
The Urban Beautician: a practice of transferring ephemeral interventions in the public space via media into a work of art

Elke Reinhuber¹

Abstract: In this artistic research, I argue that a range of artistic practices is capable of addressing relevant issues in our material, specifically our urban, environment. In particular, conceptual interventions or non-theatrical performances, which are in most cases mundane everyday activities that require transformation through media to be understood as art. Yet, as human memory is susceptible, media is also required to provide proof of the action for archives or exhibitions, or simply as a memento of the artwork itself. Lens-based media, such as photography and video-recording, are in most cases the ideal form of documentation and distribution, while the actual performance is transferred to another genre of artistic practice and dissociated from the immediate experience of the moment. This paper introduces the enduring work of the author's alter ego, The Urban Beautician, and defines her actions and documentation of this work within the framework of the conceptual and performance art scene. An assiduous assessment of her artistic ancestry is given and a catalogue of her endeavours, categorised by diverse subjects, arranged to isolate the themes and to connect the topics.

Keywords: Non-theatrical performance to camera. Expanded photography. Artistic research. Alter ego. Intervention in public space.

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The Urban Beautician: uma prática de transferência de intervenções efêmeras no espaço público via mídia em uma obra de arte

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Resumo: Nesta pesquisa artística, argumento que uma série de práticas artísticas são capazes de abordar problemáticas relevantes especificamente em nosso material ambiente urbano. Em particular, intervenções conceituais ou performances não teatrais, que são, na maioria das vezes, atividades do cotidiano mundano que requerem transformações através da mídia se almejam serem compreendidas enquanto arte. Ainda, como a memória humana é suscetível, a mídia é também necessária para fornecer provas das ações para arquivos ou exposições, ou simplesmente como uma lembrança da obra de arte em si. A mídia baseada em lentes, tais como a fotografia e a gravação de vídeo, são na maioria dos casos a forma ideal de documentação e distribuição, enquanto a real performance é transferida para outro gênero de práticas artísticas e dissociada da experiência imediata do momento. Este artigo apresenta o trabalho duradouro do alter ego da autora, *The Urban Beautician*, e define suas ações e as documentações do trabalho no cenário artístico e conceitual da performance. Uma avaliação assídua de sua ascendência artística é dada e um catálogo dos seus esforços, categorizados por assuntos diversos, são organizados para isolar os temas e conectar os tópicos.

Palavras-chave: Performance não-teatral para a câmera. Fotografia expandida. Pesquisa artística. Alter ego. Intervenção em espaço público.

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Introduction

Responding to the question of how life, media and art merge, I will introduce the projects of my alter ego, *The Urban Beautician*. In her practice, she combines conceptual and performance art, documented through lens-based media. Because of her presence, I am able to fulfil my desire to point subtly to issues in our urban environment, while at the same time experiencing responses from a spontaneous audience during the process itself. This response rarely occurs for me with art productions once they are installed in an exhibition. Furthermore, I will discuss her work in relation to other artists and their actions, particularly those for whom their life merges with their artwork.

In this context, I regard media as the physical form with which to capture and archive moments of life, specifically with optical media, but also in the production and collections of artefacts as proof of an action.

Figure 1 -Elke Reinhuber: *The Urban Beautician*. Mail Polish, Hong Kong, 2016.



Source: Videostill by Sheryl Chua

Furthermore, I will propose a categorisation of the Urban Beautician's interventions to date, which are documented with photographs and videos, and which also have provided the material for later exhibitions. In doing so, non-theatrical performance, as defined by Allan Kaprow (1993), is transferred to another genre of artistic practice and dissociated from the immediate experience of the moment.

With this artistic research, I aim to explore strategies which touch on the connection between everyday life, art, artist and media as a form in which to document actions and prove existence, but also to turn ephemeral tasks into art.

Performing for the Camera or Documenting Performances

This section touches on the hard-to-answer question of the relationship between and the definition of art and artist. Unlike the physical presence of paintings, sculptures and artworks, in which the skills and craftsmanship of the artists are predominantly praised, conceptual art and non-theatrical performances are often hard to identify and difficult to distinguish from acts of everyday life – and not just for a general audience. In the following examples, I introduce my starting point for further considerations to elaborate on the triangle between Life-Art-Artist and the representation through media.

The artist duo Gilbert and George demonstrate one of the best-known examples, as they have declared themselves to be living sculptures. The artists becoming the artwork itself would also mean that everything they touch and do becomes art – or at least a relic of artistic presence.

Also connected to Marcel Duchamp's widely known quote that "Anything is art if an artist says it is", Mierle Laderman Ukeles realised her artistic concept less extravagantly than the two gentlemen-artists after she became a mother with little time for her artistic practice. She declared:

I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (Random order). I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I 'do' Art. Now I will simply do these everyday things, and push them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art. (UKELES, 1969)

Based on her manifesto, she established the new genre of Maintenance Art. Her first pieces following the concept in 1970 were entitled *Private Performance of Personal Maintenance as Art* and included the private event of washing her children's nappies and documenting it through a series of photographs, entitled *Rinsing a B.M. Diaper*. The tasks as a housewife can be easily imagined as a never-ending repetition – without leaving any traces or producing a result in an everyday- or arts-context. *Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Go In* presents a series of images of her children getting dressed in warm winter clothes and getting undressed again. More than making just an artistic product, Ukeles points to the importance of invisible everyday work and apparently praises it as an artistic oeuvre. With *The Sorting of the Socks Homage to Mu Ch'i* (1973), she also succeeds in using everyday objects as an artistic tool: socks appear almost like huge brush strokes and form new images by applying the usual steps of sorting, pairing and folding after washing them. The scope of her Maintenance Art soon expanded from her own household's privacy to art institutions, and her actions contributed to the urban city life. Mierle Laderman Ukeles assigned herself to become the first artist-in-residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation in 1977 and began, in my opinion, her most important work: *Touch Sanitation Performance* (1979–80). During this period, she met 8000 sanitation workers and expressed her gratefulness for keeping the city tidy with a handshake for each of them. The formal greeting as well as most of her other maintenance efforts were documented with photographs, some of them on video as well, and they provide the evidence of her actions in retrospect. The verification of the authenticity of her work became part of the piece itself in *Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object* (1973). After cleaning an artefact in a museum, she presented a certification of the procedure to the museum's director. In an exhibition review, art historian Wes Hill recognised her efforts to document her practice which, he said, makes it:

[...] well-suited to viewing it within a larger historical context, while her blurring of the boundary between labour and performance is emblematic of her intelligent yet playful take on institutional critique, unveiling then-latent connections between feminism, workers' rights, and ecological awareness.(HILL, 2014)

Within the same trajectory and period of time, Jo Hanson was working in San Francisco. Her artistic practice is rooted in daily observations, with a particular sense for waste which she connects to urban society. She stated:

An ocean of urban trash flows daily to my windy corner of San Francisco. Revelation blows in the wind: about the waste society, the careless or alienated urban dweller, environmentally thoughtless packaging and advertising, industry devoted to consuming without need.(HANSON) [1]

Although her name is more closely connected to sculptures made out of garbage, one of her most significant projects is based on the observations stated above. With the daily performative act, *Art That's Sweeping The City*, Jo Hanson, 1970–2000s, simply swept the sidewalk in front of her house with a broom – expanding gradually over the whole block, several times a day. She extended the work by encouraging neighbours and soon raised awareness in the whole community. On top of that, Hanson created an artist-in-residence program at the *Sanitary Waste Recycling and Disposal Company* to support artists who raised public awareness. Hanson documented her sweeping routine not only with photographs but, more importantly, filed and preserved samples of the discards (HANSON, 2003).

These projects by female artists clearly connect to inevitable mundane duties with a feminist undertone. Obviously only the documentation and, later on, the presentation transformed their everyday work into art. Most of their contemporary male colleagues created unconstrained artwork that also followed similar patterns. On the other hand, Tomislav Gotovac went out to clean a public square in Zagreb on May 28, 1981 for four hours in his handmade apron, and was rather interested in the symbolic meaning as the detailed title suggests: *Cleaning of Public Spaces (Homage to Vjekoslav France aka The Bolshevik and Cleaning Apostle)*. The subsequent museum piece contains not only the images and a description but also his apron, a broom and a dustpan, and he converted the collected garbage during the event into a ready-made.

Different to this short but impactful public intervention, I suggest Tehching Hsieh as one of the exemplary artists who reached for the extreme in

connecting life and art. For his durational *One Year Performances*, he set strict rules and signed contracts with himself to follow specific constraints for a whole year, such as imprison himself or not to enter any building, but rather to live on the streets. For him, photography turned out to be an important medium as he treated patch-up patterns in the streets of Taipei as if they were abstract paintings, in *Road Repair* (1973). Hence, it is no surprise that his photographic and filmic documentations were well planned and executed as a daily or even hourly routine and became an essential part in merging his artwork with his life. Tehching Hsieh's work could be seen as a response to the political environment in Taiwan, though he states that he is "[...] not a political artist, although people are at liberty to interpret my work from a political standpoint ... I'm interested in the universal circumstances of human life." (MARKS, 2014)

Chilean artist Lotty Rosenfeld, however, does not seem to have objections to the connection of her work bearing a political message against the regime of her home country. Her intervention *A Mile of Crosses on the Pavement* (1979), captured on 16mm film and photography, appears to be neat and aesthetically pleasing street art, but there is more behind the scenes. With a simple gesture, by applying adhesive tape to the tarmac, Rosenfeld changes the minus of the road marking into a plus: the negative has been transfigured into its opposite, the positive; everything is turned upside down.

Least public among all the examples mentioned is Richard Long's artistic practice which he defined through walking. The work itself is not created for an audience, nor for documentation practices during the process. Nevertheless, he returned from his walks with relics for exhibitions. In my regard, *A Line made by Walking* (1967) condenses his ephemeral work in one single photograph. The black and white image shows a straight line, reaching towards the vanishing point of the landscape. Long created the line by walking several times along the path until the flattened grass was easily visible in the light because of its altered structure. Long's photograph in particular raises the question of the medium and the artwork – whether the image is a documentation, the artwork itself or merely a form of representation of the concept to define walking as art.

Keith Arnatt addressed this question straightforwardly. He officially decided to become a photographer, but at the same time kept up with his highly conceptual practice, documented through photographic images. *Liverpool Beach Burial* (1968) was captured before this transition and – in a manner similar to Long’s pursuits – did not leave any traces, except the proof of the action in visual documentation. Arnatt (1974) suggested that “the published photograph was simply a record of the completion of the performance.” In *Self-Burial* (1969), he vanishes, almost motionless, into the ground. Today, one would assume it had been edited, but the action of burying himself was the work in the first place, even if it was not for an audience. Keith Arnatt described in an interview with Susan Butler: “So the photograph was to become instead of a second order work the first order work... the end product.” (ARNATT, 1993)

In all the examples described, media, the photographic or filmic proof of the action, is an essential part of the artwork, whether to turn a mundane act into a work of art or to provide authenticity for the artistic activity itself. In the following, I will introduce the work of the *Urban Beautician*, which falls between the artists introduced above and their practices.

Practice of the Urban Beautician

In this section, I will provide an overview of the practice and development of my performance alter ego, the *Urban Beautician*. After carrying out a wide range of performances in the past 15 years, I am able to observe recurring patterns, and propose to categorise them hereafter under relevant themes such as cultural heritage, environmental issues, gender equality or the general urban environment. What once started as a leisurely intervention soon became my serious alter ego, with her own artistic practice.

Cultural Heritage

Flip Your Wig, Berlin 2003

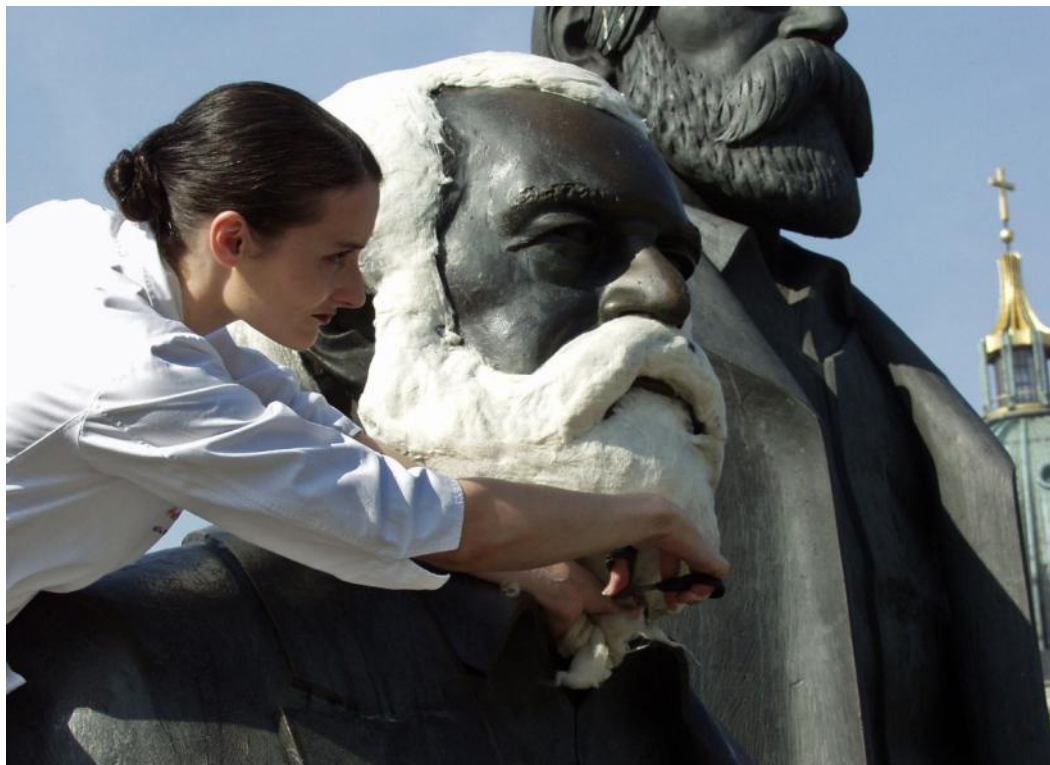
With my first intervention, I replied to a call for the installation of temporary monuments in Berlin's public space. Several available locations were offered to me, but I did not have the urge to create anything new between all those already existing (and hardly recognised) sculptures. In particular, as I realised that almost no-one was familiar with the enormous monument of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in a central location in the East of newly re-united Berlin. There was even discussion about having the bronze sculpture removed. Therefore, I suggested to give new life to the sculpture for one weekend by felting a wig onto the gigantic bronze skull in an ongoing live-action.

Once the proposal was accepted, I clad myself in my mother's former beautician's smock from the nineteen-sixties and climbed up on Marx's shoulders to begin the endeavour. I subsequently became focused on felting perfect layers of lambswool on the bronze cast hair, feeling increasingly disconnected from the surroundings. As the intervention was well organised and announced, I was grateful for the many supporters on location who were informing the audience by distributing postcards, answering questions – but most importantly – capturing the event. The usual busses with mainland Chinese tourists stopped by to take their group pictures and many passers-by slowed down, observed the action and wondered.

My attempt to preserve the felted wig as a performance relic, after removing it two days later, for presentation in subsequent exhibitions proved unsuccessful. But photographic images and video documentation substantiated the essence of the work, along with newspaper clippings and a radio interview.

Back in 2003, the work was more like sheer artistic folly, unaware of any references (although I was pleased to be supported by the same manufacturer of wool who provided Joseph Beuys once with fabric). Nevertheless, I meticulously planned the production, from optimising felting techniques and testing them on the heads of various smaller monuments, up to organising the documentary team. My attempts to seek official permission were repetitively terminated with the statement that 'this is not art'.

Figure 2 - Elke Reinhuber: The Urban Beautician. Flip your Wig, Berlin, 2003.



Source: Photograph by Stefanie Bokeloh

That first re-animation by me of the then-neglected monument paved the path for more specific actions. It is unlikely that anyone would recall Karl Marx wearing a felt wig for the duration of one weekend, if the event had not been captured on video and film, to commence its own right of existence at performance and media festivals. Today, the monument is still there – possibly depicting not the ‘hero’ as had been intended when erected, but definitely as a document of the times and its minds.

The identity of the *Urban Beautician* and also her name only came into being during the following projects. The titles of most of the subsequent performances drew inspiration from beauty products and were supposed to be reminders of such. For *Flip your Wig*, the English title was only created in retrospect for the first video installation at NRLA (National Review of Live Arts) in Glasgow. *Perrückt*, the original German title is a portmanteau invention, a combination of wig and crazy (= Perücke & verrückt).

Mail Polish, Hong Kong 2016

My most recent performance also relates to a reminder of times past, though in another context. The modern city-state of Hong Kong still has a few traces of its history as colony of the British Crown: the Star Ferry, the trams, several landmarks and, of great importance but maybe less obvious – post-boxes. Cast in iron, solid for centuries to come, many of the iconic pillars with different royal insignia are still spread throughout Kowloon and Hong Kong Island. Recently, Hong Kong Post changed the vibrant red to their complementary green signature colour. What was even more controversial and vibrantly discussed among Hongkongese was the plan to cover the British royal emblem, no matter of which reign – EIIR, VR or GR – with a plain green plaque of the Hong Kong Post.

In this context, the Urban Beautician decided to pay tribute for a day to these iconic symbols by polishing them. The performance *Mail Polish* became part of the ISEA 2016 symposium and was, similarly to *Flip your Wig*, a response to an open call for interventions in public space.

Different to these well-planned and announced performances are actions which happen for a spontaneous audience and mainly for the eye of the camera, but also for a subsequent spectatorship. In most cases, I leave the capturing fully to engaged friends or students, but pursue the editing of the footage myself. Most of these pieces are based on observations in the course of my residence in other countries and respond to issues which I observe in these specific surroundings.

Environmental Issues*Volume Control, Cairo 2007*

During my stay in downtown Cairo in 2006–2007, I was disturbed by several issues, the two main factors being noise and dust.

After resigning from my work at the German University in Cairo and with the prospect of soon leaving the country, the Urban Beautician put on her smock and went out onto the streets with an openly visible volume control device to – at least virtually – switch off the noise on one of the main roads. In contrast to the other

interventions, *Volume Control* can only exist as a video piece because the result was solely possible to achieve through the edit.

Accompanied by a selection of ‘No Honking’ signs and the according noise as no one on Cairo’s streets followed the orders, the video shows cars driving along Talaat Harb. Then, the slightly annoyed Urban Beautician walks into the frame, holds up the Volume Control, the turning of the switch follows in a close up and happens in synch with muting the car noise. In the following shot, the satisfied Urban Beautician walks again out of the frame and the muted cars are still visible, driving along the road. Much to my dismay, I had to accept the first take as the efforts were quickly terminated by the police.

Therefore, I decided to seek a sheltered place for the second work, and the Goethe Institute in Cairo provided the ideal environment for *Leaf Gloss*.

Leaf Gloss, Cairo 2007

With all the dust in the city and almost no rain, most of the plants in Cairo are covered with a substantial layer of grime. In particular, the huge rubber plants in the dooryard of the Goethe Institute drew my attention, which I remembered from Germany as glossy, shiny indoor plants. The day-long cleansing procedure took place in three steps: washing and scrubbing with water and a sponge, deep-cleansing with a spray and cloth, and finally polishing each leave with beer to follow a family tradition.

The selected trees were growing behind a fence but clearly visible from the street, though the action hardly grabbed the attention of passers-by. Similar to Jo Hanson’s *Art That’s Sweeping the City* performance, *Leaf Gloss* could be regarded as everyday work, although no one would seriously polish leaves in Cairo, especially not in the Urban Beautician’s meticulous manner. Shortly after, the trees looked the same as before. In this way, the effort is a reminder of Sisyphus’ never ending plight.

Both works which were captured in Egypt were specifically conceived as performance to camera. With proof of the first interrupted performance, I did not feel comfortable in repeating my attempt, since the police were not bothered by the illegal honking, but by my recording. *Volume Control* and *Leaf Gloss* tackle issues caused by

the extremely dense traffic and the ensuing pollution, trying to direct the viewer's attention to the beauty and importance of plants as O₂ catalysts and CO₂ filters.

Another topic addressed by the Urban Beautician is gender equality. Her rather stereotypic female appearance could be mistaken for a nurse or domestic helper. Therefore, it seems coherent that she also cares subliminally for gender-related themes in her work.

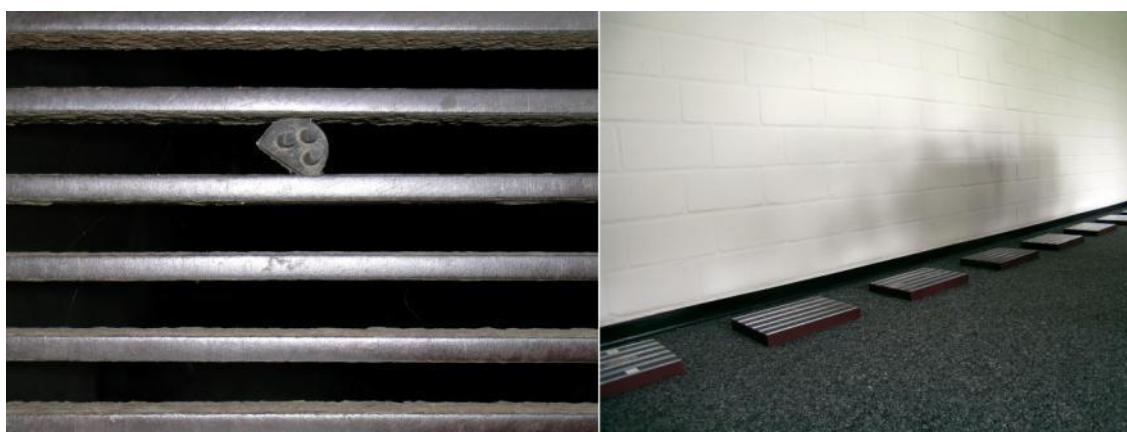
Gender Equality

Following the concept of the above-mentioned performances to camera, *Heel Appeal* was also realised with video in mind.

Heel Appeal, Milan 2013

The work is based on my photographic series *Inferno 20121* (Brera's postcode) of stiletto rubber soles stuck in grates in Milan, which was realised ten years earlier, in 2004. When installed in an exhibition, the life-size images on the floor were understood quickly by a female audience, who could immediately relate to the feeling of getting stuck between cobblestones or metal bars.

Figure 1- Elke Reinhuber: *Inferno 20121*, 2004. Photography (left); installation view (right).



Source: Photograph by Elke Reinhuber, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2004

It was a surprising observation that, in particular in Milan's fashion district, with a high density of high heels, the ventilation grates on the sidewalks are designed so that they easily get stuck. To address this issue, the Urban Beautician returned to the area equipped with specific tweezers in order to pull out the rubber tips for her personal collection.

At least during the day of the action, a spontaneous local audience became aware of the issue. Presenting the work as video abroad will hardly change anything for the ladies in Milan, though the piece points – understandable for everyone – to different needs which should not be neglected during design and construction processes. In my opinion, the initial photographs of the grates only became complete through the action itself and the subsequent video-documentation, as well as the performance relic, in the form of a box of the pulled-out rubber tips.

Figure 4 -Elke Reinhuber, 2013. The Urban Beautician. Heel Appeal, Milan, 2013.



Source: Photograph by Sebastian Pelz

That specific undertaking, which I understand as Expanded Photography – the photograph as a foundation for immersive or time-based work – can be observed in several of my artworks, but in particular in the efforts of the Urban Beautician.

Half the Heavens, Newcastle (NSW) 2009

Half the Heavens, which was part of the ‘T.I.N.A. This is Not Art’ section of the Electrofringe festival 2009 in Newcastle Australia, followed a similar pattern. During my stay in Australia, I was always astonished by the vibrant veteran culture of this island-continent, without the direct threat of invading enemies. Parades during Anzac Day, with highly decorated men and a small number of widows, take place all over the country, commemorating events more than 90 years ago. What impressed me even more were the specifically arranged memorial groves. For instance, in Newcastle, a small area is covered with metal plaques, each of them engraved with a name of a military hero. Astonished by their existence, I documented them in photographs and – as all the names were male – the Urban Beautician decided to donate a plaque for the ‘Unknown Housewife’ after removing the dust from the existing ones. In her opinion, the women back home are the real heroes, who keep up daily routines and cater for peace in their small domestic universes. Previous to the instalment of the plaque, a lecture-performance was held in the local theatre and the well informed audience followed her to the scene of the event, as in a procession. A journalist of *RealTime* summarised the event:

Elke Reinhuber’s domestic performance installation is the crowning hair bun atop the domestic festive spirit. Dressed in the white salon uniform of her “Urban Beautician” persona, she dusts and preens Civic Park as one prepared to lift the corner of the public fountain to dust beneath. Her ultimate intervention is pointedly humble; amidst the plaques to sundry wars and dead local soldiers, she plants flowers, parsley and a memorial plate dedicated to the honour of the Unknown Housewife. (MACKINLAY, 2009)

According to the organisers, the well-fastened plaque had already disappeared the following day. As a matter of prudence, three identical plaques were manufactured, initially with the ulterior motive of installing the remaining two in other locations, but the plaques now complete exhibitions as performance relicts.

Other actions have taken place since the Urban Beautician came to life. Most of them fit into the general theme of overlooked details in our Urban Environment.

Urban Environment

Rust-A-Bust, Edinburgh 2005

After the NRLA-show in Glasgow, the Urban Beautician was invited to propose a work for an independent gallery space in Edinburgh during the annual Fringe festival as her second project. With *Rust-A-Bust*, her appearance came into shape even though the performance did not yet precisely address one of her subsequent concerns. At this stage, her intention was to point to the details which improve life in our urban environment. For the duration of the festival, the Urban Beautician sat every day for two hours in front of the gallery and polished the iron-cast manhole covers. In contrast to the German covers on which she tested her approach, the Scottish grids did not even begin to gleam by the end of the first week. This added a new significance to most of the following projects which were less success or outcome oriented, but instead showed endurance, often ending in vain. Though, once more, media documentation proves of the activity as an artistic piece, similar to the approach realised by Mierle Laderman Ukeles in her initial maintenance art projects.

Shadow Reflex Sydney 2010

Another parallel could be seen in reference to Ukeles's *The Social Mirror* (1983), which reflected the image back to the spectators from a mirror-clad garbage truck during a parade. Though *Shadow Reflex* is a response to the omnipresent surveillance cameras which the Urban Beautician spotted particularly in Sydney, that observation seems valid for other locations around the globe. For one day, the Urban Beautician went out and held a small pink-framed beauty mirror up on a long rod in front of each of the surveillance cameras along her route. For a minute each, she was trying to reflect the image of the cameras back to themselves. In this way, the camera operator might realise his disturbing interaction with the public space. The Urban Beautician described her intervention more positively in her own ironic but naive words: "I felt there like a real star in the limelight: so many cameras were pointing at me. [...] I wanted to return the favour of being constantly eyed for one moment and

reflected the image of the numerous cameras back to themselves.” Conceived as an action to be recorded and presented as video, it was surprising how many passers-by stopped and shared their amusement – but also realised, often for the first time, the omnipresence of surveillance cameras in Sydney’s central business district.

With the selection of works described above, I aim to provide an overview of the scope of work, and specifically the application of recording devices to transform the incongruous interventions into a work of art. As each project was treated individually in the beginning, no standard had yet been applied during the capture, and the team also varied in each location. Though during my edit, the footage becomes connected: each of the videos is four minutes in length, in colour and recorded in the then-current technical state of the art, intended for single screen presentation. In 2012, the first eight documentations were combined to create a short introduction into the life and work of the Urban Beautician.

Employment of an Alter Ego

The question might be raised why I refer to the Urban Beautician in the third person, and above all, why do I prefer to have an alter ego instead of pursuing the actions as myself. In my PhD thesis on Counterfactual Thoughts in Media Art, I address this question more in detail. At certain points in life we might look back and wonder how the present would have come about if a choice had been made differently in the past. As artists, we do have the possibility of exploring these paths which we did not pursue – at least virtually. Reflecting on possible alternatives to my life, I imagined for my final project at university how I was kidnapped as a baby, cloned six times and, 30 years later, I met all my other selves again who grew up in different environments, with different parents. They all feature their individual biography and names. The work *Me and Myself* consisted of a photographic series of the six women introducing their favourite household items and a short video portrait. Each of them is connected to events in my life which potentially could have transformed me into the individual depicted. They eventually came to life during the first two years of existence through online dating-platforms or for specific events until I conceived *The*

Urban Beautician, who became my sole artist persona. I hereby found possibilities to explore counterfactually other paths of life, answering ‘what if...?’ contemplations artistically.

Figure 5 - Elke Reinhuber: Me and Myself, 2000.



Source: Self-portraits by Elke Reinhuber, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2000

Growing up close to my mother’s beauty parlour and being trained myself as make-up artist and beautician, stepping in my mother’s footsteps would have been the life which was almost predestined for me. Not only is the Urban Beautician a subject for artistic reflection and homage to my mother’s profession, but also provides me with the chance to realise a potential path of my life which I didn’t follow. I always admired the neatly groomed beauticians in their uniforms but found it was not satisfying for me to sell beauty products and optimise faces of individuals, with their tiny spots, pimples and other small-scale concerns. Therefore, I prefer to beautify our urban environment – or at least to point to neglected details while transforming myself into a kind of superhero-beautician. My persona was inspired by a portrait of Helena Rubinstein, which was prominently positioned in the maternal beauty parlour. It showed the elegant lady with her black hair smartly tied up to a knot, admiring a statue of Venus de Milo. During my first performances, the Urban Beautician was also dressed in a Helena Rubinstein beautician smock which my mother was wearing during an engagement for the famous luxury cosmetics brand in the nineteen-sixties. After the inceptive interventions, as the fabric of the original smock became weaker, I had uniforms sartorially tailored, including a custom-made embroidery of the newly designed label for the Urban Beautician.

Figure 5 - Elke Reinhuber: The wardrobe of the Urban Beautician, 2012.



Source: Photograph by Sebastian Pelz

For a catalogue documenting a series of her performance work, I decided to attribute my photographic collections of everyday objects to the Urban Beautician: manhole covers, the aforementioned grates, fire-extinguishers, hydrants, etc. Many of them had become the foundation for installations or time-based works – though mainly for her performances, which are subsequently again documented as photographs and video. In this way, the existence of my alter ego also supports the distinction between my artistic practice as conceptual media artist, with myself as the photographer with a passion for urban oddities, and as performance artist.

Conclusion

With the examples described above, I have started to define a framework and artistic references for my alter ego, the Urban Beautician, in particular by looking at the connection between life, art, artists and the representation of their work through lens-based media practices such as photography and video.

Unlike most of the artists introduced earlier in this essay, who might claim any of their deeds as art, I assigned performance practice to my alter ego and

henceforth created a distance from my artistic self and also my practice. The projects of the Urban Beautician are positioned between conceptual and performance art, but also find their space in expanded photography – a field in optical media which reaches out to other disciplines, such as performance to camera. For most of her actions, photographic research provided the foundation and served again, as with all of the artists' works referred to, as the formal frame to document the work, which predominantly turns into the artwork itself. In reference to Keith Arnatt's clearly defined approach, the question of whether the photograph becomes the artwork or serves as its documentation suggests possibilities for further evaluations. Most of the projects presented in this paper were developed in the nineteen-seventies, a period of time when video recording became widely available for artists and in which photography slowly became recognised as a medium in the art world too. Henceforth, artists were not bound to the studio or the stage, and prospects opened up to combine everyday duties with art production, as was the case for Mierle Laderman Ukeles or Jo Hanson. A closer connection to female artistic practice and references to mundane, ephemeral work becomes obvious in the Urban Beautician's procedures, as well as an attempt to improve specific issues in the urban environment, not just in a straightforward manner, but also with subtle references to political or social critique, such as in Lotty Rosenfeld's simple but effective effort by converting road signs into symbols. Likewise, the comprehensive efforts by Tehching Hsieh merged his life with the production of art and its documentation via media to deliver plentiful resources for interpretation.

When positioning herself among her contemporaries, the Urban Beautician addresses and attempts to solve the enigma of her existence. While focusing social and environmental issues, such as cultural heritage, gender equality or the urban environment in general, she can maintain a guileless attitude towards her vocation – by slipping into her smock, she transcends the prevalent irony of the age and follows her peculiar pursuits with her own innocent naiveté.

Notes

[1] Available from www.cla.purdue.edu/waaw/cohn/Artists/Hansonstat.html

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