

Systems of Maintenance: Feminist Theory and Method

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In part, my work explores possibilities for rethinking technology, power, change, and sociotechnical cultures, by identifying theorists, artists, and maker/hackers who take up critiques of technology and innovation. This often involves recognition of the labor associated with the maintenance and care of technologies and large technological systems. Typically, scholarship about the history and current instantiation of technology focuses on innovation and design practices, which ‘The Maintainers’ conference problematizes. Studies that take part in these shifts in focus include feminist critiques of gender and technology. Feminist critiques of technology seek to explore the relationships between gender, race, class, and technology as they are crystalized, transgressed and made further complex. They have typically examined feminist technologies, the co-construction of gender and technology, and the gendering of constructed public spaces (Layne et al. 2010; Cockburn & Ormrod 1993; Rothschild 1999; Weisman 1994). These critiques demonstrate that, while present, women and minorities have typically played a devalued or subordinated role in technological design, such as in the development of telephone systems for public use (Glucksman 1990) and the very important but almost forgotten work of women who conducted physical computing in the development of ENIAC (Light 2003). In particular, I am interested in using feminist research, method, and theory to explicate the importance of labor practices concerning care and maintenance. I am hoping to highlight methods and theory that take seriously such work, and contribute to scholarship that works to make visible often marginalized efforts in technological development.

While I work with Sandra Harding’s “strong objectivity” and Donna Haraway’s “situated knowledges,” for the purposes of this short piece and for my presentation I will leverage Stacy

Alaimo's "trans-corporeality," to work through a few case studies. Alaimo's theorization of "trans-corporeality" (2010) complicates matters by identifying entanglements between environment, human, non-human, and various other actors. Trans-corporeality, "grapples with the ways in which environmental ethics, social theories, popular understandings of science, and conceptions of the human self are profoundly altered by the recognition that 'the environment' is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves," (Alaimo 4). This concept is helpful for analyzing the mechanisms of Fixers, makers, and artists interested in maintenance and care of the object, particularly when considering their subjectivity and why these actions might have impact. In this light, fixing and maintaining connects to self-care since the objects are seen to be inextricably linked with the self and community resilience.

CASE STUDY: Mierle Laderman Ukeles

In her artistic practice, Mierle Laderman Ukeles highlights the often unrecognized maintenance work that is desperately needed in fine arts museums and other knowledge keeping institutions in order to standardize preservation conditions. Heavy work is done to make these efforts near invisible, and so Ukeles takes on cleaning practices as performance, putting maintenance work on display for all to see.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside* (detail), 1973, twelve black-and-white photographs, two text panels, dimensions variable. From a performance at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, 1973.

Her projects shed light on marginalized actions of service industry workers and culminate in her “Maintenance Art Manifesto 1969.” Here, she delineates a dichotomy of two systems within cultural production and transformation: Development and Maintenance. “After the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?” (Ukeles 1969). The answers to this question are political and deeply tied to gender, race, and class. But Ukeles is not trying to say that these actions should necessarily change – more that they be recognized for the very important role that they play. While marking the differences between systems of development and maintenance, Ukeles also makes clear that they are intricately connected. Development brings forth important transformations, but then maintenance sustains and preserves such change. These linkages illustrate a form of trans-corporeality that is not just about how material objects and environment become us and us them, but also about the fluidity of systems, and the need to complicate the binary of “development” and “maintenance.”

CASE STUDY: Feminist Hacker Collectives and Fixers Collectives

In line with Ukeles, recognition of the importance of maintenance and repair work has begun to make an impact on hacker and maker cultures as radical feminist hacker collectives focus on projects that hack with care. Tangentially, Fixers Collectives strive for material literacy and care of the objects that make up our built environs. Yet, dominant hacker and maker practices still preference an additive technoculture that focuses on getting the tools, building the space, getting the funds, getting the members, and making the objects -- sometimes not acknowledging the important organizational, community, and maintenance work that enables such efforts to move forward.

The first time I came across the NYC Fixers Collective was at the NYC World Maker Faire in June of 2013. I was impressed by the group's set-up because whereas all the other booths were geared toward displaying new innovations, cool gadgets, fun hacks, or projects involving mainly new materials, the Fixers' set-up was completely geared towards fixing the electronics of people who came up to their booth with a broken artefact. Not only were they interested in performing a service, but they were interested in imparting skills, making tools available, and giving others a sense of technological literacy. The Fixers also made available their Manifesto, which relates their passion and commitment to fixing and fighting the increasing problem of planned obsolescence in the electronics industry. Their actions and presence give weight to the importance of repair cultures and skills

The work of Fixers is well aligned with Alaimo's trans-corporeality concept, as caring for the objects becomes about caring for oneself, caring for the environment and caring for the system to which material cultures are connected. Self and object are one-in-the-same with environment. Through trans-corporeality, barriers between dialectical pairs are shown to be

permeable, necessitating a blend between material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual territories. These connections and breaking of boundaries previously considered concrete demonstrate that our views of a dialectical world are not so descriptive of the sociocultural and sociotechnical world at large. Alaimo examines how various models of transcorporeality are emerging not only within scholarship and theory but also in popular culture, literary texts and social practices. Her "...intention is not to conjure up a new theory so much as to work across separate fields, forging connections and suggesting ethical and political perspectives" (Alaimo 2010, 3). Through the social practice of fixing and repair, participants are made to acknowledge their own participation in a consumer culture, and rethink their roles as users, consumers, producers and fixers connected to their material objects in a more complex way.

CONCLUSION: Breaking the Binary and Queer theories of waste and destruction

I plan to elaborate or think through these themes with others at the conference, and I hope to push some final provocations. What might further recognition of the linkage between Production and Maintenance systems, and possibly a breaking down of such a dichotomy, enable? Beyond this duplicity, and in line with some queer theorists (Edelman 2004), what might systems of destruction add to the mix -- not as positive moments, but as political statements that work to disrupt and provide counter to any productive claims? Calling upon the death drive, recognizing the abject and waste for what it is, may also tie into Alaimo's theory of "transcorporeality" by highlighting the connections of disparate life/death systems, of letting care and maintenance fall away towards waste and destruction. It should be noted there are often power relations associated with who defines things as waste, who produces said waste, who destroys, what is destroyed, what is left in disrepair, and who deals with the aftermaths of waste.

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