

# CLEANING AND VALUE



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# **CLEANING AND VALUE**

INTERDISCIPLINARY INVESTIGATIONS

edited by

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# Contents

<b>Contributors</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Editor's note</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>17</b>
Hans P. Hahn	
<b>Paper Abstracts</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>SECTION 1: EDITORIAL</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>We have never been Clean – Towards an Interdisciplinary Discourse about Cleaning and Value</b>	<b>23</b>
Isabel Bredenbröker, Christina Hanzen, Felix Kotzur	
<b>SECTION 2: DISCIPLINARY REFLECTIONS</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Archaeology and Cleaning: Some Reflections on the Archaeological Process</b>	<b>41</b>
Ulrich Veit	
<b>How is Dirt possible? On the Philosophy of Dirt, Cleanliness and Refuse</b>	<b>55</b>
Olli Lagerspetz	
<b>SECTION 3: CONTEXTS AND PLACES</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>The Last Bath: Cleaning Practices and the Production of 'Good Death' in an Ewe Town</b>	<b>69</b>
Isabel Bredenbröker	
<b>The Cultural Aspect of Cleaning in Archaeology – a Case Study from the late Neolithic Site of Fıstıklı Höyük</b>	<b>89</b>
Georg Cyrus	
<b>CARPE Dirt, Disease, and Detritus: Roman Sanitation and its Value System</b>	<b>105</b>
Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow	

<b>SECTION 4: BODIES, OBJECTS AND PERSONAL HYGIENE</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>A Matter of Representation – Personal Hygiene in Eastern Zhou-dynasty China (771-256 BCE)</b>	<b>129</b>
Catrin Kost	
<b>Why is Death defiling? Considering death-related Pollution and Cleaning in Central Asia</b>	<b>155</b>
Jeanine Dağyeli	
<b>Your Clothes Should Be Clean! Your Head Should Be Washed! Body Cleaning and Social Inclusion in the Epic of Gilgamesh</b>	<b>167</b>
Ainsley Hawthorn	
<b>SECTION 5: SOCIAL PRACTICES AND POLITICS</b>	<b>181</b>
<b>Shaking out the Tablecloth – Uzbek Hospitality and the Construction of Boundaries of Belonging</b>	<b>183</b>
Sebile Yapici	
<b>The Cleansing of a Political System: Obliterations, Burials and ‘Reuse’ of Palaces and Seats of Power in Central Italy (Seventh-Fifth centuries BCE)</b>	<b>195</b>
Robinson Peter Krämer	
<b>Cleaning up the Past</b>	<b>213</b>
Mareike Späth	
<b>SECTION 6: ARTISTIC PERSPECTIVES</b>	<b>229</b>
<b>Growths: Contemporary Art between Cleaning and Value</b>	<b>231</b>
Isabel Bredenbröker	
<b>Mother Tongue (2013) Interview</b>	<b>235</b>
I: Isabel Bredenbröker, C: Chrischa Oswald	
<b>Mehl, Salz und Wasser zu einem Teig verarbeitet und auf die Spiegeloberfläche aufgetragen (2017)</b>	<b>240</b>
<b>Flour, salt and water, prepared as a dough and applied to the mirror surface, size varies (2017)</b>	<b>240</b>
Kerstin Gottschalk	
<b>Duschvorhang (2005/2015)</b>	<b>246</b>
Andreas Koch	
<b>Cleaning and Value</b>	<b>249</b>
Robert Schittko, Nikolaus Kockel	
<b>In between contemporary stones (2016)</b>	<b>251</b>
Wagehe Raufi	

**Contemporary Art and the Gaze of an Archaeologist:  
An Interpretative Attempt of Decay and Lost Evidence** 255

Anna Langgartner

**Bruise 13 (2017)** 257

Mia Bencun





## Mother Tongue (2013) Interview

2-Channel-Installation, HD Video, sound, b&w, 4.10 Min. (Loop)

I: Isabel Bredenbröker, C: Chrischa Oswald

I: I would like to ask about working with your family and to consider whether this aspect of your work can somehow be brought in connection with the topic of cleaning, or with value. Especially in relation to the kind of intimacy that *Mother Tongue* tests out, is this intimacy a value in itself? Maybe as a precondition for making it? Could you also have made this video with someone else? Is what happens here cleaning?

C: Firstly on the question of whether I could have made the video with someone else: no. At first, my mother refused to collaborate at all, but for me her participation was really important. I had this set idea of licking her face, the way cats do it, or how it is performed among animals as part of their body care routine. And I was interested in seeing what would happen if this was transposed into the realm of human social interaction, where today the cleaning of bodies is a completely different thing. So maybe there were certain similar dimensions to bodily care among humans back in the day, like inspecting someone else's scalp for lice. Surely that must have been an intimate moment. Or when mothers bathe their children. But in relation to touch, a direct kind of physical interaction with our tongue is more likely to be read with a sexual connotation and is something very intimate. That's why it can create such tension, it produces a kind of conflict between the pure act and the relationship between mother and daughter, who in the video appear to be quite innocent, dressed in white. I've always termed the beginning and the end of the video as the "NIVEA moment", the image of mother and daughter in an intimate portrait setting.

I: Why NIVEA?

C: I am always playing with the idea of the idyllic family and intimate togetherness. I've seen this moment shared between mother and daughter in some beauty advertisement before, this act of taking care of each other's bodies. Even if that only means that one person leaves a bit of lotion on the nose of another. But transporting this idea of: that's good for you, that's what care is, that's what gives you a spotless complexion or somehow nurtures you. I wanted to record a moment that worked well for advertisement purposes, an idyllic situation, and then go on to break this moment up. Which, in the end, is still a very pure gesture for me. When cats lick, it's cute and everyone is taken by it. But as soon as one shifts this gesture to another context, things like incest and so on come into mind. That was my mother's main

concern, the reason why it took me so long to win her over for this experiment. She thought, when this becomes public and people from the town see it, they are going to ask themselves if she is mad, or if I am, or if we both are. And what is wrong with our relationship? This is where I believe the value of this video is somehow not fully appreciated. I mean the value of art. The value of breaking conventions and looking at them from a different angle.

I: I am living with a cat at the moment. Of course, it's just one cat but it kind of looks as if she can take care of cleaning herself very well without the need of another cat.

C: I guess I'm thinking more of mothers and children, cats and kittens. This is why the chance to experience this myself seemed so important to me. How does it feel? What is it like? And because I work a lot with my family, it was not an option to use someone else who would perform as a mother for me.

I: Which means that family in itself serves as a kind of value in your work; a level of mutual respect and trust. Does that then mean that you could not film these transgressive scenes, scenes somewhat uncharacteristic as far as human behaviour goes, with other people? Or that you would find it less productive?

C: I think I could. But I'm really more interested in the dynamics that unfold within the family. You can also read it as a kind of therapy, if you want: I am trying to understand certain structures. Whilst doing so, I am testing the boundaries. How far is my family willing to play along? This is where the value of trust is really important. I could pay other people to do this and that's not a problem at all. But I also didn't want it to look too much like it was all just an act. There had to be an element of the real and real relationships in it at all times so that everything that resonates within our family has the chance to resonate in the works.

I: That means this significance of 'having a family' and of sharing, of being a common unit, is really important for these dynamics.

C: Yes, I think so. But I'd like to come back to the value of art once again. That's an important point for me because I also had to make it clear to my family who are not very interested in art. To explain to them why it holds such a high value for me and why I want to spend my life doing art. Why I invest in work and thoughts. I want to show them what this can mean and what a different kind of world or experience it can create. But of course, the value of the family and of how I am able to work with them, trust and everything my family gives to me which may not exist in other families, the fact that I am able to use this as a material for my work is of course very important.

I: It becomes something different if you end up paying someone else for the part. The contract is different and emotions are different, the experience will be a different one. And what kind of effect does this setup then have on you in the end? Was it cleansing in any way?

C: The act itself was somehow disgusting for both of us. Saliva starts smelling when it dries in contact with air. My imagination of how it would be was a lot more romantic than how it turned out. I might be just imagining this, but perhaps it had a somewhat

cathartic effect on my mum both during the shooting but also afterwards when the work was featured in exhibitions.

I: Yes, she got over her fear.

C: Exactly. And I was quite amused when I heard how different people reacted to the work. One of my best and oldest friends, who also knows my mum and likes her a lot, she basically could not look at it at all. Another person told me he thought it was very romantic. I had expected to represent an expert in the video. I thought that could be a powerful image. So having achieved that is already an achievement, even though I found the physical interaction repulsive.

I: You meet as two adults in the video. If we go back to images from the animal kingdom, bodily care is more likely to occur between mothers and their young children. Like suckling or breastfeeding for humans. The mother takes over a task which the child is still incapable of doing themselves. But you are able to wash your own face these days...

C: But I can't lick my own face.

I: Yes, you do need someone else for that.

C: No, but you're right and that was also the point. Now that I am grown up it comes across even more weird. I am a sexualised body and don't have the purity of a child anymore.

I: Adult bodies do not necessarily have to be sexualised.

C: Yes, but charged. It's clear that I am sexually mature, I know desire and lust. For the child, these things do not resonate in physical interaction. I am aware of that, even when trying to be as neutral as possible and to just let the interaction stand for itself. But for me this tension is always present. So my play includes a different dimension.

I: That means that the act of a body being cleaned by another body, involving the direct interaction with bodily fluids which may already have a sexual connotation, is likely to be interpreted as purely functional – an act of cleaning – when the body that is being cleaned can pass as morally pure. It seems almost paradoxical that one should only be allowed to bodily clean that which is already considered somewhat pure. What does it mean if that purity is not a given? That the persons who are involved in this act are polluting one another?

C: Yes, it may be a kind of moral pollution I would say. That was exactly my mother's fear even if she knows that there is nothing sexual between us but based purely based on what a viewer sees may think.

I: Unorthodox cleaning. An established method in a wrong or new context. In this case also with new actors. I mean, the child is also active in the cleaning and is not just being cleaned.

C: This mutuality was important in order to see whether it changes anything to change roles or to have a fixed role.

I: Did you rehearse?

C: Not really. After all the convincing...

I: How long did it take to win her over?

C: It took about three months until she gave in. And then some more time until we actually filmed it. The idea was to do it and then see whether I would be allowed to show it but in the end it was kind of spontaneous and unannounced. She suddenly said, "So do you still want to do this video thing? Because we're going to see your grandmother later and I have a bit of time before we leave." And I thought, "great, now I'm actually not prepared at all." The only white wall was in my parents' bedroom, so we shot it there. We did several takes. Of course, there was plenty of laughing in between and then we would start over again.

I: But the video that was chosen in the end seems to be basically uncut.

C: Almost, yes. But then she said she didn't like the way she looked on screen. In the end we gave it another go two months later.

I: So once again with feeling?

C: Well, what would feeling be here? She tried to approach it in a more relaxed manner. I set us the goal to do it uninterrupted for a certain time so that I would not have to cut. But in the end everything went really fast. The most time-consuming thing was the convincing and talking.

I: So the version that you selected in the end is from the second take?

C: Yes. That was when she agreed that it would be okay for her to show it. But she wanted to have a say in what the final video would look like. Nobody operated the camera, we just put it there and turned it on.

I: That is very intimate, without even having a third person in the room.

C: Yes, only the two of us in my parents' bedroom.

I: Did it change something in your relationship to your mother? Or did you expect it to do something?

C: Not really. I think instead it showed me that my mother really has to love me in order to do something like this for me. If one is truly afraid of being judged, then it takes a serious effort to overcome this fear. She was torn between her intention to support me and the values of the society around her which collided with my ideas. It showed that she supports and acknowledges my art practice and wants to see her daughter happy.

I: Which in itself is also a way of showing value.



Figure 1-3. Stills from Mother Tongue (Photo: Chrischa Oswald).

