

THE EMERGENCE OF A MANIFESTO

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*An ode to
female art workers,
mothers and wives.*

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INTRODUCTION

Last Autumn, I set out to re-enact a 1969 work by American artist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles: *Manifesto for Maintenance Art!* It was my first live performance. I had never before thought myself capable of taking centre-stage. Standing tall and confident. Being visible. My emergence into visibility has been a long and painful journey. This emergence was preceded by working for some years on an art project addressing themes of hidden labour, hidden economies, and precarity.

That was before one morning in May 2016 when my life changed for good.

§1. ON THE ENTRENCHED DICHOTOMIES OF SOCIETY

“Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of every such offer; and it is in this manner that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of. It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”

In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith asserts that all human actions stem from self-interest and the pursuit of financial gain, bringing to life *The Economic Man* as a discursive figure. *The Economic Man* has dominated our thinking ever since. His influence has spread from the market to every part of how we live our lives. The vast majority of all economic activity today has a singular focus on self-interest, ignoring other motivations. *The Economic Man* disregards unpaid work and household work as uninteresting and socio-economically inconsequential.

While Adam Smith sat in his room, at home in his mother’s house, crafting this narrative that everyone acts in their own interest, his mother made sure there was food on the table every evening. Not out of self-interest, but out of love for her son. This inherent paradox points to entrenched socio-economic dichotomies between paid work and unpaid work, between workers and capital, between worth and worthlessness. Between the financial elite and the general populace. It illustrates the fundamental injustice of the capitalist system – a system that should be replaced by another.

A growing sense of existence-on-the-brink pushed me to seek an artistic model that would support the precariat and new economic narratives; a model that would produce paid positions for those working on the project, while still functioning as an art project. I wanted to test the feasibility of such a model.

I sought to critique capitalism’s winners and to understand better its losers.

I sought answers to how
I, as an artist, could sustain my activities.
What economic conditions could I put to use?
What means to pool resources? To hack economic systems?

The Exchange Library was born. The project was installed in the storefront room of the Rum 46 exhibition space in Aarhus. This was in Spring 2015.

The Exchange Library was an evolving store and café. Different models of trade and barter were discussed and tested in practice. It was a membership-based concept, with an initial membership fee of DKK 50 per month, later reduced to DKK 35 [approximately €5]. Members could borrow equipment for home production: an apple press, a butter churn, a large jar for fermentation, a grain mill, and more. Tools showcasing the value of producing your own food; the value of avoiding mass-produced foods filled with additives that make us sick. Building blocks of a framework for a sustainable economy, pointing also to environmental and health issues.

Members could participate in the collective school we founded: *School for Home Production – Passing on Knowledge; Preserving Memories*. Once a month, we opened the school and made dinner for all participants. Members could freely participate in all the evening school events they wanted. During such an evening, we taught ourselves, and each other, how to produce traditional foods based on recipes from past generations. We learned to conserve and ferment foods – long a primary source of self-sufficiency in the Nordic countries. We resumed these past practices as a vehicle for discussing the value of hidden work and hidden economies.

The store was open three days a week. People could also shop in the store without being members, just as in any other store. Non-members could barter for the products on our shelves. All transactions were either via *1:1 Direct Swap or Time Banking*. The price and value of the products were determined through a conversation about what resources and hidden economies went into its making. And what value the producers attributed to their production labour. From the harvesting of the strawberries to the amount of care put into the cultivation. How much time was dedicated, and what was the value of that time?

When I started the project, I envisioned that membership fees would generate revenue – not just for me, but for all the members who wanted to work in the store. Members could book the number of hours they wanted to work in the store themselves. Everyone would perform all tasks, for an equal hourly wage regardless of education and seniority. Ideally, the membership fees would provide enough money that each of us could establish an economic foundation for our everyday lives.

We collectively owned and operated the store.
No person ranked higher or lower than any other.
All work was of equal value.

SCENE 1 – FROM EVERYDAY LIFE

It's a Monday morning in May 2016. The Exchange Library has been running for just over a year now. Things are going well. We are making progress and I am optimistic.

I have just been admitted to my dream programme in Brussels, where I am going to spend the coming year working on something that I have long been wanting to do: unifying my discursive art projects with performative practice. I have a burning desire to go in this direction as an artist, but I have never had the courage or opportunity to give it a go until now. The previous Friday, I had just returned home after the first week in Brussels – elated by the realisation of how I would be spending most of my time in the coming year.

Monday morning,
we stop in front of the school,
my son refuses to get out of the car.
I try reasoning with him,
– but you have to go to school, I say.
He starts screaming.
What's happening?
Eventually, I drive him back home and he calms down.

The next day, the same.
And the day after that.
Again, and again, and again.
And that's what we keep doing. For two years.

It spreads to all areas of our life. I can't leave his side.
He clings to me desperately, even if I'm just taking out the rubbish.
I have to sleep next to him at night.
We sit in the living room as he rocks back and forth crying for most of the night.
He's 11 years old.
I come apart at the seams.
I cancel everything.

§2. ON STRUCTURE

Today's society is infected by a structural system that fosters apathy. We are expected to partake in this structure and actively maintain the system that keeps us in place. To stand out or to escape is out of the question.

Some would argue that art is the very space where we can stand out or make a clean escape. I would counter that art is imbued with the same structural mechanism of self-perpetuation as our workplaces, our supermarkets and our institutions.

Society is disinterested in fostering understanding and dialogue across divides, preferring instead to admonish and shame those unable to able to play their role in the perpetuation.

Where is the interest in fighting for community,
for all minorities and the vulnerable?

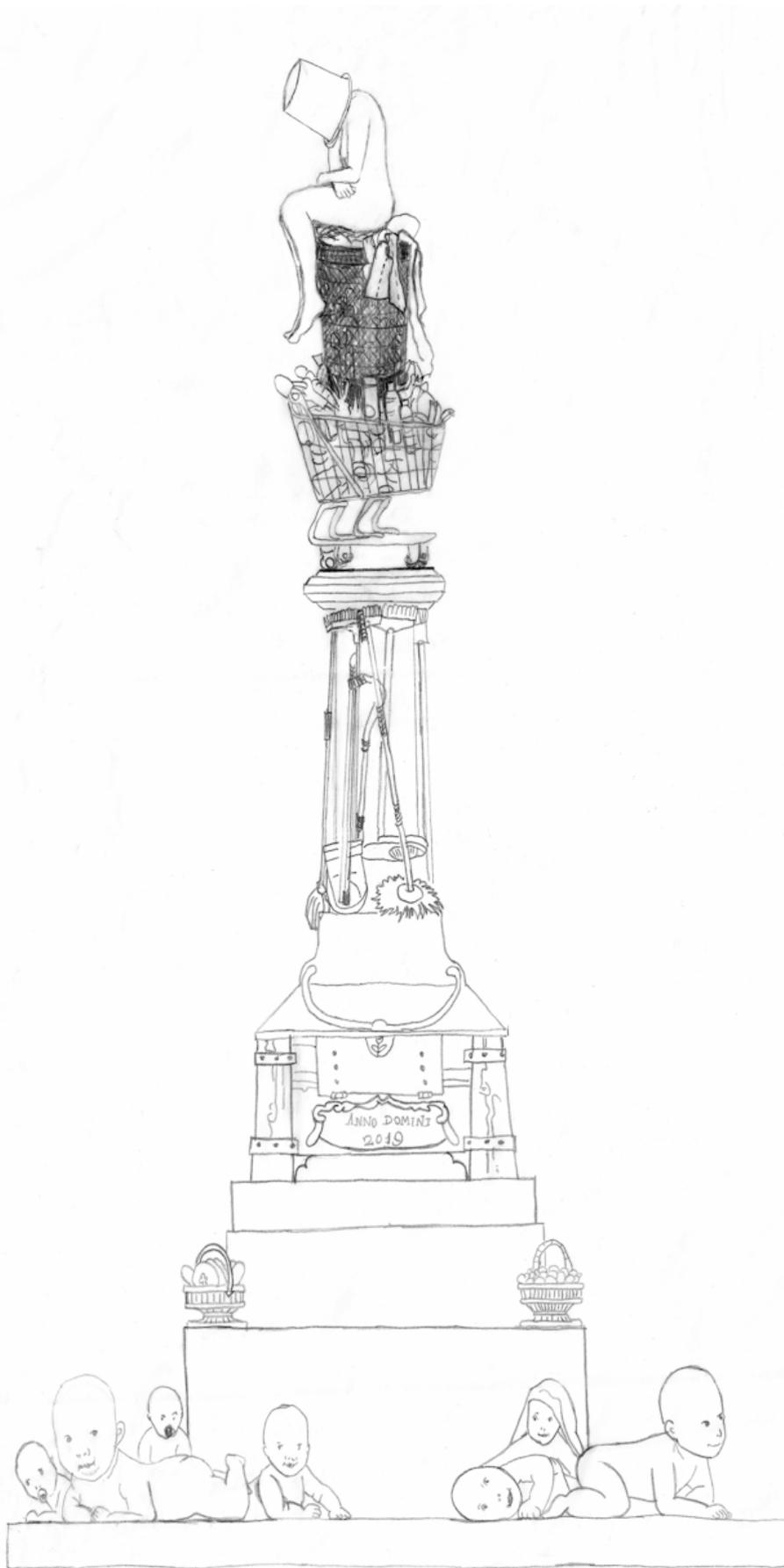
We hear talk of inclusion, representation, rights of all kinds,
but see little change in the lives of the vulnerable,
of the intellectually disabled, the mentally ill, the precariat.
The right to a job you can endure for a living wage.
The right to an affordable home.

Identity politics discusses racist stereotypes;
job centres and unemployment services are privatized;
children suffer from stress and anxiety under the latest school reforms;
diagnoses abound;
housing prices increase;
the quality of life deteriorates.

Rights to economic equality have fallen by the wayside.
It's an unbearable hypocrisy.

SCENE 2 – FROM EVERYDAY LIFE

Children’s Psychiatric Hospital – Ward 2. My son is on the floor, screaming. A heart-wrenching cry for help. Tears pour out of him. And out of me. His arms clasp tightly around my torso, squeezing so hard that I can barely breathe. I try to stand up, but he throws the weight of his slender body and we tumble on the gray linoleum floor. The staff tries to pull my son away from me, and send me home. No one can hear my screams.



Lise Skou, *This Work of Love*, maquette for a public artwork, 2020–

§3. ON HIDDEN ECONOMIES

“Women’s unpaid labor in the home has been the pillar upon which the exploitation of the waged workers, ‘wage slavery’, has been built, and the secret of its productivity.”

– Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 2004

Care work, this work of love, has no socio-economic value. Adam Smith writes that all our actions stem from self-interest and the world turns because of financial gain – a sentiment confirmed time and again. A sentiment that degrades all those who put aside their dreams for the sake of other people. Those willingly rendered invisible.

Providing care is a matter of survival over time. You must give a person, a system or a structure care to keep it going. And that is why we should learn from and value those who provide this service – and recognize their contribution. Exalt them as the most valuable among us.

SCENE 3 – FROM EVERYDAY LIFE

Sitting alone in my living room.

Days like this are unbearable. The washing machine running in the background, meshing with the sounds of the dishwasher. Three and a half years have passed since that Monday morning in May when everything changed. Three and a half years of pain and screaming. Nights without sleep. Slowly, I disappeared, but only I noticed.

The telephone rings.

The staff has told me to not answer the phone; they'll "take care of it". But how am I supposed to ignore it? I managed the first thirty-nine calls. I pick up the fortieth.

He screams in my ear: "It hurts so bad. I can't take it anymore. It hurts so bad. I don't want to live anymore, Mom."

I sink into a deep, deep hole. The walls are dark and steep.

In the midst of this powerlessness, anger and frustration, thoughts swirl about surrendering my practice as an artist to devote all of my powers to caring for my son. It is time to shut down my business? It's not bringing in enough money anyway, and it's draining my human and financial resources dry. The art project I thought would secure my personal finances – and my artistic practice – was in fact the beginning of the end. How could I keep the faith in this artistic experiment as a potential means of sustaining life? As something valuable?

The value I found in life as an artist, in producing art, could not finance the care required to bring my son back to life.

§4. ON THE EMERGENCE OF THE PRECARIOUS SUBJECT

*“To be precarized is to be subjected to pressure and experiences
that lead to an uncertain existence,
where you live in the now without a secure identity,
or a sense of development achieved through choice of work or life.”*
– Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, 2011

As time passed, I had no choice but to acknowledge that the Exchange Library did not attract enough members. The utopia of paid work combined with running an artistic project remained a utopia. For a while, I ran the store on the back of my own unpaid labor, but I knew all too well that it was unsustainable.

Experiences of running the Exchange Library intertwined with my growing frustration with life as an artist and the absence of economic means to sustain life. I began noticing how the economic reality of artists always seemed to be the elephant in the room: everyone senses its presence, but few seem aware of its composition and who it benefits.

But the meager wages and unpaid work of artists is no mystery.
For the most part, we tacitly consent.
We do not object and we do not act in unity.

This emerging manifesto is not a progressive bid to mobilize a leftist rebellion to counterbalance the rise of the right we are witnessing in Europe today.

It is a call to rouse us from our paralysis;
to connect with the visions, the anger and critique of power
that shaped our society.

It is a call to embrace care.

SCENE 4 – FROM EVERYDAY LIFE

Days are consumed by care work and two paid cleaning jobs.
My body is exhausted and my face has grown old. My heart is wounded. I
have watched myself disappear. I no longer recognize myself. The care for
my child is so overwhelming that it annihilates me every single day.

EPILOGUE

“I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife.

I am a mother. (Random order).

I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking,
renewing, supporting, preserving etc. Also,
(up to now separately I ‘do’ Art.

Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up
to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art.”

— Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art!*

Lise Skou is a Danish artist based in Aarhus, Denmark. She read a BA in History of Art and Nordic Literature from the University of Aarhus, and an MFA from Funen Academy of Fine Arts in Denmark. She is a graduate of the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Programme.



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