

# **A Woman's Work**

Clare Gallagher | Csilla Klenyánszki



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**A Woman's Work** a 24-month collaborative programme, funded by Creative Europe, with cultural partners in the United Kingdom, Lithuania, Ireland, France, Finland and Germany. The project uses photography and digital media to address the representation of women's labour in all its forms through artistic collaboration and exchange across borders, and the co-production of exhibitions, publications and online resources that challenge the dominant view of gender and labour in a wider European context.

**Partner Organisations:**

- Ffotogallery (Cardiff, Wales)
- Lithuanian Photography Artists' Union (Kaunas, Lithuania)
- Gallery of Photography Ireland (Dublin, Ireland)
- Le Château d'Eau (Toulouse, France)
- Whack 'n' Bite (Finland)
- Fotosommer Stuttgart e.V. (Germany)

**Gallery of Photography Ireland** is delighted to present a new two-person exhibition of work by Clare Gallagher and Csilla Klenyánszki. The exhibition features Gallagher's series *The Second Shift* and Klenyánszki's *Pillars of Home*. We have also commissioned the Hungarian curator Emese Mucsi to write a new critical essay that explores the many layers of these two fascinating projects.

Gallagher's work refers to the hidden burden of housework and childcare primarily carried out by women on top of their paid employment. It is physical, mental and emotional labour demanding effort, skill and time but which is unpaid, unaccounted for, unequally distributed and largely unrecognised. Hidden in plain sight, veiled by familiarity and the perception of its insignificance, this form of labour is largely absent from conventional photographic representations of home and family. Gallagher's project is an attempt to recognise the complexity and value of this invisible work. It is a call for resistance to the capitalist, patriarchal and aesthetic systems that deny its intrinsic worth.

With Klenyánszki's *Pillars of Home* the challenges of early motherhood are transformed into a game: the lack of time, the fragility of a new life, the weight of responsibility, changing identities, anxiety. The 'pillars' of the title are ninety-six balancing sculptures, made during her son's nap, when the family home – the living room, the kitchen, the bedroom or even the staircase – became a studio for no more than thirty minutes at a time. The pillars rely on their own inner stability while being framed only by the floor and the ceiling. As the objects are piled up, they become a coherent entity, but their delicate arrangement and balancing structure makes them vulnerable. They can be destroyed at any moment. The work addresses a singular dilemma: how does a mother find balance between all her priorities, a never-ending juggling act.

These important works are presented to Irish audiences as part of 'A Woman's Work', an initiative funded by Creative Europe to consider the representation of women's labour in all its forms, and our own curatorial focus on contemporary women's practice. Although made long before the COVID-19 pandemic, the projects take on a new resonance in light of our changed relationship to domestic space, revealing it as both a place of refuge and a territory marked by unexpected tensions.

“I’m no more your mother  
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to  
reflect its own slow  
Effacement at the wind’s hand.”  
— Sylvia Plath, *Morning Song*

“We are well aware that children suck our  
blood and gnaw our flesh. This is true, so  
from time to time we need to get rid of  
them for a while. Sometimes mom needs  
to breathe freely, eat out or go to cinema  
with her spouse so her child can get back  
a more relaxed and chewable mother. The  
mother’s well-being is paramount in order  
that she could rejoice her life and her child  
and does not just suffer from them and her  
countless chores.”  
— Interview with Tamás Vekerdy<sup>1</sup>

**House:** According to one of its primary  
meanings, it is a feminine symbol, the pro-  
tecting bosom of the Great Mother (Magna  
Mater). Akin to the cave and the grave, the  
house evokes the mother’s womb, an em-  
bracing eternal shelter bearing a possibility  
for revirescence.  
— József Pál–Edit Újvári, *Szimbólumtár*<sup>2</sup>

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1. Tamás Vekerdy (1935–2019) Hungarian psychologist and author.

<https://www.baon.hu/bacs-kiskun/kozelet-bacs-kiskun/frusztraciok-tomege-teszi-agresszivve-a-gyereket-374737/>

2. József Pál–Edit Újvári: *Szimbólumtár*, Balassi, Budapest, 1997

# What is love?

***A Woman's Work:  
Clare Gallagher & Csilla  
Klenyánszki***

**Emese Mucsi**

## **What is love?**

Or, to be more precise, what could love mean within the economic system of capitalism? The market economy transforms the diverse manifestations of love, along with the practices of sex, caregiving, and housework, to fit into the logic of capital accumulation. The process by which the re-creation of life becomes part of capitalist production can be denoted by the terms 'reproduction', 'social reproduction', or 'reproductive work'. This umbrella concept of reproductive work – including inter alia caring for the elderly and children, cooking, cleaning, and other household chores – encompasses a myriad of seemingly independent activities, all essential to sustaining human life at individual, communal, and societal levels. These tasks are unequally distributed between the two genders – they are far more burdensome for women than they are for men. Moreover, to date, these typically unpaid activities that are carried out mainly within the private sphere of life require the largest amount of time

from people in every society over the world. "Its private nature and the institutionalised myths surrounding social reproduction – such as that reproductive activity is not work but an instinctive response, or that no value is created within the household – make reproductive work invisible. And it is this invisibility that allows capitalists to systematically extract the added value generated within the household."<sup>3</sup>

## **Home as studio**

Through their series of photographs presented in this exhibition at Gallery of Photography Ireland, Clare Gallagher and Csilla Klenyánszki provide an insight into their own homes, into the intimate environments and scenes in which they live their daily lives, simultaneously within operating two roles – the mother's and the photographer's. Their pictures, the evidence of their artistic practice that even traditional economic theories readily accept as productive work, manage to make some of their various reproductive activities visible, showing them through homely window panes, familiar bathroom doors, completely mundane objects like cleaning supplies, crumpled paper balls, boxes, books, clotheshorses, ladders, tissues, glasses, and houseplants that are numerous props of invisible work. Being practising mothers, parenthood, their children, home events, and the family home's objects became their central themes, whilst the time and space they set aside for artistic creation becomes almost entirely merged with their everyday lives. The studio, this classic

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3. Gergely Csányi–Ágnes Gagyi–Ágnes Kerékgyártó: Társadalmi reprodukció. Az élet újratermelése a kapitalizmusban, In: FORDULAT 24, 2018/2, 6. o.

**Clare Gallagher and Csilla Klenyánszki provide an insight into their own homes, into the intimate environments and scenes in which they live their daily lives, simultaneously operating within two roles – the mother’s and the photographer’s.**

topos of art history usually embodying the master’s genius in every square centimetre, appears from a slightly different angle. It is the entire house that has become a creative space, where, instead of work sketches, equipment for photography, laboratory supplies, and shelving systems jam-packed with only high-impact art books, the living space of a family can be seen. In this manner, via the interior details they chose to showcase, we can get an insight into both their artistic lives and the private microcosms of their families.

**Pillars of Home – a playful race against time**

The arrival of their child(ren) rearranged the studios and living spaces of both photographers, and concomitantly their disposition of time. Csilla Klenyánszki engaged the theme of this transformation in many of

her works, including her *Pillars of Home* project.<sup>4</sup> The series features 98 images of balancing pieces that the photographer built and shot in her own home – sometimes putting herself as well inside the compositions – during those thirty-minute windows while her baby boy was asleep. She and her partner live in the Netherlands as expats; thus when the child was born, they had nobody from the extended family around to help, and since the daycare was too expensive for them, they did not have the opportunity to share the parental tasks with anyone. For a year and a half after their baby was born, the living room, the kitchen, the bedroom, and even the stairs became a studio for Klenyánszki in the short working sessions scheduled by the biorhythm of the infant. Besides this basic pressure of time, her creative work was also regulated by the requirement of undisturbed stillness, because if something crashed, the baby could wake up and “the studio would have vanished right away.” So the images in the *Pillars of Home* series are literal still lives showing attributes surrounding the young mother who has just recently entered adulthood from household cleaners through sports equipment and the artist’s own body, shakily towering on each other in the most absurd situations. The composition on the verge of collapsing as a symbol

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4. Klenyánszki initiated the Mothers in Arts Residency program in 2016. The project was based on the public domain know-how created by artist Lenka Clayton for An Artist Residency in Motherhood (ARIM), which is an on-line art residency project developed specifically for mothers. With the support of the Mondriaan Fonds, Klenyánszki made this unusual program happen in real life in Amsterdam over a period of three months. Ninety people from all over the world applied to the open call, three of whom were eventually chosen to join the Mothers in Arts Residency event. During the trimester spent together, everyone was working on a separate project; the daycare was at the Klenyánszki’s home; they organized an exhibition and a studio visit and also made a documentary film.



Csilla Klenyánszki, *Pillars of Home*, No. 72

of temporality and human thrown-ness into transiency is also present in a number of Dutch and Flemish still lives that are art historical antecedents of Klenyánszki's work.<sup>5</sup> In the ludic settings of *Pillars of Home*, the strange, enigmatic positions of the objects also refers to the tense state of the juggler, who is this time the mother, trying to find a balance between her most important duties.

### **The Second Shift – a collection of visual poems on reproductive work**

In her work both as an artist and a university lecturer, Clare Gallagher deals with everyday home experiences that she observes, records, contextualises, interprets, and then shares in various forms.<sup>6</sup> After the birth of her first child, she directed her focus of attention within this domain towards the human condition of being a mother and the pile of household duties towering before a mother like a pillar.<sup>7</sup> In *The Second Shift* project on display, she, a full time working mother of two, reflects on the never-ending grind of her second shift as a manager in charge of her family's household, raising the children, doing the laundry, washing the dishes, cooking the meals, and cleaning the house. To this day, with

5. Cf. artists from Willem Claesz Heda, through the Fischli & Weiss and the Lernert & Sander duos.

6. A photography lecturer since 2003, Gallagher teaches on the BA and MFA programmes at the Belfast School of Art, Ulster University. She recently completed a PhD using photography and video to research the hidden work of home and family.

7. In addition to her latest project *The Second Shift* she deals with the same subject in her previous work *Domestic Drift*: "Domestic Drift is concerned with everyday life - the ordinary activities, states of mind and conditions of existence that fill time outside the moments of drama and spectacle. It examines the sense of ordinariness inherent in the repetitive, habitual work of home while trying to appreciate the experience as simultaneously mundane and precious." Source: <https://www.claregallagher.co.uk/domestic-drift>

**The artists featured in A Woman's Work bring this issue belonging to the private life of women out into the public spotlight, highlighting that it is a result of an unjust system working against their favor.**

rare exceptions, the full responsibility of all of that falls to the lot of the mother in the nuclear family, leading to gender inequality and resentment over being treated unequally.<sup>8</sup> "[It's a] quietly angry book," Gallagher describes the volume made out of *The Second Shift* project, in which the multi-genre pictures and various texts about household chores are organised following a poetic principle.<sup>9</sup> This project includes still lives too, however, Gallagher's attitude is radically different from Klenyánszki's – she does not do staged photography or arrange scenes, instead, like a professional observer, she aims to visually record her environment with the simplest instrument causing

7. "I grew up in the 1970s. My generation were told that we were equal and that, if we worked hard enough, we would be as good as anyone, so we applied ourselves. Instead, we have the illusion of equality. There is a silence about that still – not least because it suits half the population to help prop up a system that maintains that illusion." From 'Even dust can be interesting': the woman who photographs housework, In *The Guardian*:

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jan/05/even-dust-can-be-interesting-clare-gallagher-photographs-housework>

9. Ibid.





*Clare Gallagher, Untitled, The Second Shift*



*Csilla Klenyánszki, Pillars of Home, No. 76*

the least disturbance possible.<sup>10</sup> Her photographic attitude combines the mother's attention to intimate situations, significant moments, and emotions with a distanced, anthropologist-like attitude. Gallagher documents her invisible work at home from the position of the participant-observer avoiding influencing her environment or the behaviour of her children. Although, while documenting, she never intends to convince people about the objectivity of the things represented, rather she wants to picture the way she experiences these moments as a mother and a photographer. *The Second Shift* is a lyrical documentary work, with telltale signs of the personal perspective of its maker in each piece.<sup>11</sup> Blood-stained tissues, snail trails, steam; remains of cooking, half-smiles, children's napes, hands, soles, locks of hair, humps of laundry, and swirling dishwater lead us through different scenes, moods, and tense or casual, scared or funny, but ever intimate moments.

### Personal is political

Selfless caregiving is an ultimate case of donation through which the mother sacrifices her time for the ones she cares for. This gift of her time spent is impossible to be reciprocated; that same period of time can never be returned to the giver, since the economy of love does not work that way. And this might be the reason why this

kind of act remains invisible and unquantifiable within the scheme of capitalism. The artists featured in *A Woman's Work* bring this issue belonging to the private life of women out into the public spotlight, highlighting that it is a result of an unjust system working against their favour. Even though both series are deeply personal, the thoughts that spring from the artists' delivery of the themes constitute an important addition not only to understanding the general phenomena of care, love, motherhood and invisible work, but also to framing gender inequalities and many other constructs regarding gender in modern society and contemporary art.

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10. "I'm not into all the masculine stuff of big, expensive toys. I could as easily make work on a phone with a camera. Essentially, I want a tool that doesn't get in the way. I'm really not interested in the status of the camera." *'Even dust can be interesting': the woman who photographs housework*, Op. cit.

11. Cf. artists from photographers like Walker Evans, Helen Levitt, Rinko Kawauchi, etc. to lyrical documentary filmmakers including Chris Marker, and Humphrey Jennings.



Csilla Klenyánszki, *Pillars of Home*, No. 96





*Csilla Klenyánszki, Pillars of Home, No. 63*



*Clare Gallagher, Untitled, The Second Shift*



*Clare Gallagher, Untitled, The Second Shift*

**Clare Gallagher** is a Northern Irish artist whose work focuses on the ordinary, everyday experiences of home. A photography lecturer since 2003, Clare teaches on the BA and MFA programmes at the Belfast School of Art, Ulster University. She recently completed a PhD using photography and video to research the hidden work of home and family. Her project *The Second Shift* will also be exhibited in Finland, Lithuania and Germany in 2020.

**Csilla Klenyánszki** is a Hungarian artist living and working in the Netherlands. Her work is represented by TRAPEZ Gallery, Budapest, Hungary. Within her current practice Klenyánszki examines and deconstructs personal - but universally known - challenges such as parenthood, gender, and the malleability of self identity through the passage of time. Although her approach is analytical, the nature of the work is highly playful and experimental.

**Emese Mucsi** is a Hungarian-born curator. She graduated from the Faculty of Contemporary Art Theory and Curatorial Studies at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts in 2013, and from the Faculty of Hungarian Literature and Linguistics at the University of Szeged in 2017. She started publishing criticism, essays, and interviews in various art journals in 2011. Since 2013, she has also been involved in organizing contemporary art exhibitions as a freelance curator. She is a curator of the Robert Capa Contemporary Photography Center, Budapest since 2018.



**Gallery of Photography Ireland** is the national centre for photography. Our role is to promote an appreciation and awareness of photography as an artform in Ireland. A publicly funded, not-for-profit organisation, we are committed to making our programme of exhibitions accessible to the broadest possible audience. As a key part of this commitment the Gallery offers tours to second and third-level students. To facilitate these tours, we provide a number of resources for educators to help direct engagement with the work of exhibiting artists. In addition to the introduction and specially commissioned essay in this publication, below is a list of questions that can be used by teachers/ tutors to lead class discussion.

- How would you describe the visual styles that these two artists use?
- What are some of the differences between them? What are the similarities?
- The title of this exhibition is *A Woman's Work*. How do you think the artists represent this?
- What are some examples of work that women do that isn't always acknowledged? Can you see any of these in the exhibition?
- Do you think the artists give you a clear idea of their experience as mothers? If so, how is this communicated?
- How would you describe the different approaches the artists use to placing their work in the gallery?
- Does this have an effect on the way we understand their work?
- In her essay about the exhibition, Emese Mucsi describes how the artists turn their home into a studio. What are some of the different ways they do this?

**Further Reading (click to view):**

Clare Gallagher website

Csilla Klenyánszki website

'Even dust can be interesting': the woman who photographs housework - Clare Gallagher speaking to Sean O'Hagan for The Guardian

Clare Gallagher, *The Second Shift* - book review, Conscientious Photography Magazine/ Jörg Colberg

Csilla Klenyánszki, *Pillars of Home* - book review, Collector Daily/ Loring Knoblauch

**Publications:**

Clare Gallagher, *The Second Shift*, 2019 (self-published)

Csilla Klenyánszki, *Pillars of Home*, 2019 (self-published)

Available from the Gallery of Photography Ireland bookshop:  
[www.photobooks.site](http://www.photobooks.site)

**Front Cover:** *Csilla Klenyánszki, Pillars of Home, No. 19*

**Back Cover:** *Clare Gallagher, Untitled, The Second Shift*



# A Woman's Work

Clare Gallagher | Csilla Klenyánszki



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