

Devoted  
to dirt

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IM Masters  
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# Devoted to dirt

A study on the experience of cleaning and ownership

# Abstract

In self-sufficient households people used to have devoted, long relationships with objects. Unlike now, waste equaled failure.

Cleaning is a creative way to make sense of our physical surroundings and build bonds with the things we own. If the processes of getting dirty and clean are made equal with the use of an object, we can regain control over ownership.

There is no dirt in nature. A puddle of mud in a forest is not expected to be cleaned. By associating objects with natural creatures that have their characteristic behaviour and expectations, I can blur the experience of dirt. The decay of these objects becomes acceptable and cleaning natural.

Cleaning tasks are repeated day after day, generation after another. I want to show that in the routine is hidden a delicate caring relationship between the owner and the object.

## Devoted to dirt

### A study on the experience of cleaning and ownership

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Thesis, 2010, 46 pages

## Key words

Domestic work

Cleaning

Dirt

Ownership

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# Devotion

The way people care for their belongings is tremendously different in today's world of cheap imported products compared to the self-sufficient household of the past. I've used Finland of 1940s' and 50s' as reference, because the country industrialized and urbanized relatively late. This change was so quick that it's possible for me to hear about that abandoned lifestyle from my grandparents.





## Domestic work in the 40's and 50s'

In the past domestic work was something people would take huge pride in. Managing with limited resources was a crucial survivor skill and a major factor for the public economy.

These notes are based on interviews made in December 2009 with my grandmothers Helga Rinta-Rahko (born -33) and Helena Järvinen (born -21). Helga lived in the countryside, Helena mainly in a city and both started a family in early 50s'.

I've also viewed ten housekeeping guidebooks published between 1927 and 1994. The ones from 40s' and 50s' emphasize the role of the housewife as a manager of family economy. Wellbeing of the family and consequently of the nation is dependent on her. The books preach about efficiency, resourcefulness and austerity. Domestic skills were learned young: most of these books were intended for girls preparing for marriage.

### Self-sufficiency and cooperation

At the time Finland was still dominantly rural. Urban population didn't exceed rural population before the 70s'. People living in the countryside were self-sufficient and few products were sold in

the shops. In Helga's youth even shoes were made of leather from own calves. There was no rubber available so leather was used also for the soles. Wool from own sheep and linen from the fields were woven into fabrics. Helga remembers a day in 1942 when the local shop got a shipment of good fabric. The queue outside was 50 meters long and fabric sold out in an hour.

Bad availability of goods was also caused by shortage. In the wartime even if you had money, there were no goods to buy with it, at least on the legal market. Lack of such a basic thing as firewood for heating forced Helena to move from the city back to her family in the countryside.

Food was rationed from 1939 to 1954. When the shortage was at it's worst, rations could only fulfil half of a person's energy need. (Sota ja pula 1939-1949). Hunger made urban people search for any possible connections in the countryside. People could illegally exchange fabric into eggs and

10 **“You can wear patched and washed but not dirty.”**

butter. The situation created friendships that only lasted over the rough times.

Also things like clothes were exchanged and borrowed between people to get variation.

**Caring, protecting, cleaning, repairing and recycling**

Because material was scarce but labour plentiful, everything was carefully and imaginatively designed, used, cleaned, repaired and recycled.

Clothes were cut in a way that little fabric would be wasted. The slaughtered animal was used fully:

still in 1950 there was no soap available in shops but it was boiled at home from butchering waste, pine resin and lye.

Clever replacement materials and ingredients were used especially for cooking but also for objects. Paper replaced fabric or leather. Surprisingly for the time shortage of fabric and soap led to the invention and success of disposable products, such as the Kleenex and paper bed linen.

People paid special attention to details to make the most of their belongings. Jewellery had been

donated to the army but not much jewellery was worn anyway because skillful decorations, such as embroidery or a fur collar were sufficient.

Ironing and mangling were special skills because pleats and folds made textiles sharp even if the material was poor in quality. Details were enhanced by starching also with natural ingredients like sugar water or potato starch. It was common to use dyes from nature and favour coloured clothes in stead of white for their practicality. Textiles were scented with herbs.

To keep things clean they were protected: aprons used and shelves lined with paper. Obviously appropriate cleaning was essential. There were innovative and odd options, such as bleaching with a potato, sour milk or sunlight, cleaning upholstered furniture with an onion or a piece of white bread, washing with potato starch, olive oil, salt, sand or sanding paper.

Repairs were made with devotion. A jacket would be carefully taken apart and turned inside out piece by piece to reveal the unworn side. Two



Helena Järvinen  
(born -21)



Overalls repaired by Helena



Pillow repaired by Helena



Socks repaired by Helena



Martti Järvinen  
(born -24)



Plate repaired by Martti



Plate repaired by Martti

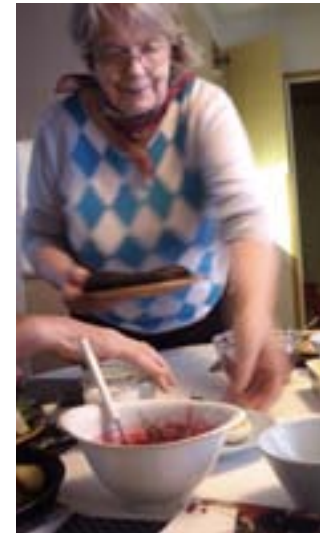


Socks made by Helena,  
repaired by Martti





Rug made of old shirts by Helga



Helga Rinta-Rahko (born -31)



Tablecloth made by Helga's mother-in-law Hilja in 20s', repaired by Helga in 60s'



Socks made and repaired by Helga



Old tablecloth used to protect the shelves.



Kettle holder made of recycled coffee packaging by Helga

worn bedsheets, towels or socks could be joined into one usable one. Old woollen socks were unravelled from toe to heel, and the leg reused.

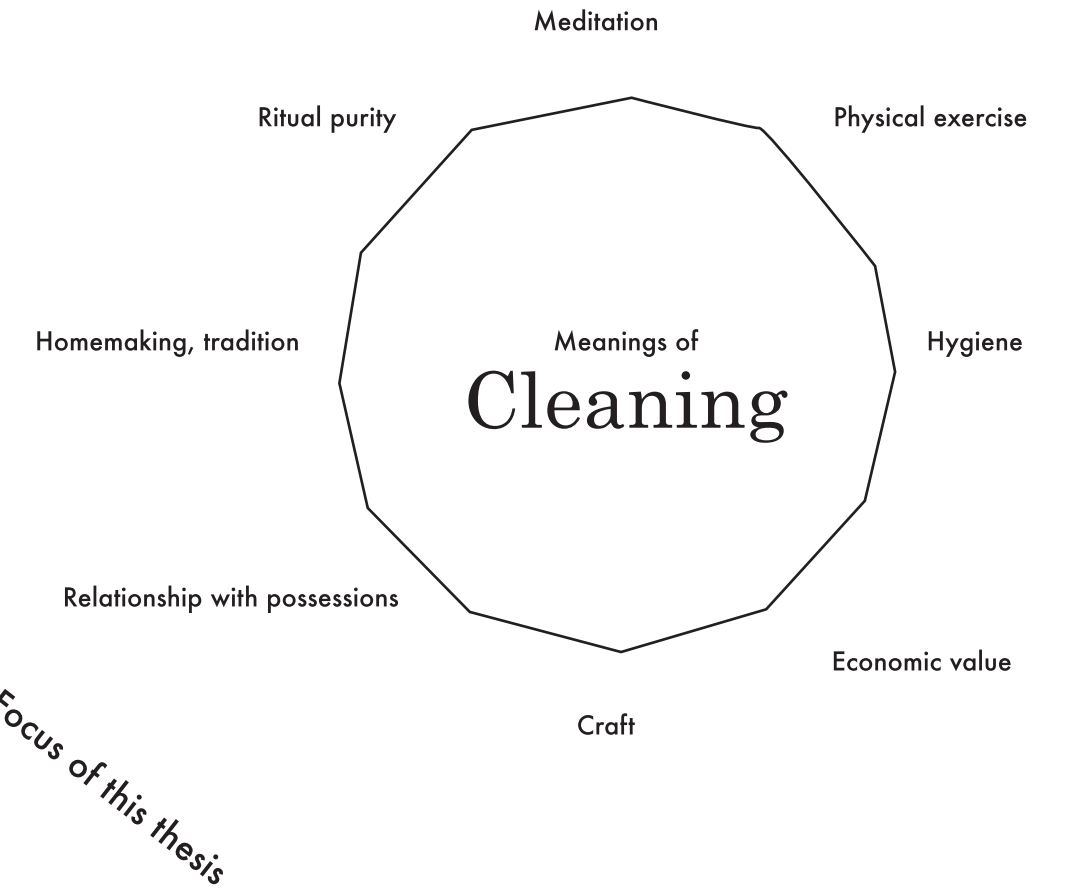
Unravelling knitwear or recycled fibres could be turned into yarn for new needlework, a leg of men's trousers into children's trousers, father's wedding suit into son's confirmation suit and on. Finally, if the material was no longer good for clothing, it was woven into rugs. For example: you can make 15 cm of rug (width 80 cm) from one men's shirt. 2 kg of clothes makes 1 square meter of rug.

# Waste equals failure

When things are homemade from limited resources, the relationship with them naturally becomes very tight. Professor of philosophy Olli Lagerspetz investigates these relationships we have to our material world in his book *Lika* ("Dirt").

By cleaning and maintaining things a person protects their purpose and identity, keeps them alive. We expect a lot from objects but so do they from us. (Lagerspetz, 2008, p.269, 298.) Every effort put in the making and maintaining of the object increases its value. In a culture like this waste equals failure. This can mean that the responsibility of things becomes obsessive (p.262-263).

Now the actions and attitudes described on the previous pages seem exaggerated or funny even for my grandparents. From today's perspective it's difficult to understand the devotion.





# Routine

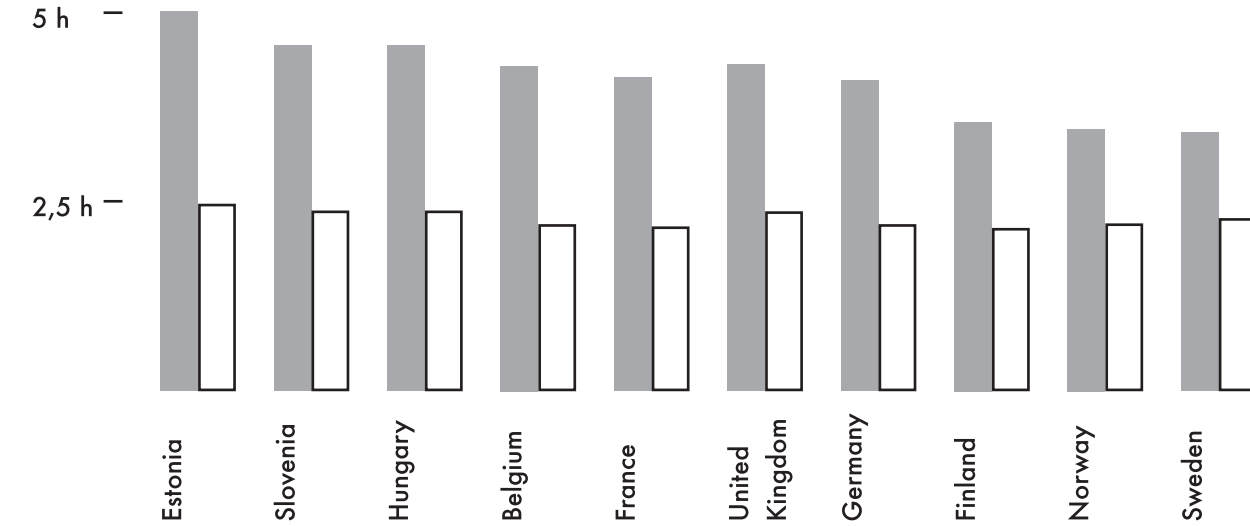
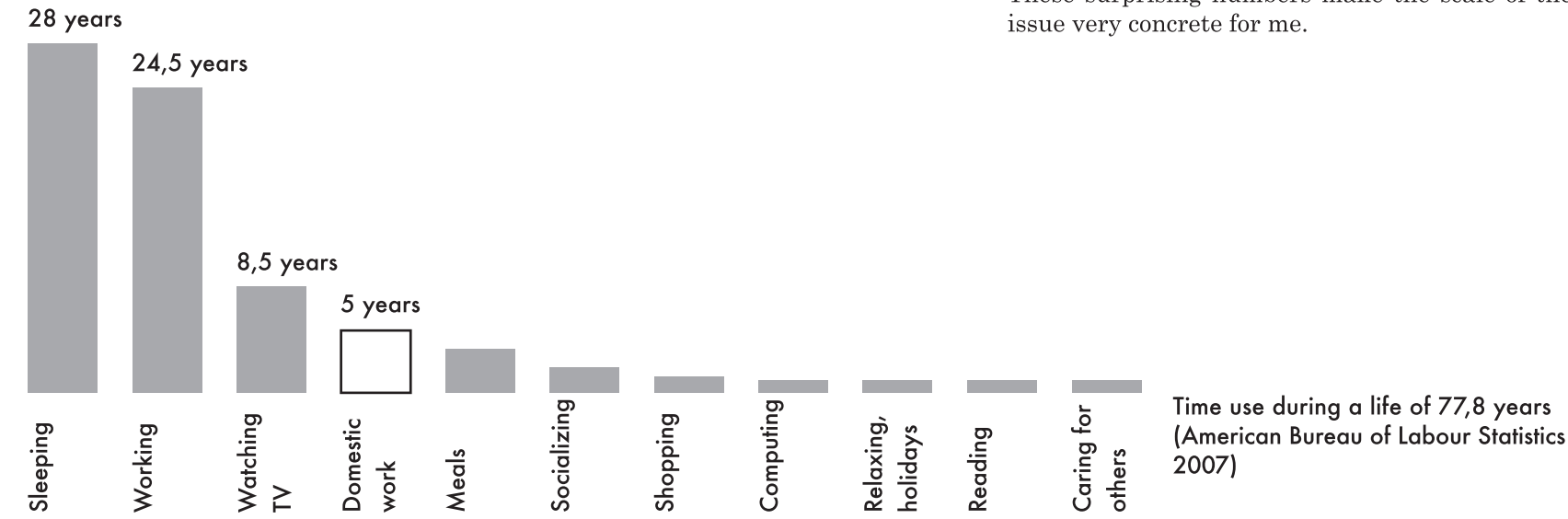
We don't care for our things with the same devotion as we used to. But regardless of the efforts to rationalize, mechanize and outsource domestic work, the amount of time Europeans spend on it is still surprisingly big.

# Domestic work now

We spend most of our time at home, so the effort put in caring for it is understandable. Until now housework has been seen as a basic skill that everyone needs, and outsourcing raises mixed emotions. Domestic work has still a major role in our lives. However, we play it down. This is clearly visible in the tools and space reserved for housework in our homes.

### Outsourcing

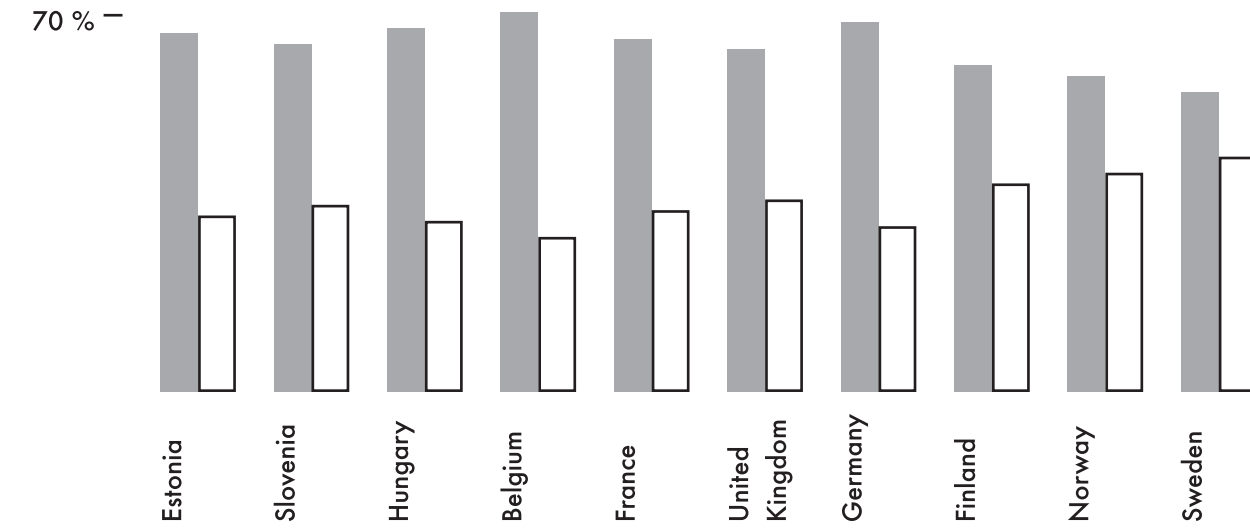
According to studies we prefer to keep doing a great deal of domestic work ourselves (Varjonen et.al. 2005 p.48-55). Still, compared to the self-sufficient household of 1950s' where everything from shoes could be homemade, the degree of outsourcing is high. Since 70s' the public and private sector have been interested in the home as a market. The economical magnitude of housework makes it alluring for businesses: in 2005 the value of products and services produced at home (= meals, cleaning, care etc.) equaled 46 % of gross national product in Finland. (Leskinen et al. 2005, p.17). These surprising numbers make the scale of the issue very concrete for me.



“Domestic work comprises work done for own household. The most important categories are food management, care for textiles, cleaning and household upkeep, gardening, repairs, shopping and child care.” (European Communities, 2004)

Time spent on domestic work by persons aged 20 to 74

■ women □ men









Domestic and gainful work of women aged 20 to 74

■ domestic work □ gainful work

(+) increase  
(-) decrease  
(0) no change

Change in time spent on domestic work in Finland between years 1987 and 2000

	handicrafts and maintenance of clothes	women (-)	men (0)	total (-)
	laundry	women (+)	men (+)	total (+)
	ironing	women (+)	men (+)	total (+)
	dish washing	women (-)	men (0)	total (-)
	food preparation	women (-)	men (+)	total (-)
	cleaning	women (+)	men (+)	total (+)
	childcare	women (-)	men (0)	total (-)
	shopping and services	women (+)	men (+)	total (+)
	gardening	women (+)	men (0)	total (+)
	construction and repairs	women (+)	men (0)	total (+)
	total	women (-)	men (+)	total (+)

Women's share of domestic work, Europeans aged 20 to 74

	handicrafts and maintenance of clothes	88 - 100 %
	laundry	80 - 100 %
	ironing	95 - 99 %
	dish washing	67 - 88 %
	food preparation	67 - 86 %
	cleaning	67 - 83 %
	childcare	65 - 76 %
	shopping and services	55 - 62 %
	gardening	26 - 57 %
	construction and repairs	1 - 9 %
	total	60 - 66 %

The time spent on domestic work increased

A European Communities study on time use of 20 to 74 year-old citizens in ten countries (Estonia, Slovenia, Hungary, Belgium, France, United Kingdom, Germany, Finland, Norway and Sweden) proved wrong some of my initial assumptions. The data is relatively old, from years 1998-2002, but it gives an idea on the importance that housework still has in our lives. In the nineties the time used on domestic work actually increased. European women kept spending astonishing 4-5 hours and men 2-3 hours on it daily. There was a slight decrease (3 minutes) in the daily time spent by women, but the time spent by men had increased a significant 10 minutes. On this has been concluded that contribution of men doesn't affect the workload of women.

The particular chores that had increased were also surprising for me. I assumed that cooking, a trendy, fun task would take up more time, but actually the ones increasing strongest were boring jobs such as cleaning, laundry and ironing. I would have assumed that modern technology would have eased these. On the contrary, the popularity of washing machines in households has decreased the use of laundry services and so the workload for women has become bigger (Aalto, 2003). (Statistics Finland 2000)

It's understandable that we put so much effort into our homes since we are at home most of the time, around 2/3 of the day. (European Communities) Still, these hours seem like lost time, because it is neither profitable work nor free time. We try to play down this big part of our lives.

Women do two thirds of all domestic work

In Europe there's no great difference in the employment rate of men and women these days. In Finland the number of women in working life actually exceeded that of men in 2009 because the effect of the financial crisis has been bigger on male-dominated domains (Pulkkinen, 2009).

The traditional housewives are becoming rare. Nevertheless, domestic work is still done by the women. I was astonished to find out that women spend more time on domestic work than gainful work. (European Communities, 2004)

Problem of conservativeness

The discovery that so little has changed in the home in regard to gender roles was quite discouraging. Although I see a great value and beauty in domestic work, I saw there was a danger that highlighting this might also strengthen the conservative attitude. Efforts to ease women's workload by outsourcing don't offer an inspiring solution either, since the work would still be done by women (care sector mostly employs women).

Above all I do think it is important for people to do domestic chores themselves. And not just do them in the quickest, easiest way possible. I go deep into the psychological reasons for this further in the thesis. My conclusion is to deal with the issue from a gender neutral perspective and study basic human needs. Consequently I want to point out the importance of this (yes, female dominated) part of life.

Daily time spent at home (Europeans aged 20 to 74)

Women: 66 - 78 %  
Men: 60 - 69 %

Daily time spent on domestic work (Europeans aged 20 to 74)

Women: 3h 42min - 5h 2min  
Men: 2h 16min - 2h 48min



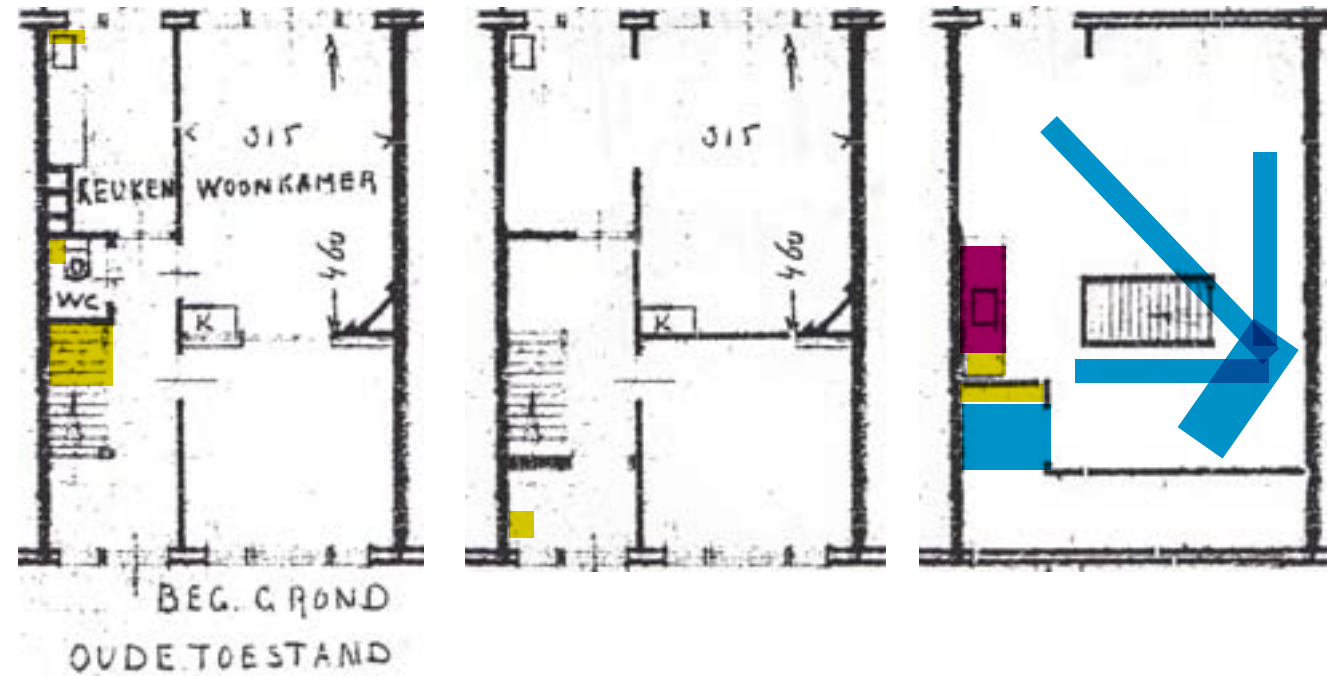
Use of space and tools

I made a study of the space and tools used for housework in homes of three generations of my family. My conclusion is that the space doesn't correspond with the big time use.

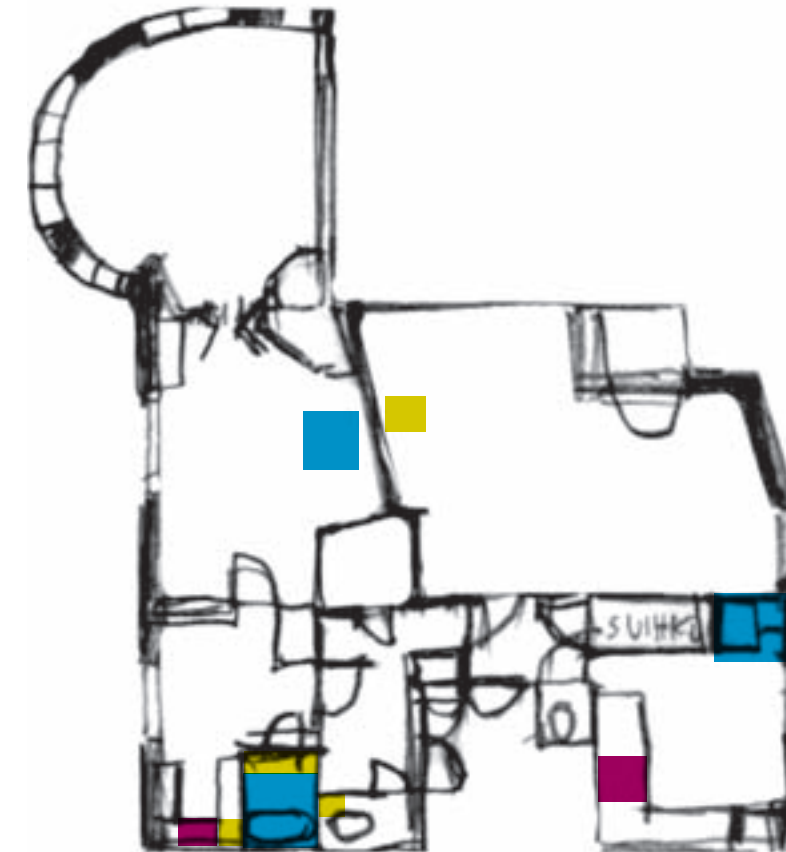
The utility rooms and cleaning closets are dark and shabby. Often there is not even an actual space reserved, but it's more just an in-between space that has an appearance of temporality. The tools are also lacking personality. Later in this thesis I deal with the conflict of their aesthetic of efficiency and our experience of domestic work.

- Cleaning and upkeep 32-68 minutes/day
- Laundry and ironing 21-37 minutes/day
- Dish washing 15-30 minutes/day

Saara Järvinen (born -83)  
Lives with two flatmates  
Row house in Eindhoven,  
The Netherlands



Leena Järvinen (born -54)  
Jouko Järvinen (born -51)  
Risto Järvinen (born -83)  
apartment building in Tampere, Finland



Helga Rinta-Rahko (born -31)  
Yrjö Hämylä (born -30)  
House in Ilmajoki, Finland



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Cleaning and upkeep  
Average European time use:  
32-68 minutes /day

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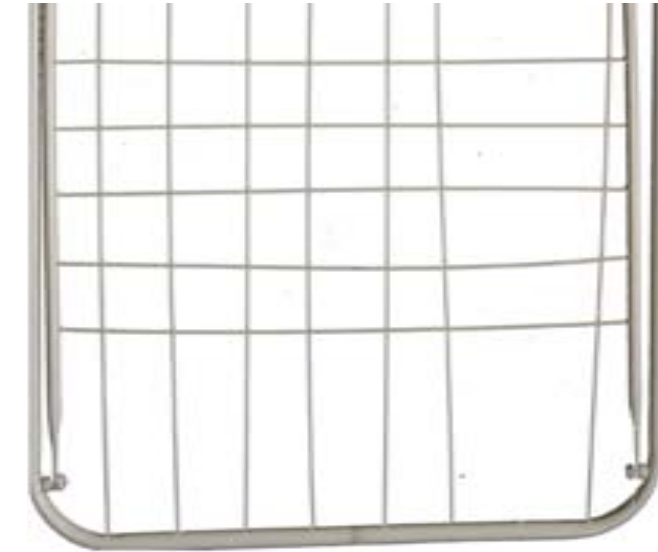
Space



Tools



Space



Tools

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23



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Space



Tools



Space



Tools

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Leena Järvinen (born -54)  
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25

Laundry and ironing  
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Space



Tools



Space



Tools

Dish washing  
Average European time use:  
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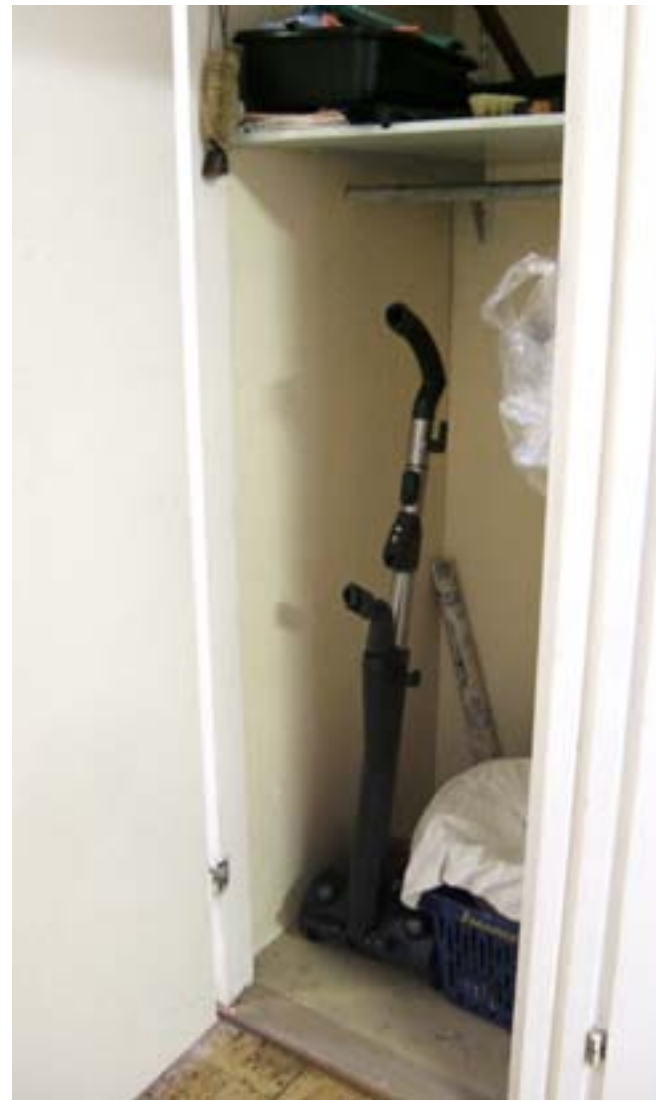
Leena Järvinen (born -54)  
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Cleaning and upkeep  
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Helga Rinta-Rahko (born -31)  
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Space



Tools



Space



Tools

Laundry and ironing  
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Helga Rinta-Rahko (born -31)  
Yrjö Hämylä (born -30)  
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29



Dish washing  
Average European time use:  
15-30 minutes /day

Helga Rinta-Rahko (born -31)  
Yrjö Hämylä (born -30)  
House in Ilmajoki, Finland



Space



Tools

## Reassuring repetition

### Make dinner, eat it, wash up and repeat this tomorrow

Housework is repetitive by nature. Routines feel unintelligent and impersonal, something that make a person lose his individuality. A routine may prevent methods from evolving (Heinilä, 83).

Our understanding of time is linear. It is measured with clocks and calendars and based on an optimistic idea of development. Professional life is structured by goals that we pursue on this linear timeline. (Veijola, 2000.) But biological time is cyclical, following the seasons, day and night. This shows for instance in our rhythm of sleep and metabolism. (Saarela, 2000.)

Consequently can be said that public time is linear and private cyclical (Heinilä, p.84). The natural cycle shows in the repetitive nature of domestic actions. Nevertheless, we are used to a linear system of setting and reaching goals. Domestic work has visible, tangible results, but they are temporary. The clothes become dirty again and we repeat the cycle. I think this is one of the main reasons why domestic work seems insignificant and aimless. A housewife's work is never done.

### Skill through repetition

In her PhD about domestic skills Henna Heinilä points out that a routine reveals a skill that has been thoroughly mastered, it has become fluent and effortless. (2007, p.82-3.) It takes around 10 000 hours to reach expert level. This would mean three hours of daily practice over a period of ten

years. (Sennet, 2008, p.172.) This coincides with the time Europeans spend on domestic work, so most of us are experts in housework (European Communities, 2004). Routine is an intuitive form of physical work, the “experience reaches our body directly past conscious thinking”. (Heinilä, p.83) In order to be beneficial, a routine needs to be chosen and maintained in a conscious way. (p.83)

### Purposefulness and safety

Both Richard Sennet and Henna Heinilä (p.83) highlight that repetition is rewarding simply for its rhythm. “The substance of the routine may change, metamorphose, improve, but the emotional payoff is one's experience of doing it again” (Sennet p.175)

Simone de Beauvoir stated that cyclicity was trapping women, but she also saw value in repetition: “Clinging to one's habits implies an attachment to one's possessions: the things that belong to us are as it were solidified habits – the mark of certain repetitive forms of appropriate behaviour. -- We know who we are because of our habits, and we derive security by knowing that tomorrow, to some degree, will be very much like today.” (de Beauvoir, p.698) Her followers have studied the meanings of the routines around our possessions. Caring for the things around us is a way to build our identities. Each repeated act of cleaning means that we evaluate the object and its relevance. (Young 2005, p.142).

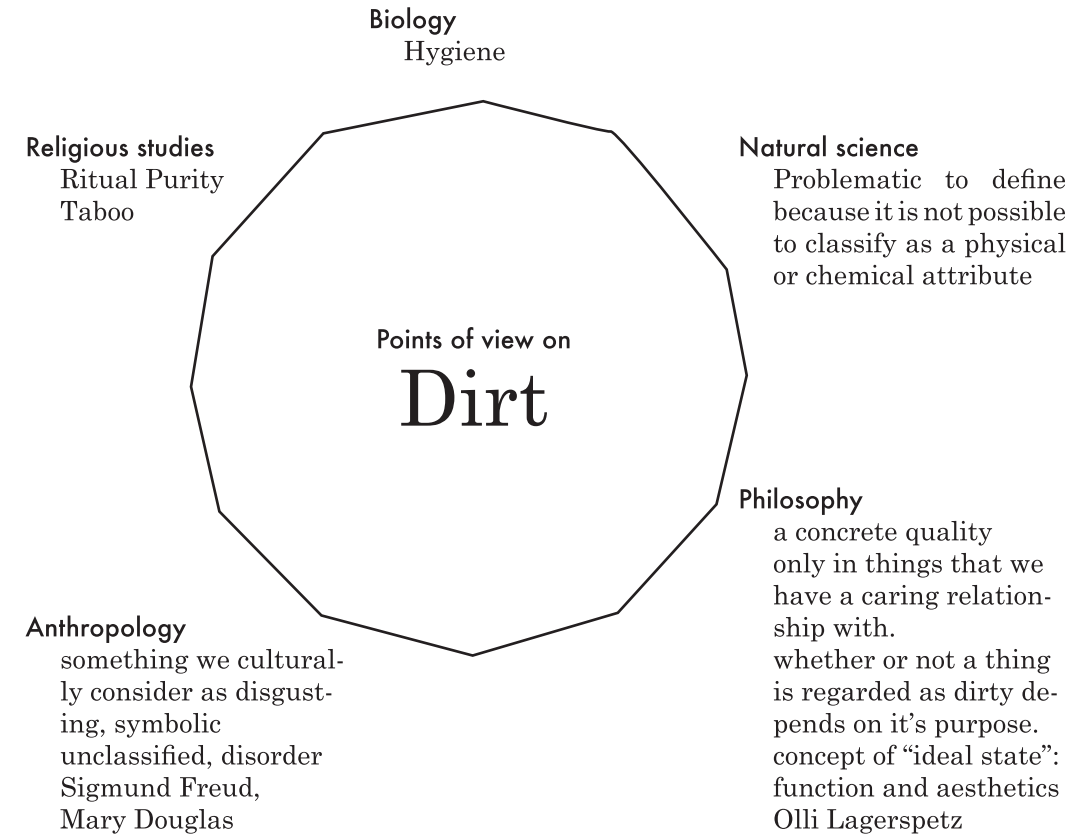


# Dirt

Cleaning is a way to build and maintain relationships with our belongings and make sense of the physical world around us.  
This chapter focuses on our coexistence with dirt.



## “Cleaning is a creative movement”



Focus of this thesis

### Craft of cleaning

Professional life has become so abstract that we don't see many tangible results in our jobs. Housework gives an opportunity to do physical labour with a concrete outcome.

Nevertheless, a lot of the efforts of domestic work remain invisible. The necessity makes it something self-evident and therefore easy to ignore (Heinilä, 2007, p.81). The goal of many actions is purity, perfection and therefore invisibility. I think this shows in the visual language of cleaning products: they promise a neutralizing, erasing effect.

### Balancing decay and order

Anthropologist Mary Douglas has a much more inspiring goal for cleaning: “Dirt-avoidance: it is a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience.” (1966 p.2) She has been the central theorist of dirt since 60s'. Philosopher and professor Olli Lagerspetz (2008, p.271-272) strongly criticises her theory that the perception of dirt has to do with what we cannot classify. Nevertheless, he agrees with Douglas on the importance of making sense of one's surroundings. This is also the point that I find the most intriguing.

We understand the world as a unity where each thing has its own goals, and we are responsible of maintaining this system. “The world, however refuses to obey this order. Objects fall and break, they wear out and get lost”. Washing, saving, repairing and disposing is a continuous attempt not to stop, but to regulate this decay. (p.272.)

## Tolerance of dirt

As explained before, balancing dirt and cleanliness, chaos and order, is an expression of our caring relationships with objects. We take charge of this dysfunctional world. But what do we consider as dirty?

“Dirt is matter out of place”  
Mary Douglas

### Social context

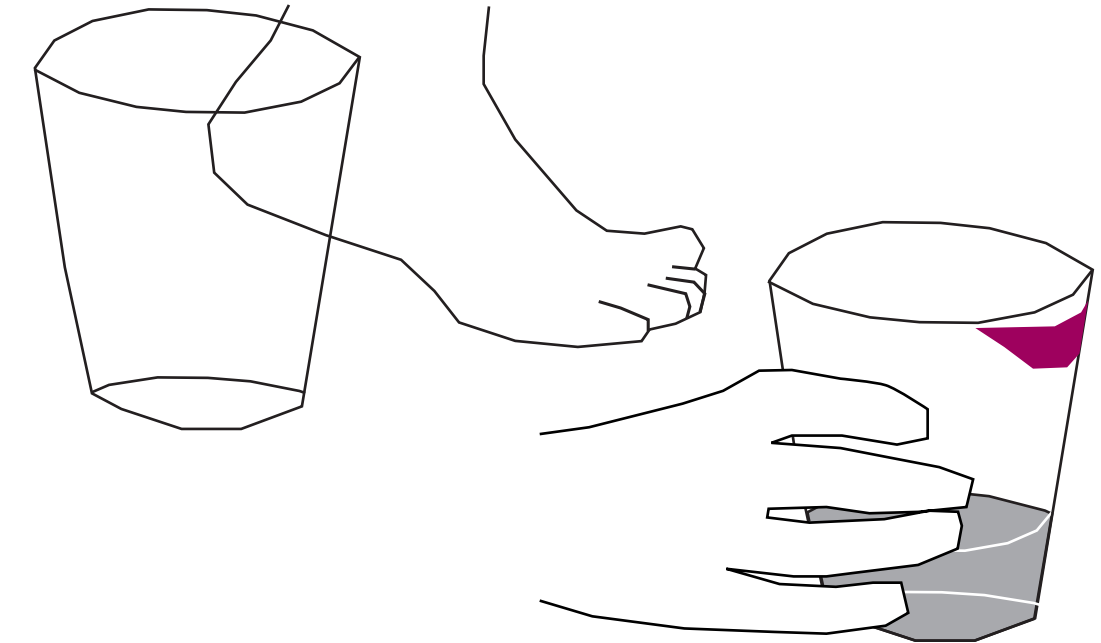
According to Douglas it is always dependent on context, culture and individual habits. A glass can be perfectly clean, but leaving it on the floor is dirty. “In short, our pollution behaviour is the reason which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.” (Douglas, p.37) This theory has later been questioned by Olli Lagerspetz.

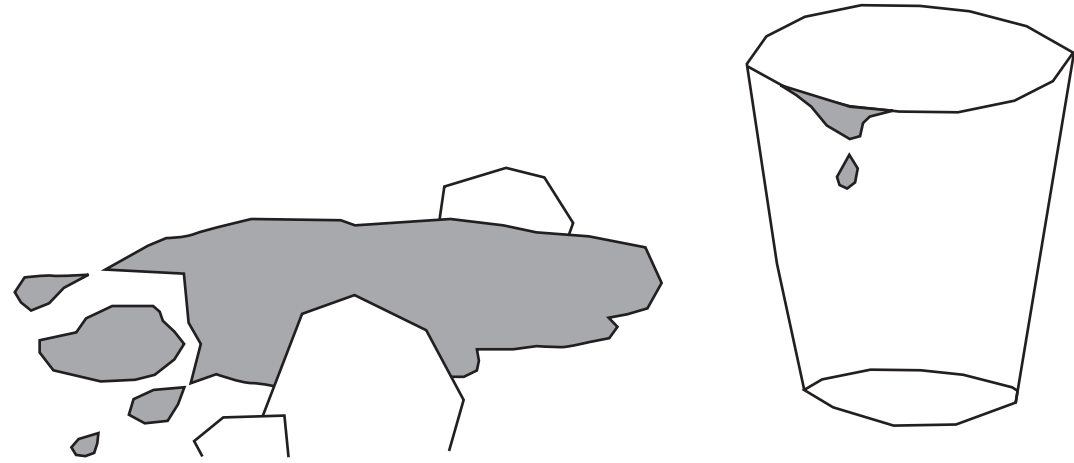
### Purpose

Lagerspetz on the other hand emphasizes that definition of dirt depends on whether or not the thing still makes sense, fits its purpose functionally and aesthetically. (p.255-260, 269-270)

### Intimacy

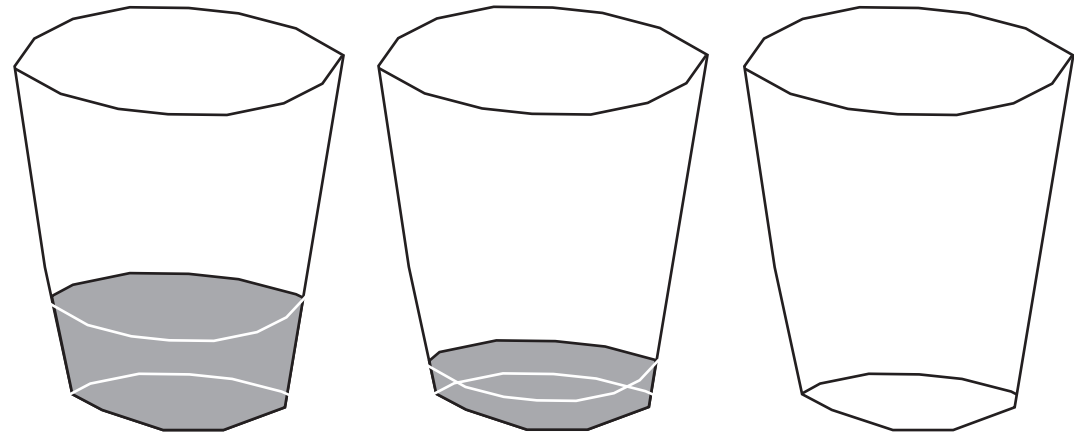
Another factor we consider is intimacy. It is romantic to drink from a lover's glass but a stranger's glass is filthy. (p.282.)





#### Responsibility

The understanding of dirt has to do with ownership and responsibility: wild nature can be muddy but since no one is expected to clean it, it's not dirty. Some forms of decay, such as patina and maturing are accepted, when they fit the purpose or are seen as belonging to wild nature (p.257-258). Dirt can be denied simply by making it something that doesn't expect to be interacted with.



#### Stages of process

A cup of coffee is clean when you are still drinking from it, but as soon as it's left on the table it becomes dirty. (Lagerspetz, p.255-260, 269-270) This idea of being in the process is interesting. Many things, such as tools need to get dirty to fulfil their purpose. It's a matter of opinion if a setting of unfinished actions is considered filthy or full of life. (p.269-271.)

## Dirt boom

#### Dirt – fascination and confusion

The means we have for managing decay in our surroundings are being used differently from before, “we can discard or even save, but not wash or repair” (Lagerspetz p.37) According to Lagerspetz this confusion with dirt has resulted into a boom of dirt in art, literature and social science. Unlike in the past self-sufficient households, we no longer think that waste equals failure, in context of disposable products waste can simply mean “used” or “damaged”. (p. 262) Ironically wartime taught people to use disposables. The Kleenex and other paper products were introduced because there was a shortage of fabric and soap. (Sota ja pula 1939-1949.) This gave a completely new meaning to the word “waste”. Later we have alienated from production of things so much that maintaining long devoted relationships with them seems insignificant and tedious. (Lagerspetz, p.262-263) Now the relationship is ended by us before the thing reaches the end of its life span (p.267).

#### In the process

Our fascination to dirt also exceeds to rough, unfinished or in-the-process -states. I would be interested to open up cleaning activity in the same honest way.

That would be the exact opposite approach from Alison and Peter Smithson's Appliance house that was designed as a solution to the problem of glut in the new consumer culture. “The intention of the Appliance house we made in the 1950s' was to regain as much of the house as usable space. In that period of just ending scarcity of material goods, to get rid of the spatially intrusive welter of the then noisy domestic machines into 'appliance cubicles' could, it was thought, achieve this.” (Smithson, et al. 2005, p.55)

Aesthetic dirt imitations made of gold, precious stones, embroidery and silicone

Niels Van Eijk & Miriam Van der Lubbe, 2000  
Tea set

Susan Collis, 2004/2008  
Paint Job / Love is a Charm of Powerful Trouble

Marije Vogelzang, 2010  
Mouth-watering spoon



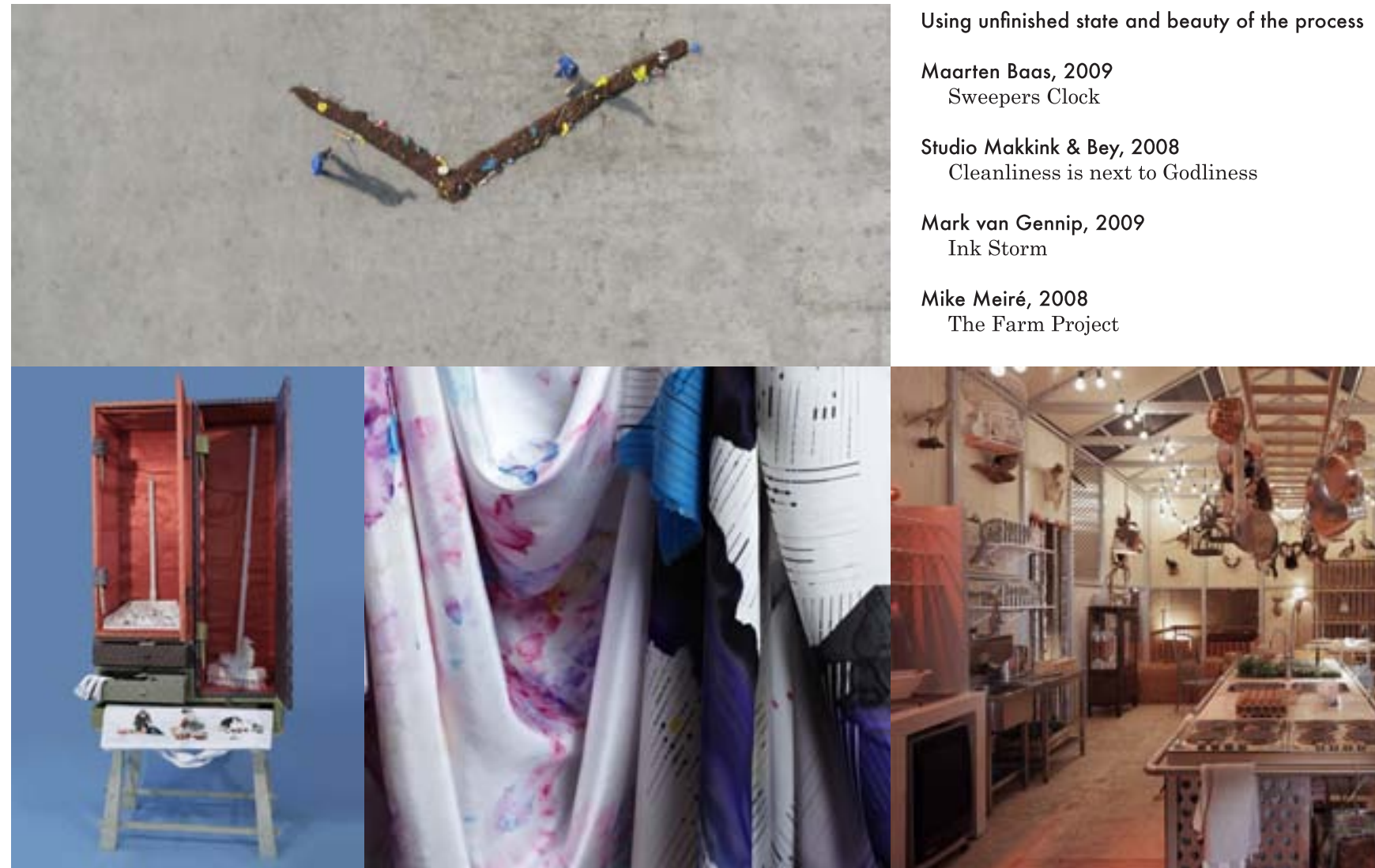
Using unfinished state and beauty of the process

Maarten Baas, 2009  
Sweepers Clock

Studio Makkink & Bey, 2008  
Cleanliness is next to Godliness

Mark van Gennip, 2009  
Ink Storm

Mike Meiré, 2008  
The Farm Project







## Conclusion: Coexistence with dirt and cleaning

Now that we live in scarcity, caring for our possessions is once again exciting. But the obsessive devotion to things of 50s' is not the answer, life with dirt and cleaning becomes rewarding if stiff judgements are discarded.

### Relativity of dirt

There is no dirt in nature. A puddle of mud in a forest is not expected to be cleaned, therefore it is not dirt. Dirt is a phenomenon of cultural surroundings.

By associating objects with natural creatures that have their characteristic behaviour and expectations, I can blur the experience of dirt. The decay of these objects becomes more acceptable and the act of cleaning natural.

This experiment tests our tolerance of dirt and incompleteness.

1. Dirt is a natural phenomenon
2. Dirt is a quality to analyse
3. Dirt is a material for play
4. Dirt, object and tool complete each other



### Presence in the home and object

Cleaning is a continuous action by nature, but in the home it's pushed aside. The spaces reserved for it are hidden in-between areas with a notion of temporality. The design language of cleaning equipment is dynamic and therefore contradictory with the cyclic quality of housework.

Dirt appears when an action ends: a paintbrush isn't dirty until you stop painting. I claim that if the cleaning activity is seen continuously present in our homes and in the use of an object, that changes our whole understanding of cleaning. Consequently we can regain control over ownership because each repeated act of cleaning strengthens the relationship with our things and makes them more valuable.

However, I don't see anything wrong with the cleaning routine itself, the problem is that we overlook it. I want to make manuals that celebrate cleaning as an equal stage with the production, use and storage of an object. The prestigious tone and physicality of these books will help me reach this goal.

### Reinterpretation of the routine

The routine is an inspiring aspect to play with if I ignore stiff restrictions of functionality. I'm designing two manuals that compare good cleaning practices with natural phenomena.

Because children are free from routines, responsibilities and gender roles, it's good to look at the banal tasks from their viewpoint. The age group of 7-9-year-olds plays with aspects of adult life and like to imitate grown ups. However, they have a rich child's imagination and are able to use objects in creative ways. (MLL).

Experiments, natural phenomena and classifications intrigue children in this age (MLL), so it is the perfect time to introduce them to the processes of getting dirty and clean. Having children as a target group I'm allowed a lot of freedom in manipulating the experience of dirt.

For the adult user I move the routine away from it's normal setting, the home, and place it in nature, so creating a surreal situation. When the routine task is taken out of context, it's essence is highlighted: cleaning is a creative way to make sense of our surroundings. A delicate caring relationship between owner and belongings is revealed.

## Reflection

I chose this topic because I was curious about a lost lifestyle. My research revealed that we are actually surprisingly conservative in our homes, but the bond with our belongings has definitely weakened. By choosing psychology of dirt and cleaning as my focus, I think I've found an interesting angle to a much discussed problem.

The topic is interesting for me because it's so present in everyday life. But this is also a challenge in the design process because the stiff routines and practical limitations easily make me blind to opportunities. My design approach can be considered to be debatable. I claim that there is no need for improvement in the cleaning routine itself, the problem is only that we overlook its emotional and creative value. Twisting the routine is my way to bring it out.

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