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by Jen McGowan



About the Artist

Jen McGowan is an artist, educator, and mother living in the unceded Coast Salish territory currently known as Vancouver, Canada. She holds a BFA from Concordia University and is a recent graduate of the MFA program at Emily Carr University. She has a Secondary Art BEd from UBC and has taught Animation, Film, and Art at a Public Secondary School for 15 years. In her interdisciplinary practice, she allows each project to determine the choice of medium and often repurposes the discarded material detritus of caregiving. Her work navigates maternal experience and the socio-political systems that weigh upon it.

The Invisible Labour Loops Project as Portal — Framing Mother Labour through Animation

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Motherhood, it could be said, is the unfinished business of feminism.

—Andrea O'Reilly

Invisible Labour Loops (2024) unveils visual depictions of domestic and care gestures that tend to escape people's notice. By aestheticizing everyday movements associated with mothering, my work recontextualizes repetitive household and care tasks to shift perspective. Those who must toil through domestic chores might be unaware when wiping a cup or turning the dial on a washing machine. These actions blur into the choreography of daily maintenance errands, becoming invisible. When observers witness everyday gestures animated in this way, they might wonder why we are stuck in this everlasting loop.

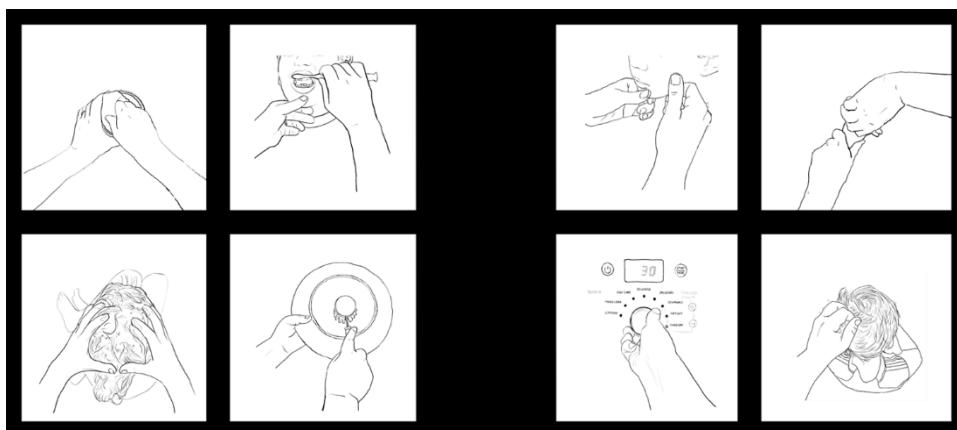


Figure 1. McGowan, Jen. *Invisible Labour Loops*, 2024. Still frames from single-channel video.

Invisible Labour Loops (2024) grew from my experiences as a mother and artist during the COVID-19 lockdown. My family and I were isolated for several months and the domestic care tasks I was performing felt unbearably repetitive. In many ways, these experiences echo the challenges of burdened and isolated 1950s housewives (Ferguson 2020). Either history was repeating itself, or gains made toward gender equity had not progressed as far as I had thought. In lockdown, my nuclear family unit was folding in on itself and intersecting structures of power imbalance were exposed (“The Facts” 2022). Just as my online community and other activist groups were doing, I questioned why life should have to carry on in established ways. The reckoning of the pandemic, processed through art practice, led me to artists and theorists, past and present, who reject this script.

During this time, I researched factors behind why care labour is made invisible and potential artmaking remedies. The term *invisible work* was coined in 1987 by sociologist Arlene Kaplan Daniels, who argues that domestic work is done mostly in private and mostly unpaid and is not valued—either monetarily or morally (Daniels 1987).¹

Kaplan Daniels’ definition suggests that invisible labour combines the isolation of the nuclear family with devalued private labour. She also makes the important point that though there is often a performative appreciation of this kind of labour, that doesn’t negate its devaluing. Because this labour doesn’t figure in the GDP (or divorce settlements), it can leave women in heteronormative relationships in a precarious position (Schwartz 2008). Furthermore, invisible labour across middle and upper socioeconomic classes is connected to outsourced and exploited labour.

Although my interest in invisible labour stems from my post-pandemic context, my work is indebted to seminal artists, activists, economists, and scholars. My thesis work was particularly informed by two feminist artists who connected invisible domestic labour with creative labour—Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Martha Rosler. Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ *Maintenance Art Project* was a response to becoming pregnant when the art world was even more inhospitable to mother artists than it is now. *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* (1969) is a work that grew from the daily tasks that she did to sustain her children’s lives. Her series draws important connections between domestic and maintenance work outside the home. She was explicit that both were undervalued and had been made invisible to be exploited. Ukeles’ *Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Go In* (1973) is another work that shows photographic sequences of her helping her children get dressed to go outside into NYC winter and then undressed back at home. Each image implies that these are acts she performs regularly as a mother. I discovered this work just as I had begun working on the *Invisible Labour Loops* series. The fact that this work about

unseen maternal labour had been created in 1973 (2 years before I was born) further reinforced the importance of the work: even though this issue had been both experienced and considered critically before. Ukeles says:

It's one of the funny things about maintenance, it's almost impossible to see [. . .] I wanted to capture it in increments of time, so you could perceive the details of the sequence of the maintenance task. One of those personal tasks was dressing the children to go out, and undressing them when they came back in. It was in the winter, when it takes forever to put on all the layers on the children to go out. They stay out for ten minutes and start crying to go back in. (qtd. in Schwartz 2008)

Getting dressed to leave in the morning is when work time weighs especially heavy on family time. It can be near impossible to gather up the messiness of family life and present it to fit within the working day's strict schedule. When that tension happens every day of every week, and every week in every month, one can get a little loopy about it. Just like I have depicted in *Invisible Labour Loops* (2024), Ukeles recognizes this series of gestures as a loop she keeps repeating. What is revolutionary about Ukeles' work is that she claims care and maintenance work as art. Before I encountered her, my work felt politically tentative, and I did not fully understand the broader context and why it was important. I had not anticipated how impacted I would feel by another artist, and one of her caliber, claiming this subject as worthy. As both an artist and a mother, I feel acknowledged by Ukeles' conception and articulation of this kind of care labour.² Her veneration and illumination of hidden domestic moments (that take up so much of a caregiver's effort and energy) were deeply moving to me. It meant a lot that she claimed this was worth being paid attention to. Whenever I find an artist or theorist centering on undervalued feminized labour, it helps me to resist the internalized notion that this work is not valuable. It reaffirms my hope that art focused on the value of care labour will reach other caregivers who might feel invisible.

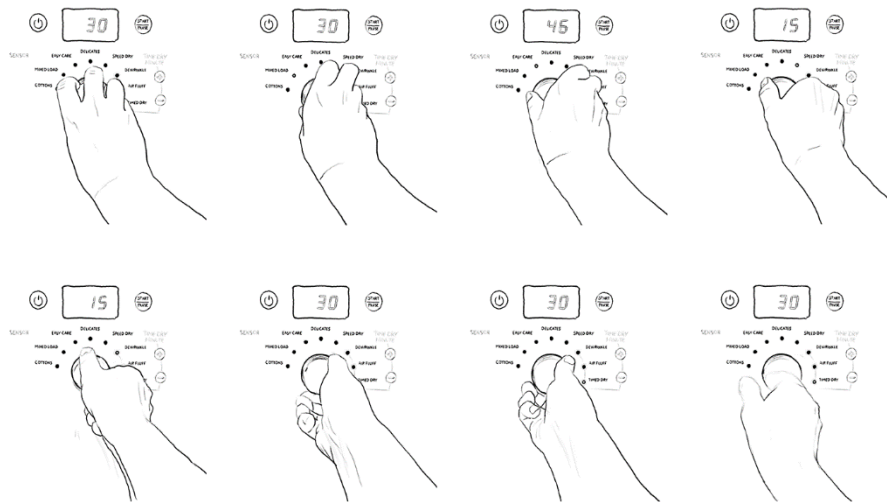


Figure 2. McGowan, Jen. *Invisible Labour Loops*, 2024. Still frames source for single-channel video.

When I showed several of the *Invisible Labour Loops* (2024) at a studio critique, my peers suggested that they conveyed a quality of instruction or language. I could see how the multiple iterations and overall style recalls illustrations in an instruction manual. It was as though these repeating actions could have the purpose of teaching others to perform this domestic routine. Reflecting on the history of domestic instruction media reconnected me to the video art of Martha Rosler. *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) is a widely known video performance work in which Martha Rosler demonstrates a task associated with a kitchen utensil for each letter of the alphabet. In one long take in black and white with a fixed camera, she has chosen to have no sound other than the jarring announcement of each tool and its aggressive enactment. She gingerly picks up each tool and then—such as with the chopper—smashes it down onto the table, over and over. She gently and quietly puts it back in its place, picks up the next tool and then suddenly pierces the silence with a metal grating or smashing sound. As Rosler later noted about this video performance: “I was concerned with something like the notion of ‘language speaking the subject’, and with the transformation of the woman herself into a sign in a system of signs that represent a system of food production, a system of harnessed subjectivity.” In the video, Martha Rosler aestheticizes gestures that portray a feminized subject—who happens to be herself—playing a part in a system of production. She interrogates how societal ideas of female domesticity construct a woman’s meaning. It is as though domestic actions performed repeatedly define what a woman is or can be. She suggests that this glossary of kitchen utensils and appliances is an exercise in semiotics:

she intentionally demonstrates how these structures and social activities perpetuate meaning. The type of cooking show that she is parodying is unironically teaching women (mostly white, middle-class, North American stay-at-home mothers of the 70s) techniques of how to cook properly for their husbands and families. Rosler is interrogating what it means that a certain audience of women is collectively being taught those techniques and those ways of being women.

Before my kids were old enough for me to have some critical distance, and particularly during the pandemic, similar repetitive gestures could make me feel as though I was enacting that outdated idea of a woman. These sequences of domestic actions were almost clichéd signifiers of what a mother did, and through doing them repeatedly, I would sometimes wonder if I was being trained towards a kind of domestic subjugation. These actions helped me perceive my part in a system of production. Though the patriarchal, capitalist system hides and denies its exploitative process of assigning privilege to white men and makes the exploitation of women working at home invisible, Rosler overtly exposes the building blocks of this unjust scheme. She calls out the language of cooking shows, or 1950s housewife instructional videos, as propaganda for domesticating women—selling an idea that she ferociously rejects. In her analysis of feminist semiotics, Leslie Rabine (1977) says:

The production of meaning in bourgeois language would be analogous to the production of exchange value under capitalism. According to Marx, the capitalistic system of exchange hides and denies its exploitative process of production; it represses and excludes the producers. By the same token, according to Kristeva, our system of communication (or exchange of words) hides and denies the work of producing meaning. Semiotics attempts to study language not only in terms of its communicative structure, but also in terms of the labour process which produces it. (44)

Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) aestheticizes these domestic labour processes that produce the meaning of a woman, so that the viewer sees them for what they are. Rosler and Ukeles produced their most well-known art at a time when feminist critiques of Marxist theories of labour, particularly through Feminist Social Reproduction Theory, were gaining traction (Rabine 1977). Learning about these theories has been especially generative for my practice and for conceiving deeper implications of *Invisible Labour Loops* (2024).



Figure 3. McGowan, Jen. *Invisible Labour Loops*, 2024. Still from single-channel video installation.

Like Rosler and Ukeles, my work responds to the current socio-political climate. Learning how systems and labour issues affect my life is fundamental to my creative process. *Invisible Labour Loops* (2024) reflects on why invisible labour continues to be undervalued, and has helped me to decode the complexities of the culture I mother in.

Rosler has said that even during North American women’s liberation in the 1970s, the kitchen was where women were expected to perform their mastery and leverage limited power. She notes, “the mechanisms of domestic production and reproduction which fall primarily on women, are as much part of the various apparatuses of social production,” as mechanisms used outside the home such as mainstream media (Rosler 1975).

I didn’t intend to enact outdated expectations of womanhood when I married or had children. Still, I discovered that systematically constructed ideas of a nuclear family couldn’t help but infiltrate my home. The *Invisible Labour Loops* (2024) pull back the veil

on the machinery chugging underneath these habits and customs. They can do that partly because of the use of Rotoscoping—a process of tracing a film or video reference frame by frame to reassemble into animation. In the *Labour Loops* (2024), I filmed looping hand gestures of my and other mother’s hands and then translated the footage into graphic forms. The act of tracing previously recorded media calls attention to itself. In his talk “The Image Gazes Back: Rotoscope and Demystification,” animator Jonah Primiano proposes that rotoscoping can be thought of as an analysis of moving images (2022). The artist who rotoscopes chooses what parts of the images to bring back into view. Primiano suggests rotoscoping is particularly well suited to interrogating the meaning behind images. He refers to art critic and historian Hal Foster’s description of engaging with the archive critically. Foster writes: “A resistant postmodernism is concerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition, not an instrumental pastiche of pop- or pseudo- historical forms, with a *critique of origins*, not a return to them. In short, it seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations” (1983, xii). This analysis allowed me to understand more deeply what I aim to do in the *Invisible Labour Loops*, as well as in past work that has referenced the figure of the 1950s housewife. My interventions into the archive critique those origins and expose the politics of maternal domestic associations. I interrogate the meaning of a woman by rotoscoping my own hands, performing a cliched idea of domesticity. In *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), Rosler performs a critique of the popular fantasy of the 1950s housewife through the format of a cooking show. She addresses the continued exploitation of North American women’s labour in the 1970s through her performance. With *Maintenance Art*, Ukeles uses her image and body in performances that exaggerate and push the form of performance art into unlikely places, making visible the arbitrary exclusivity and hidden maintenance work of the art world. Rotoscoping as a form similarly allows me to use my own hands to question persistent cultural codes of who should perform Invisible Labour. The rotoscopic line traces my hands and the hands of members of my family and community—and transforms our hands into representations. Removing the photographic referent allows for the gesture to come to the fore and take on a broader significance. It doesn’t matter that I am performing the task: the abstraction makes room for projection. It further allows the visible indexes of my race, gender, age, and socio-political identifiers to be concealed in a way that filmed images Rosler and Ukeles used couldn’t. While there is loss of specificity in the rotoscoped image, my hope is that its contours call to communities outside of my own, who recognize their own or others’ invisible labour in the rhythms and shapes of the gestures. The graphic abstraction seeks to make possible a broader connection between the exploitation of maternal care labour

and the exploitation of invisible labour performed by “outsourced” and marginalized groups.



Figure 4. McGowan, Jen. *Invisible Labour Loops*, 2024. Still from single-channel video installation.

Invisible Labour Loops (2024) began to form during the pandemic when the world seemed to stop. Psychoanalytic theorist Lisa Baraitser discusses how the pandemic functioned for many people as a pause for thought, a withdrawal from regular life. She notes that their capacity for reflection was “reliant on time’s suspended forms—pause, hiatus, interval, ellipsis, hesitation, intermission, break and gap—that also suggest a relation to care” (2022, 17). The interruptions of lockdown amplified the interruptions to linear time that are inherent to caregiving. She goes on to say that care involves “waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, persisting” and that: “care time is not really experienced as moving, developing, flowing or unfolding. It can be emotionally full, but more often it is time that must be endured, suffered even, rather than embraced” (qtd. in Kühn and Weber 2021).³ Mothering is so often about staying with the discomfort of providing care. My turn to the form of the loop embodies an uncomfortable staying with—beginning in those early newborn days when we are called to care after we think we cannot go on and repeating that promise many times over. Committing to showing up every time, cleaning, caregiving, and daily maintenance of it all despite physical or

mental exhaustion is a radical act of care. Care time can create a space for contemplation, even in the grind. The hovering or arrested caregiving time can give a unique perspective on standardized, linear, chronological time. Caregiving and lockdown allowed many of us to observe aspects of convention that we would not otherwise be able to recognize. Containment of the Coronavirus forced an online witnessing to the suffering of communities those of us who live in relative comfort might normally overlook. Abiding by that suffering—seeing it—seemed to move more people to actively resist the status quo once we could perceive the harm it caused. Those of us who might previously have been able to ignore our privilege were called to question how guarding it impacts our communities racially, socio-economically, and in many other intersecting ways. Caring about that—and, more importantly, doing something about it—requires resilience to withstand discomfort. Mothers are asked to stay with the friction of incessant labour and care loops and to become better at it with time. Maybe this gradual development of resilience is required to commit to the responsibility towards the care of others in our homes and communities.

When that essential care is placed by default on the shoulders of unpaid caregivers, I wonder about the compounding impact of the collective weight. What happens to our bodies and minds when tethered to a lifetime of these looping responsibilities? And further, why do we find it acceptable to pass on the most laborious tasks to hands whose lives we have determined are worth less than ours? This burden of time poverty and the contradictions that it reveals are exposed in this work.

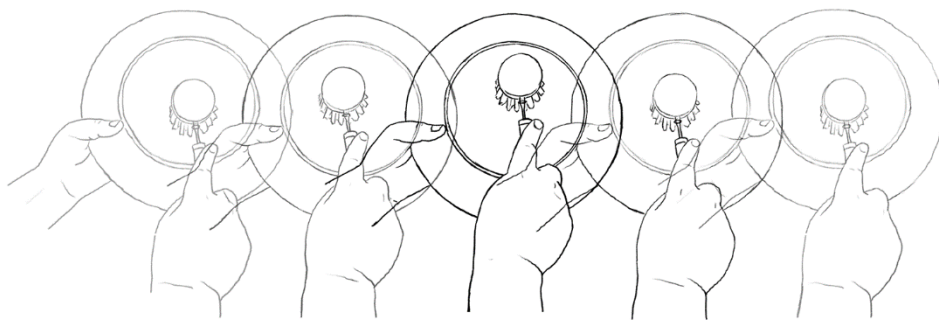


Figure 5. McGowan, Jen. *Invisible Labour Loops*, 2024. Still frames source imagery variation from single-channel video installation.

The animated loops reflect the persistence of caregiving and the cyclical devaluation of that care. The movement and stasis, like the hamster on a wheel, imply an extreme effort

that goes nowhere. There is a sense that time has stopped, and the gestures have been and will be, going on forever. This mirrors my experience of maternal time.⁴ For example, seconds can bear down when late for an appointment and locked in a power struggle with small but headstrong children about a preferred jacket or shoes (usually the least appropriate for the weather). Minutes can drag out exponentially when meandering a street at a snail's pace while under-slept and holding up a (surprisingly heavy) new walker taking their first steps. When caring for my young children, especially, time was slippery, inconsistent, and hard to track. Performing repetitive tasks would punctuate my days; they would be points of focus.⁵ These reliable yet trying actions would make me aware that I was performing them (Baraitser 2022, Baraitser in Kühn and Weber 2021). *Invisible Labour Loops* (2024) makes the invisible labours of domestic care and maintenance visible. Critically, it examines how sustaining a privileged, middle-class lifestyle can blind us to the problematic systems it perpetuates. These never-ending cycles ask what we miss when compulsively stuck in the loop.⁶

Notes

¹ Daniels states: “The idealized separation of work from the home—the expected distinction between the public world where men went out to work and the private world where women remained at home to raise the family and prepare a place of respite for the working man—sharpened the distinction between productive workers (men doing ‘real’ work for wages) and non-productive workers (women supporting, raising, and rehabilitating those real workers)” (1987, 404).

² Ukeles’ artwork validates and informs my own. As an intelligent, ambitious artist, she was frustrated by the conflicted nature of mothering while pursuing art. Still, her fury at the arbitrary barriers and dismissive attitude that she was confronted by compelled her to create artwork about her experiences. She insisted that disregarding invisible labour in movements towards societal reform (aims of the feminist movement at that time often excluded the reality of mothers and black women especially) would reinforce the imbalance of power they aimed to reconcile. As she says, “after the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage?” (1969).

³ See also Sylvia Federici’s *The Wages for Housework* campaign, which reflects her contribution to Feminist Social Reproduction Theory in the 70s. She suggests it was the first to examine that: “Unpaid labour is not extracted by the capitalist class only from the waged workday, but that it is also extracted from the workday of millions of unwaged house-workers as well as many other unpaid and un-free labourers [...] This [...] unmask[ed] the socio-economic function of the creation of a fictional private sphere, and thereby re-politicis[ed] family life, sexuality, procreation” (2019, 55–57). Feminist Social Reproduction Theory, and especially its contemporary definition, which expands beyond the gendered and domestic to include other unpaid or underpaid social and maintenance labourers, recognizes that power imbalances within the global economy are a direct result of this labour being made invisible.

⁴ Rosler uses persuasive methods of time-based media to mimic the feel of a late-night television infomercial and subvert its maintenance of the status quo. She redirects that manipulative form to encourage resistance. And for decades, those of us who continue to recognize having to resist tropes of what a female is have adored this work’s wicked humor and acuity.

⁵ Sometimes, I would notice my body labouring almost in a trance, and other times (usually to do with getting the kids to sleep), every second would be unbearable. These unending responsibilities put into relief how much time and effort it takes to care for a family and a home and how much of that responsibility is on my shoulders.

⁶ See Anna Firth’s thesis, *Inanimation* (2018). In it, Firth considers the loop a distinct animated form that heightens labour. She writes, “These perpetual clips do not have pause or play buttons. They do not get played in a sequence where they begin and then end. Instead, this form of media appears to have already begun when it is encountered and seems like it will continue to play forever.” Her description reminds me of the importance of loops and how my animations depict domestic actions even before I committed them to form. Yet, though the gallery viewer can walk away, the mother remains stuck.

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