

**"I am a Feminist":
Post-Performance Reflections
31 August 2018**

I am a feminist. I believe that society should strive to ensure equal rights and equal opportunities for every person born into this world. And this includes women. That said, I am sensitive to the very tarnished, flawed history of Western feminism, how rooted much of it has been in class privilege, racism, and in perpetuating heteronormativity. But I am also against throwing out the baby with the bath water. To act in this world is to make mistakes. Personally, I want to learn from these sins of feminist history's past and strive to rescue the best parts of the promise of female solidarity. Women of the world, unite! But don't let white, heteronormative, upper-middle-class women do all of the talking or even the leading.

Why this piece now? First, the timing of the piece is in some ways arbitrary. Only now do I have the luxury of time to carry out a project that I conceived of years ago. When I first thought of the piece, I was living in New York City, had recently finished my Ph.D. under very difficult financial and personal circumstances; I was working several jobs, constantly sleep-deprived. I was also trying to claw my way out, applying to post-docs and jobs in fields inside and outside academia. On top of that, I had joint custody of my then six-year-old son. It was during this phase that I became acutely aware of just how stacked the cards were against me, as a woman and as a mother, and how structurally I was part of a larger community of women, who are forced to compete in a market with men, who literally have more time than we do, because men are freer from domestic labor. I lacked those "extra" hours every day that they had to read, to write, to network, or even to rest and recuperate. In capitalist society, I came to realize, women have a particular relationship to labor and its exploitation, including the statistical likelihood that over the course of a woman's life she will devote a lot of time to unpaid domestic labor.

It's hard to see this reality when you are young, childless, and have abundant time on your hands, or if you have the capital to outsource your domestic labor or an extended family network to help fill in the gaps. It's also hard to see this reality when society has effectively put ideological blinders on us all, selling us the message that your happiness, your success, your social mobility depend only on you as an individual, encouraging you to ignore the forces around you, which limit your horizons in very tangible ways. But the message of individual empowerment is seductive. At the very least, who wants to imagine a world without agency, in which you are trapped in circumstances beyond your control?

The timing of the piece is not entirely arbitrary. In the aftermath of the Trump election, which brought to the surface and then accelerated many of the changes that were already underway in the United States, our world appears to be in a state of crisis, raising the stakes of debates that for many people used to seem merely academic. In the U.S., the right to abortion, to cite but one example, is under threat right now, a right that many people had come to take for granted. And I am also mindful of the fact that a big part of this moment is based on backlash, coming from certain corners. Many men are quaking in their boots right now, afraid of the potential threat to their loss of privilege. This makes it

the perfect time to strike! I am excited to contribute, in my very small way, to a public discourse that questions the status quo of taking women's disproportionate share of domestic labor and protests the forces that are working against women's rights more generally. But, let me make clear, my aim is not to vilify men. That would be too simple. More the point is to make domestic labor visible and ideally to spark some questions like: Who performs this labor? Under what conditions? Are we, as individuals, and as a society, comfortable with the terms of this division of labor? These conditions?

The first time I performed the piece at Tempelhof Airport, it was more of a dare to myself. The second time, it was in conjunction with a colloquium sponsored by New York University that was dedicated to my former doctoral advisor, who was retiring. When I performed it the second time, in front the Humboldt University library, I vowed that I would remain silent throughout the performance, focusing only on the task at hand, sweeping the rug. This was partly because of stage fright. I do not particularly enjoy being the object of anyone's gaze. But more than that, it's because I do not want to act as a pedagogue. When I step into the role of artist, I take a step back. I communicate, yes, but I do not presume to tell the audience how they should react, what they should make of it. That is up to them. I hope merely to raise the question, to bring to light something that has remained obscured mostly in shadow: domestic labor.

That said, during the performance there were many instances of what I would call passive aggressive behavior on the part of some men. From my peripheral vision, I could see them. At different times, small packs of men stood right next to me, snickering amongst each other, or putting their bags, coffee cups, or laptops on top of my postcards about the project, while they lingered heavily in the space. In these small ways they were communicating their disapproval, attempting to diminish me personally, and probably the message of the performance as well. Afterwards there were more aggressive acts, including a man who grabbed my broom, and swept up in hostile silence the remnants of dust remaining on the ground, then marched off. Another man followed me into the bathroom, muttered something angrily in my direction that I could not understand, before exiting. Clearly, I had touched a nerve.

I should add, however, that there were also some men who reacted very positively. Towards the end of the performance, a mustached, pot-bellied man, who I presume to be a security guard based on his uniform, brought his friend over. He translated the postcard for him. I could hear them say that they were impressed, thought it was great. They then turned to me and said, "Good luck finishing! Have a great weekend!" A little later, a young man walked by and giving me the thumbs up, shouted, "You're almost there. You can do it!"

Even more meaningful for me were the words of a young woman who came up to me later when I was getting cleaned up in the bathroom, saying, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much for your performance."