

Radical Domesticity 1999

By Thomas Phan (Bill Beckley)

“What wine does one drink? What bread does one eat? Wallace Stevens
“The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own
ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas I do.”

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

I mop. I iron. I clean algae off of basketballs. I polish bunnies, sweep
Andres, and vacuum Hoovers. I change fluorescent tubes and dust light
bulbs and lemons. I change the lemons once every two days, and I make
sure the moths don't get into the dusky felt suits. I whisk Courbets and
swab Judds. Have you dusted a Brillo box or fluffed a floating pillow? I
have. I'm an art cleaner.

I'm also a philosopher. I say this humbly, I'm no Socrates.

In the early seventies I took a major at The School of Visual Arts called
“Philosophies of Art, Home, and Cleanliness,” with homework in Roland
Barthes, (*Mythologies*, particularly the essay on soap powders and
detergents) Susan Sontag, (*Styles of Radical Frills*) Gaston Bachelard
(*The Poetics of Space*, in particular the chapter on drawers, chests and
wardrobes) Claude Levi Strauss (*The Raw and the Cooked*), Julia Child
(*Mastering the Art of French Cooking*) and Ludwig Wittgenstein, (*The Blue
and the Brown Books*). Wittgenstein was influential to homeowners and
minimalists in the seventies. He designed his own house. Very sparse. My
studies also included John Ruskin (*Seven Lamps of Architecture*) Walter
Pater (*Marius the Epicurean*, and *The Child in the House*), **Johann**

Joachim Winckelmann(*The History of Ancient Homemaking Among the Greeks*) and, of course, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Domestic Judgements*. From Kant I learned the difference between practical thinking, such as what soaps clean what—I think these are called “teleological judgements”—and the sublime.

I began my career at the top, cleaning the apartment of a gentleman named Fred who worked for Andy the famous artist. I'll never forget the time Fred took us to the midtown restaurant called Un Deuz tois, jumped on the table and dropped his pants. I have no idea what he was trying to prove, except, perhaps, the size of his penis. But friends or no friends of Andy, we were all thrown out. God bless you Andy! You were a good Catholic. You painted the Last Supper of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ and found redemption. There is nothing so sacred or so domestic for that matter, as drinking wine and eating bread.

Art hangs in the foyers of flutists, the mezzanines of magicians, the bathrooms of ballerinas, the parlors of politicians, the bedrooms of brokers, and on the staircases of statisticians, and resides there for a time. Some art, because it is considered “good” whatever that means, eventually gets relocated to a museum, and separated from the other objects that inhabit our everyday lives. There *is* prestige in this relocation, but all of a sudden we have chairs we can't sit on, or bed's we can't sleep in. I am thinking of Bob's bed with that antique quilt. Now what do you think that quilt would get on the Antique Roadshow? And Joseph's chair? How did art get to be more precious than bedspreads?

It's not obligated “to do” like other household objects, only “to be.” A soap dish, beautiful as it is, has an obligation to soap, an ashtray to ashes. An iron must press, and a hammer must nail, but not the hammer or sickles of art. I was actually around the day Andy came home from Bologna and

painted those hammer and sickles that he got from the hardware store on Houston and La Guardia. How ironic. He told me he met the son of the Communist mayor of the city, 22 , cute-- All he wanted to do was to shop.

I appreciate silence in a way I didn't when I could still cum three times a day. That's why I like art. Because most often it is silent, so it can accommodate domestic interactions. Questions like " Hey, Ho, what's for din? "How's my Honey?" "Where's the clicker?") "Who's a good boy?"

"Radical domestics" refers to artists and art cleaners loosely bonded by a common interest in their adulation of household incident. Radical domestics take their objects seriously. Frying bacon, slipping on a nylon, or putting on a tight pair of jeans over a white pair of pasnties--these activities accompany the silent and still occasion of art.

Radical Domestics create a dialogue between the homemaker and art through simple household activities that would otherwise be taken for granted, like oven cleaning, or watering a begonia, "Merely living as and where we live," as Wallace said.