9
The Domestic Paradox

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The paradox in the title of this chapter refers to the complexity of representations and receptions of domesticity in art. As several thinkers have explored, to have a home, or to be at home, or the longing for home, is a shared human experience across cultures and generations. Or is it? When Walter Benjamin pondered over capitalist society, the domestic environment was a key point and individual space was pronounced in the masculine.

Through the July Revolution, Benjamin states, bourgeois society established the private individual. “The private individual, who in the office has to deal with reality, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions. From this arises the phantasmagorias of the interior— which, for the private man, represents the universe. In the interior, he brings together the far away and the long ago. His living room is a box in the theatre of the world.”2 In his private universe, the individual can retreat from the realities of the world, a necessary retreat to keep functioning in an official capacity. The private realm is also where he expresses his personality;

through the things he collected and his everyday utilities we can follow the specificities of the middle-class man.

Historically, the theme of home and domestic scenes relates to such different representations as interior decoration and life style; backdrops for social scenes; or the formation of modernity and identity in art and design.\(^3\) To represent the home during the turn of the century was à la mode and domestic interiors became metaphors for bourgeois identity. The division between private life and official affairs organised society, according to the school of thought by Jürgen Habermas. Bourgeois domesticity, albeit with regional differences, was a transnational phenomenon across the North American and European continents.\(^4\) In Sweden, the importance of the domestic interior and home environment at the turn of the nineteenth century was pervasive and reached a nationwide audience through artists such as Carl Larsson and thinkers such as Ellen Key.\(^5\)

When Gaston Bachelard, half a century later, tried to understand the deeper echelons of the human psyche, he did so through revisiting his childhood home. Bachelard’s domestic space is enveloped in the feminine—it is a maternal space. It is a place the individual has once left and tries to retrieve and is therefore, in tandem with Bachelard’s contemporary world, a subject equal to masculinity. Bachelard’s critics have pointed out that for a woman during the mid-20\(^{th}\) century, who never really left the


home, or for someone suffering domestic abuse, the psychological return to home may not really have been as rose-tinted.6

Poised between the idealised environments in Carl Larson’s painting and the personal experiences in a globalised world in transition, characterised by migration such as in the work by the contemporary Iranian/Swedish artist Sirous Namazi’s, we find the experimental, vibrating and local art scene of 1960s and 70s Stockholm. In countries in the West such as Sweden, where the women’s movement changed society, domestic scenes set in the home where intertwined with issues of liberation, ideology, and aesthetics. Any myth about the home was deconstructed, any fallacy laid bare into cold light of day. Notably, the period from the mid-1960s to mid-1970s saw an intense resurgence of representations of home environments and domestic scenes within and beyond the women’s liberation. In the hour of pop, the Stockholm art scene seems both to be on the global map and a peripheral place where a concern for the domestic is deeply grounded. The concern for this chapter is how art negotiates the domestic transfer across time and geography within the discipline of art history.

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The two Swedish artists in focus for this chapter, Marie-Louise Ekman (b. 1944) and Anna Sjödahl (1934–2001), illustrate the problems and traditions with the domestic during the era of Pop. Certainly, domestic objects are well integrated into a canon of pop art: toilets, TVs, bathroom cabinets. Or food: soup cans, spaghetti, hamburgers. But the domestic is a heterogeneous subject matter that seems dependent on context both in terms of time, place and art historical traditions. Of these two artists, Marie-Louise Ekman had a declared interest in pop art and pop culture. Her imagery is populated by cartoon figures such as Minnie Mouse, and in one of her most iconic pieces *Fishcakes in Lobster Sauce* (Figure 9.1) she has played with an Oldenburg vocabulary. In this piece, all food is made as textile objects in silk (fishcakes, prawns, lettuce, tomatoes), and attached onto a white plate against a pink background.

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Marie-Louise Ekman is well-known to the Scandinavian audience. Her body of work encompasses a variety of genres: film-making, art making, scenography, and between 1999 and 2015 she was Director of the Royal Institute of Art and the Royal Dramatic Theatre, Stockholm. The advance of an increasingly dispersed art history brings forth the relevance of making comparative analyses of Ekman’s pop-aesthetics and her feminist work. Once the canon is dispersed to include women artists and artists from other geographies than the central hubs of the U.S. and Western Europe, an artist like Marie-Louise Ekman increasingly has a place in a more international canon. It is as if time caught up with Ekman’s art. In other words, placed in a context of Pop Ekman’s work translates comfortably into our own time.

Ekman’s art from the 1960s and 1970s hinges on a narrative language that revolves around a number of characters: Disney figures, art history icons, and the so-called “lonely lady.” The pastel colour scheme is bold and her art transgresses a sense of good taste or intellectual art. In a series of paintings, the lonely lady is as often placed in her well tended home, with hair done, dress and heels the figure is respectable and neat. But the world around her, that is her flat, implodes and the narrative goes over the top. The lonely lady seems oblivious to dog shit shooting through the picture plane, being engrossed in a TV-programme. In one canvas, the TV-set takes on anamorphic shapes, with a fully erect penis, and ends up making love to the lonely lady (Figure 9.2).

Body parts, such as an ear, a nose, or a penis are just as likely to take a leading role as any man, woman, child, or cartoon figure. The stories told are often funny and at times play with toilet humour with excrements shooting through the image. In a small panting by Ekman titled A Home (1974) we enter an image that conflates two themes central to feminist art history: the body and the home (Figure 9.3). The scene set for the viewer is an ordinary environment with a standing lamp, an armchair and a dresser and its framing forces any viewer to peek. The typical scaffolding for the voyeur, a keyhole, curtain or window is in this image replaced with the female genitals. Ekman makes each viewer a Peeping Tom, but what is typically satisfying scoptophilic desire, the female body, becomes the structure for looking. The woman’s womb is a well-known metaphor as a vessel for life, and female genitals on display meant to titillate the viewer’s fantasy. In Ekman’s version, life inside the uterus is neither a protected
vessel for a foetus or the male organ, nor are the intimate parts particularly stimulating. Instead, the female inside is cosily furnished. In one gesture, this image collapses several tropes that have characterised art during the 20th century and which Ekman and her peers deconstructed during the 1970s. If the home had previously been structured by a patriarchal discourse, the home is in Ekman’s hands a matter to be undone. Likewise, she takes apart the female body as an object of desire for the male gaze.

Ekman was formed as an artist at a moment in Sweden when the privacy of the home and representations of the body were being increasingly contested. She emerged with a debut at Galleri Karlsson (1967) in an art scene where her peers made art bold in expression and political in content. Kjartan Slettemark, one of her contemporaries, caused a series of media headlines with his happenings and interventions, for example performing naked in the street (in winter) or squatting Moderna Museet in 1970. Carl Johan de Geer, at the time married to Ekman, ended up in court in 1967 and was sentenced with a heavy fine for exhibiting graphic prints with the Swedish flag matched with the word “cock.” According to the gallerist Bo A. Karlsson, these were political times seeping into the everyday: not all exhibitions were outspokenly political, but many artists were.

When Ekman made her art in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the feminist movement had begun to voice the importance of making the personal visible for public debate. Emancipation was to be addressed from within the home and from within family structures. When we are invited into the home in Ekman’s art, it is through a language that is surrealist in tone and pop in style and it is through an artist described as at odds with contemporary political movements. In some of her work, Ekman undressed and posed naked, and poked fun at conservatism, political correctness, and not the least at a self-righteous and knowing art audience. Ekman was accused of being reactionary and bourgeois, not sufficiently feminist and not an artist enough—constantly transgressing genres. However, in hind-

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7 KjARTan Slettemark: The Art of Being Art, Nasjonalmerne for kunst, arkitektur och design, Oslo 2013.
sight it is precisely Ekman’s pop aesthetics and feminist rhetoric that transfers into an international art history. Sylvia Eibelmayr illustrates in an article how similar impulses led to related work and she draws parallels between artist such as Ekman and Valie Export that had no relation during the 1960s and 70s. Yet, when looking back and mapping out a dispersed art scene there are clear affinities.9

When we are at home with Ekman’s contemporary Anna Sjödahl (1934–2001) it is equally in environments characterised by everyday life and everyday injustices, but rather than alter-egos and characters from popular culture, everyday reality and everyday people are in focus. In an exhibition catalogue from 1978, she published interviews with residents in one of Stockholm’s new-built suburbs; high rise building holding a promise of a productive future for all its citizens. Sjödahl asked questions such as, “How much do you earn and what are your expenses?” “What does your day look like?”10 The short interviews are illustrated with photographs from the newly built high-rise areas, domestic environments that are set against a radically different imagery, namely against a painting by Carl Larsson. Any Swedish resident would immediately understand the ideological pressure put on making everyday and family life the ideal in Larsson’s imagery, and the interviews and related photographs show its impossibility.

Sjödahl’s project had a resonance in the documentary film Nightcleaners Part 1 (1972–75) by the British Berwick Street Film Collective, which also showed the impossible life-work equation of night shift work and full-time care for children. A tired woman, with tears in her eyes, answered the question, “Aren’t you tired?” with a “yes, I am always tired.” The inhabitants in Sjödahl’s interviews are witnesses to similar struggles, and the daily routines are dire: difficult hard work, long days—or even worse, no work at all. Little money and lots of worries to deal with each


day: cooking, cleaning, caring for kids, and agonising about the impact of their neighbourhood on their teenager children.

The domestic trap is a key theme in feminist critique. Simone de Beauvoir was explicitly negative towards “the home,” which in the Second Sex is described as symbolic in culture for happiness and therefore in reality a prison, in particular for the married woman. “The ideal of happiness has always taken material form in the house, whether cottage or castle, it stands for permanence and separation from the world.”11 Others, like Iris Marion Young, pointed out the ambivalence for feminist philosophers in the idea of home and homemaking as precisely both repressive and liberating.12 Bell Hooks showed how it is precisely the making of a home, or a home place, that is constructive for resistance in an oppressive structure, such as a racist organised U.S.A.13

When it comes to Anna Sjödahl’s work, it is as if time and international comparisons help unpack her art, despite the artist herself predominantly acting in a national context. The paradoxical interpretations of Sjödahl’s work, to be discussed below, are closely linked with the subject matters it deals with related to domesticity—and herein lies one of the problems of how Sjödahl’s art has translated in an art historical narrative. If for Hooks, the domestic, or home place, can be constructive for liberation, for Sjödahl it is very clearly a site of oppression. If the individual pondering his home is synonymous to the masculine in both Benjamin and Bachelard’s imagination, the radical aesthetics of Anna Sjödahl has become synonymous with the feminist movement, situated firmly in a specific period and possibly also bound to a certain geography—the Swedish art scene during the late 1960s and 1970s.

Sjödahl’s exhibition Var dags liv – mitt alternativ/EveryDay Life – My Alternative, which in Swedish rhymes and reads as a slogan, was staged in different versions in the years 1973–75 (Figure 9.4). The installation

stretched from paintings on the walls to objects on the floor. Objects from the reality of the everyday were interlinked with paintings about power, violence and crushed expectations in a patriarchal society. On the floor and in-between paintings, Sjödahl had placed furniture such as a bureau overflowing with the things it meant to hide: socks, mittens, toys—an abundance of unsorted stuff that tends to multiply in a family household. Notes were pasted on the walls, between paintings, reminding of sports bags to pack and bills to be paid.

The scene staged in *Every-Day Life* was as if transposed from a home; as if a home environment had been dumped on the gallery floor. Next to the bureau was a single bed with the bedding all messed up, unsightly and intimate. With history in hindsight, another messed up bed is likely to be at the forefront; *My Bed*, the British artist Tracey Emin’s contribution to the 1999 Turner Prize. As if transposed from a bedroom, it held evidence of personal debris: empty liquor bottles, dirty laundry, soiled sheets, used condoms. The British tabloids were outraged, protest groups gathered outside the museum stairs, and the installation was vandalised by a couple of art students. For some, this was a hoax. Others, such as the Turner Prize committee and several art critics, defended the piece. Anna Sjödahl’s installation has a similar history, albeit less violent; occasional visitors kicked the things on the floor according to the artist. They were provoked, perhaps both by how the boundaries of “what is art” were pushed as well as the audacity of showing the dirty linen from private life.

For a few years, Anna Sjödahl was deeply embedded in the women’s liberation movement and her art mirrors some of its key questions around patriarchal power structures and the distribution of labour in the domestic sphere. It was this close relationship that made her quit the movement; she felt that her art was interpreted as a vehicle for activism more than art. A key piece for understanding the problems of translating the aesthetic achievements of Sjödahl’s art beyond a political discourse is her bedroom

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installation. The exhibition was received with mixed feelings amongst critics and visitors. Mostly, reports Sjödahl in an interview, it was those of the older generation who were upset: “The bureau aggravated some. I believe they perceived it as an insult towards their way of life. Maybe they spent a lot of time tidying up. Others may have been disturbed in their understanding of art.” The installation seems to suggest that a self-fulfilled life demands a messy home, and vice versa: that an ordered home is testament to an old-fashioned model where women’s work is household work. The other section of the quote, on people being disturbed in their view on art, points to another complexity. Namely, how homes and domestic environments have been analysed across the 20th century.

Tracy Emin’s *My Bed*, as well as Anna Sjödahl’s installations, are preceded by an art historical discourse on beds—unmade and altered. The German realist Adolph Menzel made a small and intense drawing in 1845 of an unmade bed with pillows indented and sheets ruffled. Menzel’s recently inhabited bed comes across as a generic, single bed, without class, place or gender. Sjödahl too, created a generic, single bed in not having a personal imprint, as opposed to Emin who clearly manifested her bed-chamber. The most important bed for art history and theory may be Robert Rauschenberg’s assemblage *Bed* from 1955 which helped the critic and philosopher Arthur C. Danto to explain in 1964 the expanded notion of art in his article “The Art World.” Danto showed that if you analysed Rauschenberg’s *Bed*, altered with paint and hung on the wall as a painting, we may also understand that a piece of art is far more than the sum of its materials. The bed as such has a theoretical trajectory, a staple in the art historical canon. Another fixture is the gesture of installation art that Anna Sjödahl experimented with, for example through the 1973–75 exhibitions. Some scholars have recognised the effect that Sjödahl herself opposed: that installations (or environments) in the 1970 tend to be interpreted too literally. An installation has at times tended to be taken for

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18 In Alte Nationagalerie, Berlin.
real, like the illusion of photography’s inherent capacity to signify truth. Sjödahl’s installation has documentary qualities with socks, gloves, toys and reminders pasted on the wall. Yet it is also an aesthetic and experimental project in the tradition of Rauschenberg’s Combines.

What is rarely mentioned in the articles at the time is the installation as such, and how it relates to a genre of making art through creating environments and installations. At the forefront is the woman’s project. The domestic paradox is in this case how radical politics obscures the aesthetic gesture—both in contemporary critique and in art history. This stands in contrast to Anna Sjödahl’s contemporary, Ola Billgren (1940–2001), and the reception of his many paintings of domestic scenes. His art belongs, in the words of one of his contemporary critics, to a tradition of realism. The domestic objects and environments in Billgren’s paintings speak beyond the living room, the bedroom, the clothes piles, the flowerpot, and the dining table. It is a reaction against bourgeois culture, but most of all it is art. There is a tendency in the writings of Sjödahl (and Ekman) to obscure the complexity of her (their) art with the feminist movement. Feminist issues, it seems, obliterate any other aesthetic importance. In fact, for Sjödahl it went so far that she left the women’s liberation movement so as to be seen as artist, rather than a woman, or a feminist.

It is tempting from a contemporary outlook to place Marie-Louise Ekman’s and Anna Sjödahl’s body of work in an international narrative, poised between the domestic as an entrapment to break free from and a culturally productive place. Examples of artists who address related themes in societies with similar problems are plentiful. For the exhibition Doing What You Want, 2012 at Tensta Konsthall in Stockholm, curated by Maria Lind, Marie-Louise Ekman’s work was placed side by side with Sister Corita Kent (1918–1986), Mladen Stilinović (b. 1947), and Martha Wilson (b. 1947). The cross-over between artists from the U.S. and Serbia turned out fruitful and unexpected. The anarchism in Stilinović’s pieces has a

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resonance in the non-abiding work by Ekman, the role-play by Martha Wilson has a counter-part in Ekman’s paintings and films, and the pop-aesthetics in Ekman is echoed in the posters by Sister Corita Kent. The exhibition brought together artists largely unknown in each other’s remits and the contemporary viewer could form an understanding of a dispersed art history formation through the wisdom of hindsight. One critic took the position that despite interesting artists, the exhibition was more a testament to time, however that Marie-Louise Ekman’s work stood out in withstanding the test of time.\textsuperscript{22} Regardless of point of view, the exhibition manifested the resilience of the local context. In one of Stilinović’s exhibited pieces he states with letters embroidered on a pink banner: “An Artist who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist.” Stilinović’s metaphorical use of English points not only towards an access to language, but to the places where art happens. The margin is in itself a complexity, as the Stockholm critic, Stilinović’s banner and the Tensta exhibition make visible. On the one hand, we understand art history through central locations and art hubs, yet each regional context is its own centre. It is its own measurement and at times therefore its own limitation, but there is also strength in the margins, as observed by Yuri Lotman.\textsuperscript{23} This is where new intersections can take place, where new knowledge may form.

At the Marabou Konsthall in 2015, the synergetic effects were more overtly directed towards the theme of house-work and domestic labour. In the exhibition \textit{From her House}, curated by Bettina Pehrsson, the German artist Margaret Raspé’s (b. 1933) films and Anna Sjödahl’s activist art and paintings on domesticity and emancipation were exhibited parallel to the North-American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles (b. 1939) \textit{Maintenance Art Works 1969–1980}. Ukeles brought house and family maintenance into city service sectors of cleaning thus relating labour economy to art making. Margaret Raspé’s camera-helmet films explores aggressive aspects of making food, housework, and art by filming from her head what the hands whip, slash, gut, and paint. Ukeles recalls that as a young artist she had three great figures of inspiration: Jackson Pollock for how he used his body when painting, Mark Rothko for enabling another dimension

through paint and canvas, and Marcel Duchamp for demonstrating the power of words. 24 Anna Sjödahl, too, was full of dreams and hopes when becoming an artist. In a pamphlet in 1978 written for the exhibition Vision and möda (Vision and Effort) at the age of 44, she wrote:

About ten years ago I filled drawing pad after drawing pad with partly airy summer landscapes that I encountered, and partly romantic happy fantasies about Arcadia with sunshine, sea and greenery. [...] what became of the dream and what happens to our visions? I looked around, scrutinized my everyday and realised this is how it will continue for each and all of us: chores, illness, routines, disappointments, hard work. 25

Similar to Laderman Ukeles, Sjödahl had a sharp awakening. With maternity dreams vanished, late night debates on the potential effects of materiality were replaced with around-the-clock responsibilities and chores. Nothing, Laderman Ukeles says, could have prepared her for the double role in the 1960s of being both a mother and artist; “Duchamp, Pollock and Rothko never changed nappies.” 26

Sjödahl, Raspé, and Laderman Ukeles all explore the symbolic value of domestic environments and labour in culture. As artists and feminists, they are in good company. The questions addressed in their art has prevalence in the different societies and art worlds their work inhabit; New York, Berlin, Stockholm, in the past and in the present. Their art shares similar societal concerns about division of labour and the potential to make art when there is little scope for art making. In hindsight, and when put side-by-side, their works are also a testament to how similar problems got different solutions in the different societies which they reflect: in Sweden, Germany and the U.S. The comparisons laid out in the exhibition show affiliations between artists and artworks, as well as the role of home and home-making in culture and society. It also shows the potential impact on art on society and the complex relationship between art and activism. Ukeles’ impact on sanitation work is widely recognised, and Anna Sjödahl and her peers made several interactions that help form a

26 Ukeles 2015
new and more equal society. It is also instructive in how what seems to look similar may be vastly different. It is a familiar narrative that the home in the 1960s and 1970s was a place to break free from: the mundane domestic life, chores, and problems to be brought out in public life. The home, as we’ve seen some few examples of, was a metaphor for portraying identity, class, political critique. But it is also clear that this narrative is firmly placed in a specific geography where the women’s liberation emerged. The home as a place for family life, as Susan E. Reid has proposed, implies vastly different behavioural patterns depending upon where it takes place.\(^{27}\) In the Khrushchev era behind the iron curtain, family life can be traced as deeply connected with specific and regulated behaviour. In art history in countries in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the home is also a place to protect, where unofficial art can be made, seen, and discussed.

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The domestic in art has had a particular stronghold in Sweden and the impact of Carl Larsson’s domestic scenes and Ellen Key’s programme for creating a good home has marked the life lived in Swedish society. Perhaps it is not surprising that Anna Sjödahl was understood in her time through the lens of contemporary politics and activism, rather than through the aesthetic radicalism in her art. Yet, understanding the woman artist dealing with home environments has its own trajectory. When Carl Larsson’s contemporary Fanny Brate painted home and family life at the turn of the nineteenth century, the home was a topic of its time. Politicians changed home environments and homestead politics enabled new ways of living. Ellen Key proposed new ideals for home decoration to replace the old, dark, and stuffy, with walls painted with light colours and with simple materials.\(^{28}\) The suffragette movement developed, and women artists

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increased in the number. Like Larsson Brate painted ideal homes, both in
terms of interior design and blissful family life. Brate can be described
according to a typical narrative of the woman artist being stuck in the
domestic trap; engaging with the less daring subjects of family life and
interiors, or having to—once domestic responsibilities call.29 Yet, Larsson’s
body of work confuse any such reading. It is unlikely that he was made to
deal with domestic scenes and interiors. Larsson opted to paint what he
did and he captured something in his time, and through his themes he
explored new ways of making art. So too did Brate, Ekman, and Sjödahl—
they captured their times and explored new ways of making art. As did the
Swedish author Kristina Sandberg, in her trilogy on the housewife, Maj.30
Sandberg captures the complexity of the domestic sphere from early
twentieth century to the 1960s, and she does so in our present and in a
world where once again the domestic sphere is increasingly becoming a
politicised sphere.

The ideal domestic life represented by Larsson and Brate would later
cause some shady corners for the people of Maj’s generation, which in
turn fostered Ekman and Sjödahl’s generation. The character Maj belongs
to the generation who may have been insulted by the bedroom mess in
Sjödahl’s work. The fictional character personifies the societal structures
that the next generation had to break away from. When faced with artists’
work relating to the domestic, it is important to keep the restraints of the
actual domestic spheres, which artists such as Laderman Ukeles, Raspé,
Sjödahl, and Ekman revolt against, in mind. But it is equally important to
keep in mind how these artists furthered artistic expression, that content is
never liberated from time, place, or form.

1897 p. 166–167; Isa, “Ett modernt hem,” Idun, No. 45, 1897, pp. 359–360; Ellen Key,
29 Beatrice Zade, “Fanny Brate – Familjelyckans konstnärinna,” Svenska Journalen, No. 48,
1943.
30 Kristina Sandberg, Att föda ett barn; Sörja för de sina; Liv till varje pris, Stockholm:
Bibliography


Figure 9.1: Marie-Louise Ekman, *Fiskbullar i hummersås* (Fishcakes in Lobster Sauce), 1968. 121 x 174 cm, Appliqué on satin. Purchased in 1968, Moderna museet. © Marie-Louise Ekman/Bildupphovsrätt 2016.