

I like it

Dirty

## Abstract

When I'm questioning the designated function of the mop, I'm questioning society.

The mop talks about dirt and the people who has handled and handles it. It raises questions about gender, race and class. I have examined how categorization and systematization affects the perception of value through doing and making.

Personally, I've always felt oppression in tidying up. I feel that I'm expected to be a tidy person because I'm a woman. When I clean the floor, I use the mop the way its maker has intended, removing the anomaly dirt and keeping an expected status quo. To me, mopping is taking something from minus to zero: There isn't any creation.

When I turn the mop into a work of art, I create. The mop that belonged to the category of cleaning materials, now belongs to the category of art. For me this is to take something from zero to plus.

The coffee ring on the table cloth multiplies into an intentionally printed pattern. The staining becomes systematic and the coffee goes from being the anomalous dirt to the category dye and becomes a part of the systemized order of things. The shoeprints I have collected are different. The dirt that consists them is mixed, isn't absorbed by the surface but smudges. I do not know exactly what it consists of. The dirt is unknown. How can I put a value to something I do not know anything about? The mere aesthetics? The value of the footprints is depending on their framing, whether I categorize them as art.

I believe that just as much as the frame or categorization of something can oppress, fool and reject, it can be used as a tool to elevate things and act as an eye opener.

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## Introduction

In my process I have used materials and actions connected to household routines and everyday life in alternative ways to examine how intentionality and categorization affects the perception of their value. The focus has been on materials and actions connected to dirt and cleaning, as these are things generally connected to a lower status and value.

## The mop

I'm looking at the mop. There's something intangible about its aesthetics. Something indescribable and fascinating. It gives me the urge to examine it closer, to use it in a different way than its creator has originally designated. I feel that the mop tells a story or many different stories. Most people have held a mop handle at some point in their life. To me the mop is something of a symbolic object, filled with metaphors and prejudice and preconceptions. Different stories with their junction in the mop. I want to share the fantastic of the mop with other people. While I'm sitting there thinking, an all too familiar feeling sneaks up on me: Guilt. The floor is dirty, I should be cleaning it. That's what the mop was made for. Not for me sitting and enjoying its beautiful dirtiness and wasting time.

I think Daniel Miller gives quite a fitting explanation to my experience in his book *Stuff*, where he describes how things execute power over us, by controlling our behavior and expectations.

Material objects are a setting. They make us aware of what's appropriate and inappropriate. They tell us that this is a wedding, that an impure activity. But they work most effectively when we don't look at them, we just accept them. [...] The surprising conclusion is that objects are important, not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but quite the opposite. It is often precisely because we do not see them. The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations, by setting the scene and ensuring appropriate behavior, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so. (Miller 2010: 50)

The mop is a constant reminder of what I should be doing. My desire to do something different with the mop is something that in my mind isn't valuable or desired. Especially since its designated function is currently needed. It tells me that I should be disgusted by the stains on the floor, as though this disgust and the action of cleaning the floor is directly connected to my value as a human and a woman. I should care about the household. It seems to be talking about my character: Cleanliness, orderliness – traits society desires in a human? As if caring about the cleanliness of the floor automatically means caring about other things and the opposite means not caring about things in general. Maybe my reaction isn't that strange, since historically, caring about the cleanliness of the home was something an "accomplished woman" was expected to do. Cleanliness was also a symbol of status. With the industrial revolution the cleaning went from being something you do at a certain time, with a certain regularity, like a weekly tidying or spring cleaning, to something that is directly connected to the visible result and consequently there's no ending to how much you can or should do it (Cox 2011: 45-56).

Even though I'm not born in the 19th century I can still feel this female legacy affecting my behavior and self-image. I have always had trouble keeping my room tidy, and I remember feeling ashamed as a child and teenager, when having to show my room to some visitor popping by without notice.

I can't remember ever hearing my little brother apologizing for his untidy room.

In the typical heteronormative way, my mum has been the one tending to the household much more than my dad, and as she was my female role model I was the one getting a bad conscience for not helping her with the household chores.

I've been to parties, where all the girls would help the female host with the tidying up of the kitchen, while the boys would just continue chatting and drinking beer. Of course, I'm not sure how the situation would have been, had the host been male. But out of these seemingly voluntary actions of helping I still get this feeling that women put some of their value as females in their attitude towards the acts of tidying and cleaning. As though the one who the most vividly expresses cleanliness as extremely important and constantly urgent, is the better person. Hillevi Lench Taguchi talks in her book *In på bara benet* about the way we both create and oppress ourselves and others through society's discourses by acting according to them (2004: 165). The awareness of how we are constructed also gives the possibility of acting differently, but this is often easier said than done. Personally, feeling the pressure of helping another woman with the tidying and cleaning has partly to do with the fact that I feel that she would otherwise consider me some sort of traitor.

I think that my bad conscience about the mop also is related to a certain view on art. If I turn it into an art object to tell a story: Corpus or art jewellery, this could be considered 'unnecessary', degrading and spoiled in relation to the people who use the mop in the way it was originally intended to be used. Tidying up and cleaning has since long been the work of the poorest and in many countries it's not valued in the same way as other categories of work. It has both a race and gender problematic connected to it. In the United States, in the 1920:s, Afro-American women were thought to be especially suited for domestic work because of the colour of their skin, which was viewed upon as less clean. All over the world cleaning up (domestic work) is the only kind of work that is available for people without other opportunities. The poor are taking care of the dirt of the rich. To handle dirt is stigmatizing (Cox 2011: 57-65).

So the questioning of the purpose of the mop might be related to the questioning of society. And the constructed order of things.

## Mopping

One day while I was reluctantly mopping the floor, I was thinking about why I thought of it as such a painful thing to do. (If I exclude the feelings related to oppression) I realized that it was probably because I feel that what I'm doing is not constructing anything. I'm not building anything up from zero to plus. I'm taking something from minus to zero. The way it is when it's clean, is how it's supposed to be when it's normal. Mopping is not inventing or building anything. It's just a constant battle to keep things from falling apart. It's also a work where the result doesn't last. A Sisyphean task. It's a work that only shows when you haven't done it properly and isn't acknowledge unless you do not do it and then often in a negative way. I constantly feel the pressure to do it, because somehow it seems to be considered very important. The mop erases the unwanted dirt. It preserves the status quo. But it does not create. How ungrateful it is to see hours of work hopelessly lost in no time at all, erased by my own and other people's mere existence. Like the sociologist Ann Oakley mentioned in the 1970s, when she argued that there is nothing in the work that gives any possibility for personal growth (Cox 2011: 57).

I like making. For me making is the opposite of mopping. It's to take something from zero to plus. Development. And cleaning takes time from making. This is my personal opinion.

Here one could argue that this is a Western, masculine view on what's valuable and brings happiness. I am born and brought up in a Western culture. To me it's a forced-on, itchy sweater.

Not so much the doing, as the pressure to do it instead of other things.

## The cleaner

Every day he works with the mop. He is doing the work I personally dislike the most. A work that I experience as non-creative and hopelessly tedious. And ungrateful. A work that doesn't show unless it isn't done and therefore so easily goes unnoticed. I ask him if he will consider participating in my exam work. He volunteers saying that he always tries to help if he can. My idea is to take molds of his fingers, cast them and include them in my artwork as a representation for the invisible work and his ever presence in a school where he does not take part in the education. I also ask him to pick up litter from the floor so that I may use it in my work. The intention is to somewhat highlight the value change from its state of anomaly to its state of art jewelry.

## The coffee rings

As part of my investigation I've been staining table cloths by repeatedly stamping them with a cup dipped in coffee. I'm going to Myrorna, a second-hand shop in Liljeholmen, decidedly to continue my process. I'm looking for a clean white linen table cloth of high quality. After some asking around among friends on Facebook and looking for a new one on the internet I realize that economically a thrift shop has to be the solution. But when it comes to quality and cleanliness, it's hard for me to find what I'm looking for. Almost everything is quite torn. My reaction when I find a white cloth with a yellow stain on it is instinctively to reject it. It's ruined. One little yellow stain that I cannot place, categorize, of which I do not know the origin and I deem the cloth unworthy of use, even though my intention is to stain it.

Mary Douglas is talking about how that which we consider unclean or dirt connects to our cultural system and that if we refrain from our knowledge of bacteria, our perception of dirt is a matter of categorization.

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place. This is a very suggestive approach. It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt, there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. (Douglas 2002: 44)

I'm wondering whether my intentional staining can be perceived as dirt anymore. When I put down the coffee mug for the first time and leave a mark I can still somehow see it as dirt. But when it's multiplied into a pattern I do not longer experience it as such. The experience makes me think that there is a difference between familiar and unknown dirt. How can I value or categorize something that I am not familiar with? This makes me think of art again and how some art might be difficult to understand. And consequently to value.

## The shoeprints

During the Christmas vacation, I find myself fascinated by shoeprints.

Visiting a club on New Year's eve hundreds of dancing feet leave their marks on the floor and even though they are all more or less different and so many that they aren't any longer distinguishable from one another, a pattern I find highly appealing is appearing, slightly changing with each blink of the lights.

It strikes me that what I'm looking at is considered to be dirt. I bring the thought with me to school and unpack it. It becomes the natural continuation of my work with the coffee rings.

I unroll big sheets of white paper and attach them to the floor at different locations of the school in such a way that you have to tread on them to get to where you had set out to go. I leave them there over the weekend and a couple of days more before I take them off and take a closer look. To prevent the prints from smudging I have to spray them with fixating spray destined for drawings. This makes me think of how the shoeprints differ from the coffee rings. The coffee is absorbed by the fabric and once dry it doesn't smudge, its staining properties makes it suitable for the category dye (that's what I'm thinking in relation to Mary Douglas) and coffee is something I'm familiar with. What actually once was under the soles of the people leaving their imprint on my paper I can about guess. That kind of dirt is still mixed and unfamiliar. If they were on a table cloth the anomaly would be greater in comparison with the coffee rings. The latter have a natural kitchen table connection: When in the cup, it belongs to category beverages.

## Corpus, art jewellery & artists

For me to consider an object corpus, it has to include metal in some way or be made with a traditional corpus technique or possibly imitate a shape typical for what would traditionally be considered corpus. According to me some of my work is definitely corpus, some strongly corpus related: Objects related to the home, everyday life and/or to the body. My knowledge about the many possible definitions of corpus, helps me in my interpretation of work that someone else would define as such without me necessarily agreeing on the definition. Some of my work is also art jewellery, often archetypical objects that some would consider accessories, but to me art jewellery is wearable art related to the body and doesn't have anything to do with what an object would be defined as, outside the art jewellery scene. Both jewellery and corpus are things that I relate to status and precious materials, which I think make them especially useful when it comes to the question of value that I'm discussing with my work. The act of choosing to put something on your body and thus elevate its value could be considered jewellery as method.

The British artist Susan Collis ([annekafrench.wordpress.com](http://annekafrench.wordpress.com)) wants people to take a closer look at things they don't usually give any particular attention or value. Her specialty is to put a lot of work into and/or use precious materials to create objects that appear mundane when seen at a distance, but when examined closer give themselves away. I can relate to her work in the way she relates to the everyday and the discussion about value that comes with the crafting, the preciousness of the material and the positioning of the seemingly ordinary things in the gallery room.

But while she draws perfect imitations of unintentional staining or meticulously cross stitches dirt, I use the dirt itself in my work, placing it in a context that gives it a new meaning. By doing this, I ask you to reconsider your preconceptions.

I have also used the idea of the ready-made with the same intention as described above. A ready-made is a mundane, often mass produced or industrially made object exhibited as art, originally invented by the Dadaists to which belonged Marcel Duchamp. The ready-made questions the limits of art. The Dadaists questioned the bourgeois view on art since they thought art had justified the society that had instigated World War 1.

A famous readymade often attributed to Marcel Duchamp is 'Fountain', a urinal with the additional initials R. Mutt that was handed in to the Society of Independent Artists' first exhibition in New York 1917, but wasn't accepted. Here one could of course question the value of the readymade outside the category of art or the frame of the gallery.

Conceptual art has its beginning in the readymade and Marcel Duchamp's idea that an object stripped of its function, through the action of displaying it in the gallery context, is enough to make it art ([www. tate.org](http://www.tate.org)).

A person, whose work is a great inspiration for me, is the artist and photographer Sandy Skoglund ([www. famousphotographers.net](http://www.famousphotographers.net)). I believe that we have a lot in common both in the use of surrealism and in the aesthetics. She uses repetition and staging in her work, making scenes that take months to create, with sculpted animals in a built-up setting that she photographs when finished. Examples are Revenge of the goldfish and Fox games.

In analogy with Marcel Duchamp's view on art, as something defined by the artist or the gallery, Miller's opinion is that the setting or the category often is that which makes us perceive something as art. Miller's view seems quite critical.

A more radical version of Gombrich's thesis could argue that art itself exists only in as much as frames, such as art galleries or the category of art itself, ensure that we pay particular respect, or pay particular money, for that which is contained within such frames. It is then perhaps the frame, rather than any quality independently manifested by the artwork, that elicits the special response we give it as art. With respect to some contemporary art, that conclusion seems to me pretty obvious. (Miller 2010: 49)

Personally, I think the gallery space or the category are like glasses with a filter that makes you perceive things in a different way than without it. You should look for something beyond for example the practical function of an object. I also think that he then underestimates the capacity of the viewer.

Douglas is talking about dirt as an anomaly, because of its inability to fit in a category. In the same way she talks about ambiguity as a quality that turns something into an anomaly but that this feature also can make certain categories more interesting.

But it is not always an unpleasant experience to confront ambiguity. Obviously, it is more tolerable in some areas than in others. There is a whole gradient on which laughter, revulsion and shock belong at different points and intensities. The experience can be stimulating. The richness of poetry depends on the use of ambiguity, as Empson has shown. The possibility of seeing a sculpture equally well as a landscape or as a reclining nude enriches the work's interest. Ehrenzweig has even argued that we enjoy works of art because they enable us to go behind the explicit structures of our normal experience. Aesthetic pleasure arises from the perceiving of inarticulate forms. (Douglas 2002: 46-47)

## Conclusion

Dirt is a matter of categorization and through intentionality and repetition it can change from being perceived as dirt to enter another category. But this is also depending on which matter the dirt is consisting of. The more well-known it is and closer it is to the place where it's expected to be, the less it is experienced as an anomaly. If you know its features you can give it a function and thus categorize and value it. When put in the category of for example art, the category implies that you should read it differently than outside of it. This could be used to fool people, but saying that the category is all that makes it into something is, as I see it, to underestimate the viewer. In that case, the artist wouldn't have a reason to put it in the category, as she or he also could be seen as the first place spectator. Art is to me a matter of intentionality. The intention of the artist is what makes it art or craft.

The mop is used for removing dirt. It's connected to gender, race and class. I realize when I mop that the reason I don't like doing it, is because to me it's like taking something from minus to zero: There isn't any creation. It's also the way my expected cleanliness is supposed to define my value as a person and a woman. By making something else out of the mop I question the constructed order of things. I mock the cleanliness that is expected to define me. I create something and take it from zero to plus. I take it from the category of cleaning materials to the category of art. The original cleaning is according to me not elevated because of this. This is my personal experience. But in the category of art, the cleaning is questioned. The fact that I dislike tidying so much also makes me respect the fact that a person working as a cleaner has helped me with my exam work. We can talk about cleaning and class and about who is using who for what purpose. The fact that many artists cannot live out of their profession and have to take low status jobs to get by, makes it all more interesting: What is class? How do you categorize it? As long as people who are involved in a project is properly informed of the process I don't believe that there is any big moral issue as long as the participation is voluntary.

I believe categorization could function as spectacles to see things in a certain light, but also as a tool for oppression. The category of art legitimates the anomalous and the ambiguous and is therefore a useful tool for criticizing norms and making people see things that they normally wouldn't notice, though there is always the risk of accepting things for the sole reason they belong to the category of art and that there isn't any deeper understanding from the perspective of the spectator or any real connection made to real life.

## Literature:

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## Final report

The physical part of the examwork has changed since the initial steps were taken and I've made different choices than the once I first made.

At the beginning, I wanted one of the cleaners involved in the process to collect waste for me, out of which I would make some kind of artwork. I completely excluded this part, since, during the development of my work, the focus on dirt and the focus on cleaning and the mop itself became more and more relevant. Making something out of "found material" would have blurred more than it would have accentuated the message I wanted to get through. The work also became increasingly surrealist since, in the end, it was a criticism of categorization and an examination of how this affects our reading of matter and events and our perception of value. I took molds of the fingers of one of the cleaners working at Konstfack and of my own and cast them in tin. I attached them to the yarn of a mop I made in metal. This became a representation of the invisibility of both the act of cleaning and the expected invisibility of the cleaner. I had a difficult time deciding on whether I should use only my own fingers, the cleaner's fingers, or the fingers of the both of us. This was partly due to ethical considerations.

I casted footprints in tin as well, and oxidized them so that the surface became mat and dark. This was a very late decision. I still wanted the dirt relation to be there in the grimy appearance, though the choice of material would exclude it from that category.

During one of the last tutorials, I felt that what the installation lacked spatiality in the objects, so I added a bucket that was included as a lampshade in a slapstick performance that became part of the presentation. I made a brooch in the shape of a mop head, that could be screwed onto a metal mop stick. This action, or rather the reversed (I unscrewed it from the mop and attached it to my co-actress' chest), was included in the performance, as well as a blouse that I dyed with wine and hung on a washing line.



Staging at the examination.

After this event I received criticism for not having crafted the chairs, since this was not in line with my crafted table. I agreed that if I was to exhibit in a gallery space, I would probably make my own chairs. This however, did not become the case, due to both exhaustion and a lack of time. Instead I brought a wooden chair from home that better matched the table. After all, the artwork isn't about the chairs and the table in themselves. I did not hang the blouse on a washing line at the final exhibition, but let it just lay on the chair in the installation.

If I would have made something differently, I would probably to have tried to manage time better. I think that I would have wanted to be more precise in the details of the objects, like the mop handle and have the to rethink possible patina of the surfaces. I might have wanted to make the installation dirtier and also would have liked to have the energy to hold additional performances. I think I would have wanted a larger number of objects to make a more realist representation of a household and give the spectators more to examine.

Through the development of the exam work I have learned a lot, both about my artistic process and the writing of an essay.

I realize that ethical choices can be difficult. I don't want to reproduce norms but at the same time I do not wish to cut down on my artistic freedom. Compromises might end in something that's lukewarm or doesn't communicate your intention properly. You might feel less pleased with your own work. So that's something to ponder upon: How can I be ethical in a way that works with what I wish to create?

The artwork will be different in different spaces and might have to be adjusted to fit the exhibition. A person cannot be expected to master all techniques. To ask for help is a good thing to do.

I've had problems with the tutoring of the physical work. It's not good when tutoring doesn't fit your process, forcing you to define and explain things too early. It's not always good to be pushed in certain directions, that which I personally don't feel tutoring is supposed to be about. I also believe that you can have too many different tutors, that which can make you end up completely confused, since they all have their own take of what you're trying to communicate and how you should do it.

Sometimes it's good to fight for your rights. Exhibiting in the basement has its pros and cons. You don't see what you've made until you've made it. Killing darlings might be crucial to be able to narrow down and clarify your subject. It always takes four times as long as you think it will.



*Staging at the spring exhibition.*