweep, cook, shop, phone, drive, clean, iron, enter, mix, drive, delete, clean, purge, wash, merge, edit, shop, fold, phone, file, select, copy, curse, cut, sweep, paste, insert, format, iron, program, type, assemble, cook, email, fax, cry, forward, sort, type, click, dust, clean, etc.

1. Feminist Maintenance Performance Art:

In recent decades, the mass deployment of electronic technology in offices and workplaces has profoundly changed the structure of work, and the relationship of home and work life in ways that are having particularly disturbing effects on women. In the US, women who have largely been concentrated in the lower echelons of the labor market--such as clerical work, the garment industries, manufacturing and service jobs--are increasingly being thrown out of waged labor and forced into part time privatized telework, home-based piece work, and service labor. This situation is once again confining many women to the private sphere of the home where they perform double maintenance labor: that of taking care of the family, and that of working in the global consumer economy. Made possible by automated Information Technology (IT), and controlled by mobile

capital, it is a market economy based on just-in-time production and distribution strategies that speed up and control the pace of work and life.

The global disappearance of secure salaried and waged jobs does not mean the end of hard labor or tedious, repetitive, manual maintenance work. Worldwide, much of the rote maintenance work of keyboarding, data entry, electronic parts assembly, and service labor is still done manually, predominantly by women. But the spread of automated machinery into the workplace and the hidden nature of homework and telework is contributing to making women's work and women's laboring bodies invisible again.

Recently, cyberfeminists have begun to meet, both face to face and electronically, to begin to strategize ways of analyzing, revealing, and transforming women's current relationship to IT, as well as intervening in the replication of traditional gender structures in electronic culture. Later in this presentation I will suggest some ways in which these concerns relate to women's changing labor conditions worldwide. Before describing the current political conditions of feminized maintenance and telework, I want to show and discuss some feminist performances from the 1970s as a way of connecting current developments to a feminist analysis of women's work, and as a concrete demonstration of strategies that could serve as a departure point for cyberfeminist activism today.

Catalyzed by the sweeping changes in women's work and personal lives instigated by the burgeoning women's liberation movement of the 1960s, some US feminist artists in the 1970s created pioneering performance and installation pieces that made visible women's laboring bodies and their daily maintenance work--the repetitive, endless, unpaid work that sustains and makes possible the daily lives of individuals, families, and institutions. This performance art was inspired by groundbreaking studies like Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, which analyzed the cultural, economic, and political construction of women's gender roles, the traditional

division of labor, and the increasing rebellion of (mostly middle-class) women against their confinement to the private sphere of the home.

The landmark feminist collaborative artwork *Womanhouse* was produced by students and teachers of the California Institute of the Arts in three months from November 1971 to February 1972. *Womanhouse* was installed in a family dwelling house on a residential street in Hollywood, Los Angeles. To create the work, art students had to leave the (public) academy and enter the domestic, private space of (women's) domestic life. The artists of *Womanhouse* examined and commented on the content, forms, and history of gender roles and of women's work in the home, and delved into the complex socio/political, emotional, and psychic dynamics and relations that have constituted women's separate sphere in the division of labor. This installation revealed the complex entwinements of laborious work and pleasurable craft; of boring repetition and painstaking skill; of rebellious confinement and loving nurturance. The different rooms in which these dramas of everyday life were enacted tell their own tales of obsession, beauty, joy, anger, fear, and repression. The kitchen, the dining room, the bathroom, the sheet closet--every space is crammed with the evidence of women's life-sustaining labor that is invisible to the public world.

The performances created for *Womanhouse* also centered around domestic gender roles and women's maintenance labor, such as scrubbing, ironing, dishwashing, applying make-up. These performances introduced the duration maintenance performance--the actual performance of a domestic task such as ironing a sheet, scrubbing a floor, etc. that lasts as long as the real-life task--thus compelling the audience to experience the real-time tedium of women's maintenance work. The psychological experience of women's domestic service was addressed in Faith Wilding's "Waiting" performance, which condensed a woman's entire life into a monotonous, repetitive monologue; her maintenance

task is one of endlessly providing female reproduction and family service that erases all traces of her own agency.

Working in New York, Mierle Ukeles Laderman developed her own maintenance performances. Her Maintenance Art Manifesto describes maintenance activity as consisting of Personal, General, and Earth Maintenance. As part of her performances she interviewed people from more than 50 different classes and occupations, including maids, sanitation men, grocery workers, nurses, doctors, clerical workers, movie stars, and artists. She asked: “What do you think maintenance is? How do you feel about spending whatever parts of your life you spend on maintenance activities? What is the relationship between maintenance and freedom? What is the relationship between maintenance and art’s dreams?”

In Ukeles’ performance “Washing Tracks” at the Wadsworth Atheneum in 1973, the artist spent 4 hours in the morning washing the steps and outside plaza of the museum, and 4 hours in the afternoon, cleaning and washing the floors in the exhibition spaces of the museum. About this performance Miwon Kwon has written: “The appearance of timelessness and eternal stasis [of the museum], or simple orderliness, in fact, requires work. It requires the kind of work that not only erases the marks of bodies and time, such as dirt, dust, and decay, but work that continuously erases the marks of its own labor (including the body of the laborer). It’s the kind of work that renders itself invisible, and is rendered invisible, in order to make other things (“real” work?) possible.” (1)

Ukeles’ subsequent performances, in which she became artist-in-residence with the New York Sanitation Department and addressed the issues of waste, sanitation, and garbage collection, point to the intricate webs of maintenance work that connect the private household with urban, regional, national, and global maintenance and disposal systems.

Thus feminist maintenance and duration performances were a strategy to make women’s labor visible, and to foreground issues of working conditions, the

gender division of labor, unpaid labor, and agency in women's domestic work and lives.

2. The Political Conditions of Homebased Telework

(Note: Many of the particulars of this lecture refer to conditions in the US, but they are also applicable to many Western European countries, Canada, and Australia.)

Recently, cyberfeminist theorists, activists, and artists have been addressing the role of women in the history of computer development, and the contemporary gender constructions embedded in the new technologies. In "The Future Looms," cyberfeminist Sadie Plant exemplifies some of the more wildly utopian claims that have been made for women in technology: "After the war games of the 1940s, women and machines escape the simple service of man to program their own designs and organize themselves; leaking from the reciprocal isolations of home and office, they melt their networks together in the 1990s." (2) This free mythical realm--neither home nor workplace--presumably is cyberspace, which is imagined as a brave new world for women. Would it were so! But alas, research reveals a far more complex situation for most women who work in the high tech industries. This section of my talk will attempt to describe the political and economic conditions of contemporary female office and home-based teleworkers, and the regressive effects on women's roles in the home (and of the home in the market economy) caused by the displacement of large numbers of employed women who have been forced back into the "informal" (part-time and home work) labor economy by the global restructuring of work. Such an analysis of "women's work" must take note of women's dual roles as producers and reproducers in (unpaid) domestic and waged labor.

When women first started entering the waged labor market, their traditional gender roles of maintenance and service were easily translated into the division of labor in offices, banks, and many other work places. Beginning in

the late 1890s women increasingly became the majority of copyclerks, typists, calculators, stenographers, switchboard operators, bookkeepers, clerical workers, filing clerks, bank tellers, keypunchers, and data enterers. When automated office technology was introduced in the 70s, women also became the majority of computer users in offices and work-places. Because such a high percentage of employed women (43%) are clerical workers, it is important to study the effects of the deployment of information technology on clerical work. Researchers have noted the differences in how women and men use computers: "women seemed to have acquired computer skills that leave them doing very different jobs than men who use computers." (3) These skills tend to be the rote entry, filing, and maintenance of data, done in isolation in front of a terminal. No particular new skills or knowledge are needed for this work, and most companies never invest the money to train women clerical workers in more advanced computer techniques that would give them a chance to climb the internal company job ladders. They are condemned both to mental and physical repetitive stress syndromes to such a degree that the turnover in clerical workers is almost 100% in many offices.

In the 1990s many of these clerical jobs are being replaced by automated computers and networks of robotic machines. Secretaries and clerical workers are the first casualties of the electronic office. Lacking advanced skills and knowledge capital, these displaced women workers often have no other choice than to resort to low-skilled part time work, or home-based telework. Such "home-work" includes different kinds of work ranging from professional telecommuting, entrepreneurial businesses, salaried employment, and self-employed freelance work, to (often illegal) garment and needle industries, electronic parts assembly, and clerical computer work. While for some upper-echelon female white collar workers and professionals telecommuting has become part of their job and enhances their value as employees, for the great majority of other casualties of electronic joblessness, the forced "choice" of home

work is a big step down--measured in terms of wages, benefits, and working conditions--even from clerical work in an office, and usually amounts to nothing short of the enslaved maintenance work that keeps global capital's production lines and data-banks speeding along. Opportunities are especially bad for women of color and immigrants, who tend to be concentrated in jobs with the lowest level of skills most affected by office automation.

In order to address the political conditions of office and homework in the 90s, cyberfeminists need to analyze the mechanisms by which "women's work," "feminized labor" and "the home work economy" have become a central issue in the worldwide restructuring of labor, and in the increased division between the wealthy and the poor--those who have access and those who do not.

Home work is feminized labor

Feminized home work is a structural feature of the contemporary US telework, data-entry, and service economies, as well as an aspect of the global sweatshop economy (which includes all kinds of assembly work), and the computer chip and electronic parts manufacturing industry. "To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; leading an existence that always borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex." (4) Rather than retrain redundant clerical workers, many offices and workplaces have begun to bring in "superclerics" who combine professional and clerical functions - a restructuring of work that downgrades and feminizes professional work, and in turn lowers the pay level and satisfaction of the job. Ironically, much of the automated technology was designed to replace the rote maintenance labor--mostly performed by women--in offices and factories, and the resultant displacement of women from the public workplace, and the renewed invisibility of their work, has had the effect of devaluing women's labor and home-making services even more, both financially and

emotionally. Studies have shown that women who work outside the home have better mental and physical health because paid outside work offers them more self-esteem, control, and social ties.

Home work sustains the gendered division of labor

It is hardly news that home-based work in industrialized nations has historically been extremely exploitive. The global restructuring of work manifests locally, and home work usefully demonstrates “problems in capital-labor relations and in the gendered division of labor.” (5) Telework is defined as “work delivered to the worker via telecommunications as opposed to the worker going where the work is.” “Home-based” telework refers to the individual working in the home, rather than in a centralized location. Surveys show that teleworkers are 5 times as likely as other workers to be women and to be working illegally, without benefits or insurance. Teleworkers are often not trained in the proper uses of machines and materials, or informed of the health hazards of certain processes. They are paid by the piece--even by the keystroke--rather than by the hour, and the pressure to speed up production and work longer hours is motivated by economic necessity rather than by the employer. There is never time to retrain for higher levels of work, or to get the education to participate in the more lucrative work of knowledge production and management. For example, although women were central as early developers of software, after it became evident that software was the lucrative part of computer technology, they were increasingly demoted to coding and keystroking functions, and have not been able to regain their early level of participation.

Home work reinforces women’s subordinate status in the home and labor markets

Despite the much discussed separation of public and private spheres, the history of home work clearly shows that public power (capital) has been used to structure the private lives and control work opportunities for women. Add to this the fact that the new communications technologies have opened the home

space to the world, and conversely have brought the world into the private space of the home, and we get a blurring of boundaries that allows surveillance of the home-based worker and “makes the home more accessible to employers, marketers, and politicians.” (6) Women teleworkers become industrialized women, while women in waged jobs become Taylorized homemakers. In her study of the interplay of time spent at work and at home by the workers at Amerco in the US, sociologist Arlie Hochschild noted that: “[people]...become their own efficiency experts, gearing all the moments and movements of their lives to the workplace.” (7) For home-based teleworkers there is no distinction between home and workplace, with the result that when both personal and worklife become Taylorized they have no escape. For women who have often been forced to “choose” home-based work because of the lack of childcare options--a common problem for illegal aliens, for example--home-based telework therefore amounts to a doubling of their bondage to the home space. The blurring of boundaries in the home-space between private and public also often places the woman in a doubled psychological subordination--to her employers and to her husband. The traditional feminine roles of emotional caregiving and physical caretaking become entwined with her externally controlled, maintenance telework in the home. In the long run, female rebellion against these pressures could have the effect of redefining the division of male and female labor, and of repositioning the importance of home life and private free time within the public economy and social relations. In the short run, since home life has no recognized public economic value, it is being more and more curtailed, automated where possible, and reorganized to serve the needs of paid work; and women who work at home have the doubled role of worker and caregivers.

Home work undercuts progressive labor conditions and standards

The geographic mobility of capital made possible by IT uses waged labor, which is space-bound, with the result that geographical areas are increasingly reduced

to the status of a captive labor pool. While this makes new modes of production (especially home telework) possible, it does not challenge “the place of the home in the economy, or of women in the home” (8).

The home space and the female working in it under the sign of “choice” actually become the site of regressive labor practices and intrusions of outside control made possible by the dissemination and flexibility of the very information technology that now immobilizes and isolates the woman worker. This isolation also contributes to women’s increasing marginalization in the computer sciences, and to the stratification of women in the computer industry between a small percentage of highly skilled engineers, scientists, systems analysts and knowledge workers, and the vast numbers of low-paid, low skilled computer workers. It is this great disparity and its concomitant economic and political consequences that cyberfeminists need to study and address.

I’m the Total Quality woman. I am the culturally engineered, downsized, outsourced, teleworked, deskilled, Taylorized mom, just-in-time, take-out, time-saving, time-starved, emotionally downsized, down-right tired...

My home is my work, my work is my home.

I work with machines; I live with machines; I love with machines;

computer, modem, TV, VCR, printer, scanner, refrigerator, washing machine, dryer, vacuum cleaner, cars telephones, fax machine, hairdryer, vibrator, CD player, radio, pencil sharpener, blender, mixer, toaster, microwave, cell phone, tape recorder...

Just-in-time conception, just-in-time production, just-in-time delivery, just-in-time assembly, just-in-time laundry, just-in-time dinner, just-in-time childcare, just-in-time quality time, just-in-time sex, just-in-time pleasure, just-in-time pain, just-in-time stress, just-in-time insanity, just-in-time sacrifice, just-in-time drugs, just-in-time death.

3. Activism, Intervention, Resistance

The political conditions of home-based telework I've outlined pose questions about the effects of restructuring work for women in the integrated circuit: Will this reorganization of work further stratify jobs by race, ethnicity, and gender? Will the changes in work structures "reproduce existing patterns of inequality in only slightly changed forms, perhaps leading to different, more subtle forms of inequality?" (9)

What are possible points of intervention, resistance, and/or activism for cyberfeminists and artists (among whom I include myself) working with computer technology? On the micro level, it is time to educate ourselves thoroughly about these conditions, and to disseminate this information as widely as possible through the different cultural and political venues in which we work. We must rethink the contexts in which computers are used, and question the particular needs and relations of women to computer technology. We must try to understand the mechanisms by which women get allocated to lower-paid occupations or industries, and make visible the gender-tracking that obtains in scientific fields of work. For example, many women tend not to choose certain fields because of the "male culture" that is associated with them.

Cyberfeminists could use the model of the recent feminist art project "Informationsdienst" to create "Information Works" that address the political conditions of telework, and make visible how the deployment of IT is affecting the restructuring of work and the loss of jobs in the market economy worldwide. (10) A teleworker's bill of information and rights, disseminated to offices and private homes through a webpage on the Internet could also clarify the linked chains of "women's work" and working conditions for women worldwide. A "Home work School" on the Internet and in local community centers--taught and organized by home working women (many of whom are increasingly artists, single mothers, poor urban black women, immigrants, and displaced older women)--could offer (free) classes in everything from the politics of the new

global labor economy and its effects on women's lives and work, to feminist history, and creative and practical lessons in upgrading computer skills. Wired women need to form new unions that bring together women computer engineers, analysts, managers, programmers, clerks and artists. We need to form coalitions with immigrant rights groups that are interested in computer literacy. The classical tactics of organizing to improve working conditions must be translated into new forms which take into account the decentralization and reprivatization of workers, and subvert the already established communication chains of IT to reach and organize the people displaced by it. The creative ideas of cyberfeminist artists experienced in computer networking could be especially useful here.

On the macro level, cyberfeminists need to initiate a visible resistance to the politically regressive consequences of relegating women back to the homework economy and imposing on them the privatized, invisible, double burden of labor. Many libertarians, economists, and labor leaders are addressing the social isolation and economic privation suffered by millions of casualties of electronic joblessness by calling for the creation of socially productive jobs with a guaranteed annual income (or a social wage) for workers displaced by automation. They are also supporting moves for a shorter workweek, for job sharing, for more equal distribution of knowledge and maintenance work, and calling for corporations that benefit from the global market economy made possible by IT to return some of this great wealth to support a Third Sector of social and community work. While many of these demands seem desirable steps toward a more equitable labor economy, in practice they amount to a social welfare tax, and do nothing to challenge the intense stratification and concentration of wealth and power, increasingly produced by the global market economy, with devastating effects, on already marginalized, impoverished, and invisible populations, and on women. Cyberfeminists need to analyze the effects such schemes might perpetuate on the gender division of labor. Will women

continue to be concentrated in the low-paying “caring” and social maintenance jobs which double and extend their housekeeping “skills” to the whole community? Or will we fight to have such socially productive work be revalued by awarding it decent salaries, benefits, and job security? Such work should be acknowledged as vital to the survival of human life and should be highly rewarded--not just monetarily, but also by granting workers the greatest autonomy in planning and structuring the work, by having them determine working conditions, pay, benefits, and hours. Above all, we must rejoin the fight that was never won: the re-valuing--by way of decent wages, benefits, and improved labor conditions--of the human work of child-rearing and family care-giving that is vital to the productive lives of all human beings. If such maintenance work were liberally rewarded, and balanced with adequate free time and educational and social opportunities, it would be work attractive to both men and women, and could do much to substantially change traditional domestic--and paid labor--gender roles.

Given the groundbreaking changes IT is causing in the relationship of home to work, and in the place of the home (and private life) in pan-capitalist economies, some radical rethinking must take place about women’s changing conditions in both the domestic sphere and the public economy. The suggestion that the home should again become a locale of resistance to capitalism’s predatory effects on privacy, sociality, and free time may be a regressive one for women, because it treats these problems as private ones with private solutions. The utopian promises claimed for IT--for example, the possibility of being freed from never-ending repetitive work and heavy manual labor; the drastic reduction of working time for all people and the concomitant expansion of self-managed free time--must be skeptically countered with a critique of the ways in which IT has actually increased work time and has eroded aspects of the pleasure and meaning to be found in work--such as sociability, worker solidarity, job security, and pride in skills. This critique should be combined with vocal

opposition to and denunciation of the reintroduction of regressive labor conditions and policies for workers worldwide. It is crucial that we address the human sacrifice that the worldwide proliferation of home-based telework and sweatshop labor causes for millions, predominantly women. The wide social indifference to such vast inequities once again renders invisible the life-sustaining unpaid or underpaid maintenance work performed by women.

I dream of a new generation of young women--wired and inspired--who will use the knowledge and experience gained from past liberation movements to work for a new vision of justice, and dare I say it, freedom, for all women and men.

Notes:

1. Miwon Kwon, "In Appreciation of Invisible Work," *Documents* No. 10, Fall 1997: 17.
2. Sadie Plant, "The Future Looms," *Clicking In: Hot Links to a Cool Culture*, ed. Lynn Hershman. San Francisco: Bay Press, 1997: 123.
3. Barbara Gutek, "Clerical Work and Information Technology," *Women and Technology*, ed. Urs E. Gattiker. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994: 206.
4. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, New York: Routledge, 1985: 166.
5. Andrew Calabrese "Home-based Telework," *Women and Technology* . ed. Urs E. Gattiker. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994: 177.
6. Ibid. 163, 169.
7. Arlie Hochschild, *The Time Bind* , New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997: 49
8. Calabrese, 179.
9. Evelyn Nakano Glenn and Charles Tolbert II, "Technology and Emerging Patterns of Stratification for Women of Color," *Women, Work, and Technology*. Ed.

Barbara Drygulsy Wright, et al. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press: 320.

10. See Sabeth Buchman, "Information Service: Info-Work," *October* No. 71, Winter, 1995: 103 ff.