

What does washing the dishes look like?

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Abstract

This visual essay looks at the ordinary, everyday task of washing the dishes. It is part of an artistic research project that combines art-making with the everyday practice of cleaning to explore embodied experiences of cleaning and art-making and what happens when we attempt to cross the line between art and life. This essay presents a series of drawings that recorded the movements made by different people as they washed the dishes. It explores the sense of embodiment and heightened awareness within the act of drawing, the affect of sharing the same space as the subject being observed and the value of drawing as a method of observation.

Keywords: embodiment, drawing, everyday, cleaning

Bio

Ulvi Haagensen was born in Australia and now lives and works in Tallinn, Estonia. She trained in visual art in Sydney at City Art Institute (BA), Randwick College of Technical and Further Education (Certificate) and College of Fine Art, UNSW (MFA). She is currently a doctoral student conducting artistic research at the Estonian Academy of Arts. Through her art practice, which combines sculpture, drawing, film and performance, her research explores how a contemporary art practice can relate and connect to everyday life.

Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. (De Beauvoir, 1997 [1949], p. 470)

Housework and cleaning are a part of everyday life; yet how aware are we of the qualities of these repetitious tasks, our bodies as we engage in them, the space around us and how we move in that space? Through the ongoing artistic inquiry presented here, my aim is to discover embodied experiences of cleaning and art-making and explore how cleaning directs and shapes the movements made by the body.

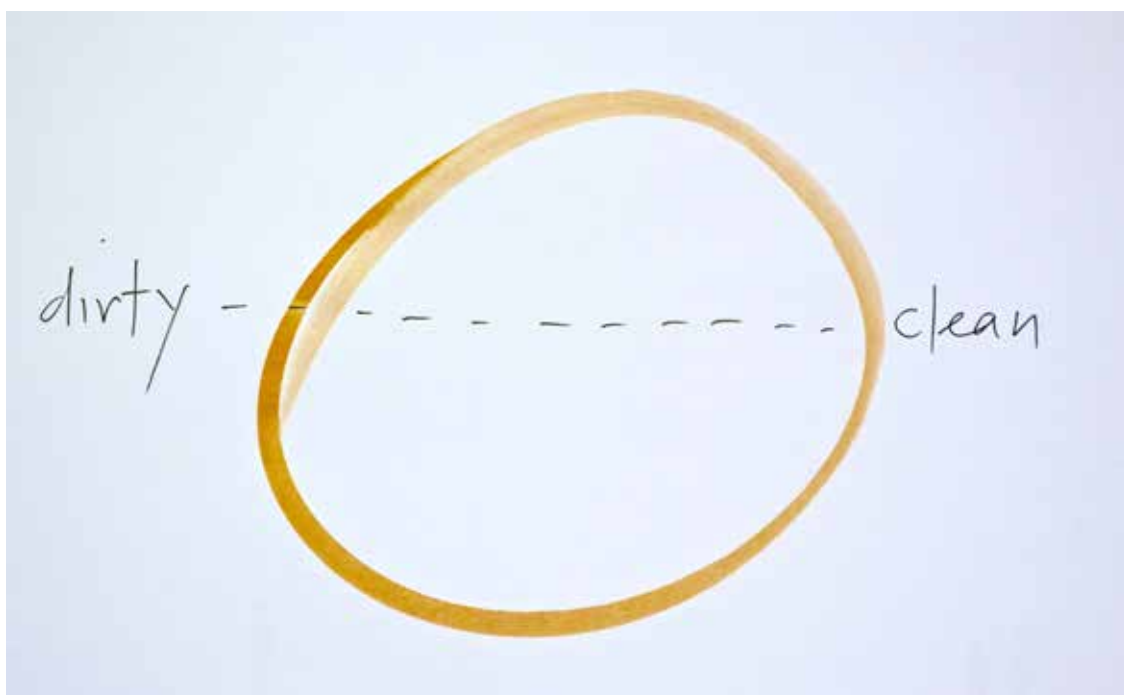


Figure 1. Between dirty and clean - the focus of my research. Ulvi Haagensen, 2016.

Dirt is one aspect of our everyday lives and we can respond to its presence by cleaning. My research focuses on what happens during this process between the states of dirty and clean. De Beauvoir's (1997 [1949]) observation, with its emphasis on endless repetition, conjures up an image of on-going movement, so although this diagram suggests a circle of near empty calm, it is in fact filled with movement.

This visual essay aims to visually communicate the movements made by people as they wash the dishes. Tracing these movements is an attempt to reveal something that is visually unseen and that we might not be unaware of, since we tend not to think about or verbalise many of the multisensory

embodied practices that we “just do” (Pink, 2012, p. 40). Awareness of unseen trajectories, our embodied experience of the everyday and the movement of people and things within this might help increase our understanding and appreciation of the ordinary.

Over a period of just over three months I observed and recorded by drawing the movements of the ‘preferred’ hand of my four participants as they washed the dishes. The resulting drawings share a commonality, which is expressed in the overall shape of the drawing and qualities of line (see Figures 3–11). These shared features were dictated by the task itself and the shape of the kitchen (see Figure 2).

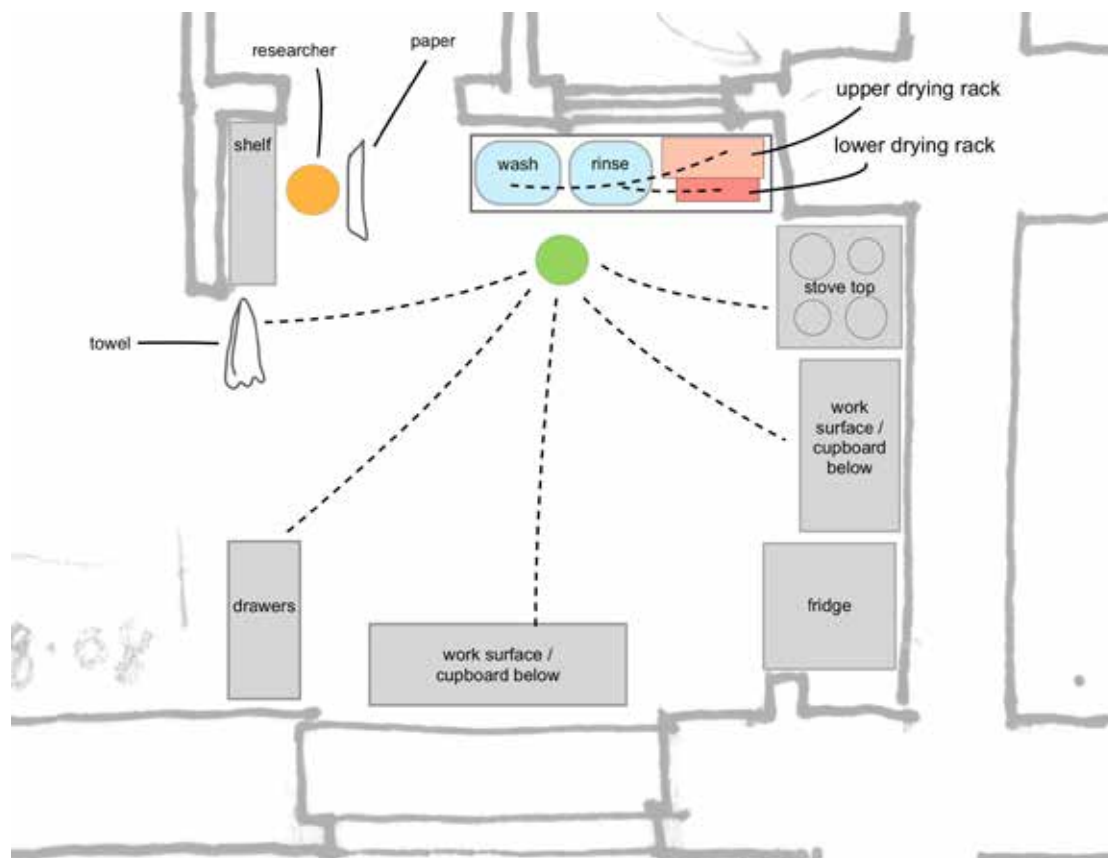


Figure 2. Plan view of kitchen showing general trajectories of movement. Ulvi Haagenen, 2017.

This shows the relative positions of the researcher (orange dot), the participant (green dot) and their trajectories of movement (dotted lines) as they wash, rinse, place dishes on the drying racks and move across the room to gather more dishes, dry their hands and wipe down surfaces.

To make it easier for myself to follow the movement I imagined a dot on the back of the hand, and using the blind drawing technique drew with pen on paper the movement of this imagined dot without looking at the paper. I tried to be as objective as possible, asking my participants to ignore me and wash the dishes as normal, while I recorded as accurately as possible. After the dishes were washed I made notes on the drawing to explain the lines and the parts of the drawings (for example, drying of hands, wiping surfaces after washing). Other more detailed observations were written in a separate notebook.

My participants were my family members – husband and three sons. They are identified here as A (aged 22), R (aged 19), M (aged 51) and O (aged 11). The drawings were done over a three-month period from 20 April and 11 July 2016.

The drawings

The first drawing (Figure 3) is accompanied by an annotated version (Figure 4) in order to place the drawing in the kitchen space, and this scheme applies to all seven drawings since they share a commonality of shape, with a characteristic frenzied ‘tangle’ or ‘thicket’ of lines at the centre, long lines extending out to the right and shorter lines curving up and to the left.



Figure 3. Drawing 1: 20 April 2016.

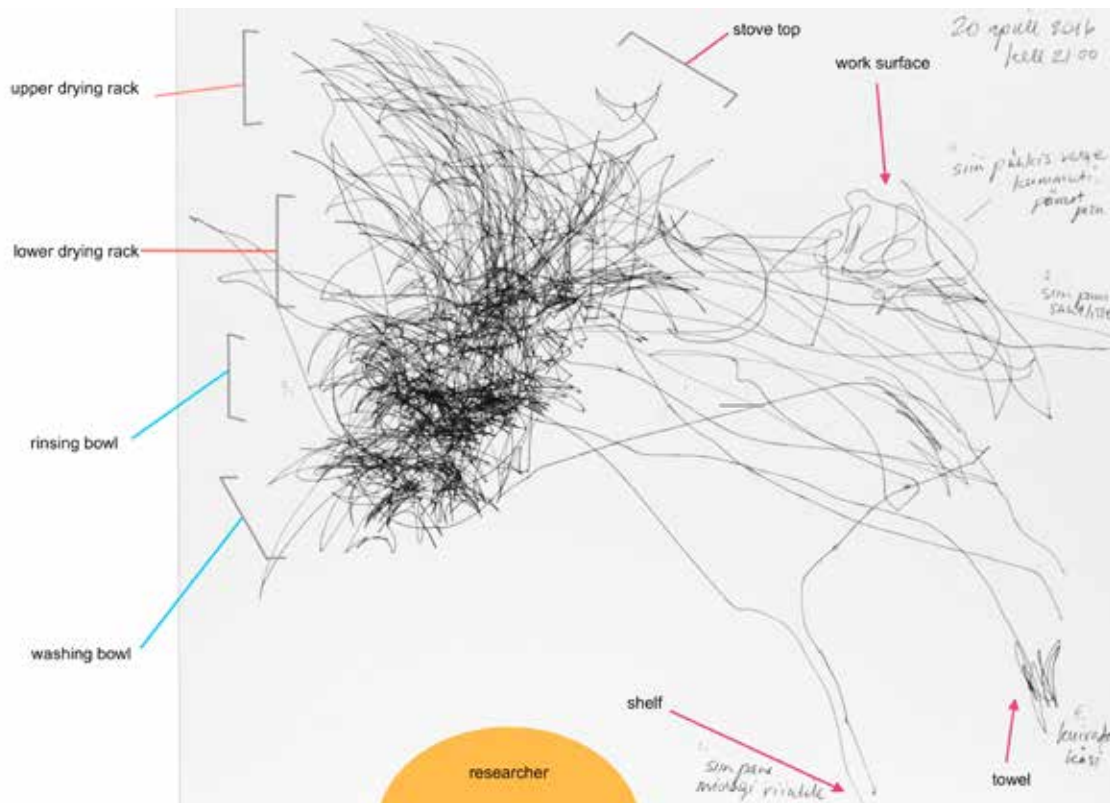


Figure 4. annotated Drawing 1: 20 April 2016.

Participant A. This first drawing is of my eldest son A washing the dishes. The drawing shows an intense frenzied ‘thicket’ of lines indicating the place of most activity – the washing and scrubbing of dishes. Out of the top of the ‘thicket’ repetitive, curving lines extend upwards tracing the movement from the washing and rinsing bowls up to the drying racks, while the lines extending out to the right follow the path of dirty dishes taken from the work surface and back to the sink to be washed. Because A started washing up by clearing the rack of dry dishes two lines extend down to the shelf. The drying of hands on the towel in the bottom right ends the sequence. The loopy lines in the top right indicate where a work surface was wiped with a circular motion. It is not just the room, its arrangement of furniture and equipment but also the washing method, types and shapes of dishes, and their quantity that determine the shape of the drawing.

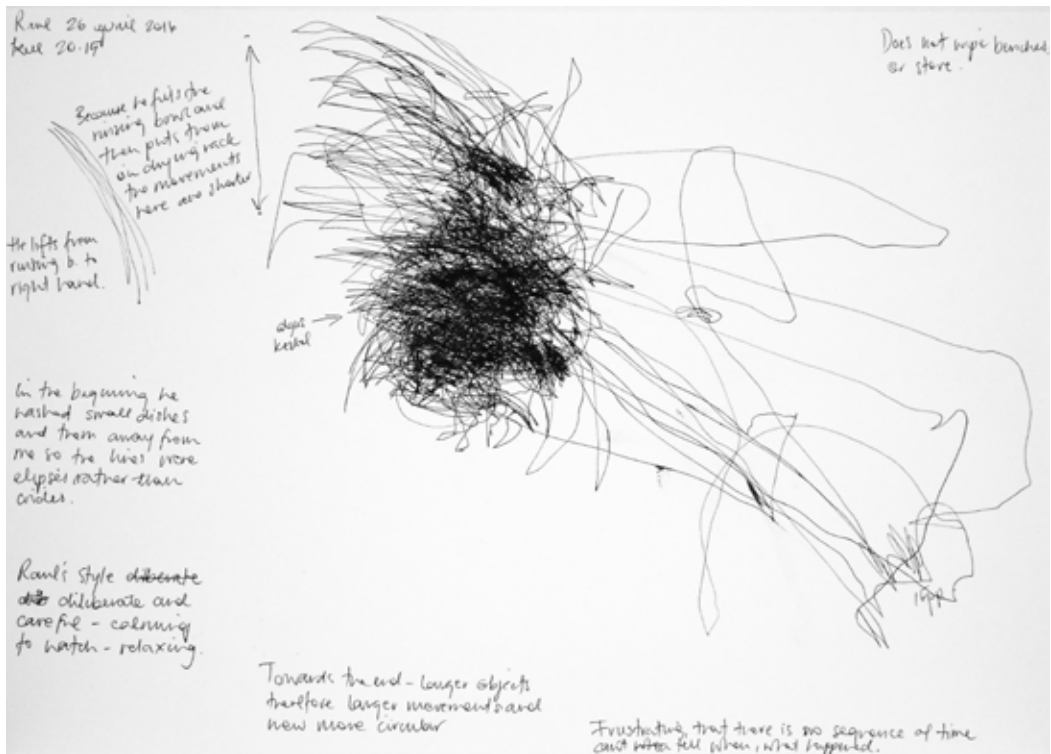


Figure 5. Drawing 2: 26 April 2016

Participant R. My middle son R started with small dishes, resulting in small ellipses, which eventually got swallowed up in the tangled bundle of lines. R's washing style was deliberate and careful – calming to watch, even relaxing, though the busy bundle of lines does not reflect this. Another characteristic was that he often stopped to check whether he was washing effectively, causing me to reflect on the overall role of looking in this research. As the researcher I was looking to observe and the participants were looking at what they were doing. The dark tangles of lines reveal not only intensity of movement but also the place where the participant's attention was focused.

Through the intense observation that accompanied the drawing process I also became aware not only of my body occupying space, but of being in the space occupied by the thing being observed – washing of dishes. I was not just 'in' the everyday (Pink, 2012) but also 'in' the research itself. This embodied experience connects to Merleau-Ponty's (1964) notion of the body as the primary source for knowing the world. He writes, "Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is one of them. It is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself" (p. 125) It also answers Pink's call for multisensory and embodied research (Pink, 2012).

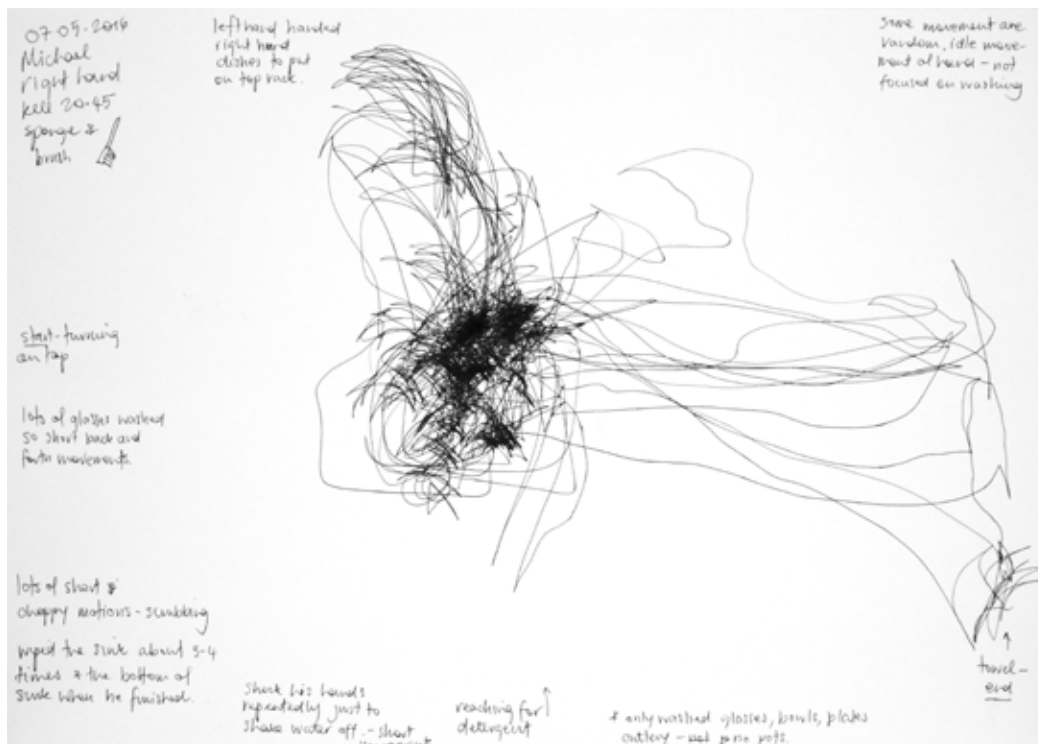


Figure 6. Drawing 3: 7 May 2016.

Participant M. My husband M washed the dishes using a combination of sponge and brush (other participants only used a sponge) to make short, choppy scrubbing movements. This together with the washing of small items and repeatedly shaking his hands to remove water resulted in the short jerky lines in the ‘tangle.’ On finishing, he wiped down the kitchen sink resulting in the rectangular shape below the ‘tangle.’

The more I drew the more I became aware that this was not only about observing movements but also the nature of drawing itself; drawing inadvertently became part of the research. This type of ‘blind’ drawing relies on concentrated looking, and therefore is a good way to truly observe something. ‘You’ve got to draw it if you want to see it’, to quote the title of an article written by anthropologist Andrew Causey (2015). But it must be remembered that this is not a mechanical process, informed only by what the eye sees, but also an interpretation based on what the brain knows or thinks it knows about the shapes of objects, distances and depths; in my drawings the perspective varies and the relative parts are not necessarily in proportion. M could not resist playfully making extra movements that were unrelated to washing, and though I did not record them this made the immediacy of drawing particularly apparent.



Figure 7. *Drawing 4: 8 May 2016*

Participant R. On the following day R washed the dishes. Here the variety of movements are clearly visible with intense circular movements at the point of washing and the repetitious purposeful lines as he put things on the drying rack compared with the more relaxed lines that extend across the room as he went to choose which dishes to wash next. Though the drawings capture and fix all the movements into one moment, concealing the sequence of events and the speed of movement, the drawings are not static and a sense of the flow and variance of movement can be seen.



Figure 8. *Drawing 4*: 8 May 2016 detail

Our eyes are drawn to the intense bundles of lines in each drawing; this is where the action is. This detail shows the movements at the core of the ‘tangle’ – a combination of jerky back and forth scrubbing lines, and ellipses resulting from the round bowls, plates, cups and glasses. This causes me to think of all the unseen lines that surround us in our everyday lives and reflect on Tim Ingold’s (2008) description of the environment around people as a “zone of entanglement” (p. 1797).

Source: created by the author



Figure 9. *Drawing 5*: 6 July 2016, part 1



Figure 10. *Drawing 6: 6 July 2016, part 2*

Participants R and A. On this occasion the washing was shared between R, who started (Part 1) and A, who finished (Part 2). These drawings show the differences between the start and end of the wash. The first has fewer lines extending to the right because at the start the sink was already full of dishes, whereas in the later stage dishes had to be brought to the sink. The back and forth lines on the right is where the stove and work surface were cleaned at the end. The ‘tangle’ in Part 2 shows the build-up where individual lines became indistinguishable. During the drawing process I recall glancing fleetingly at the drawing with a sense of regret as the early lines became obliterated. I constantly had to remind myself that my hand and my eyes are just tools and what was important was the process, not the drawing itself. On a number of occasions there was a strong temptation to anticipate a movement and draw a line before it had happened, or alternatively I would forget to keep the pen moving and found myself just watching.



Figure 11. *Drawing 7: 11 July 2016*

Participant O. The relative simplicity of this drawing is because my 11-year-old son did not put the washed dishes on the rack to dry, but left them in the rinsing water immediately adjacent to the washing bowl. Consequently this drawing shows only the actually washing. Like participant M who ‘played’ with the research process and made unrelated movements, O realised that he could control the scratching sound of my pen on the paper and intentionally varied the speed and flow of his movements to create rhythms.

These drawings are a visual communication and description of the everyday practice of dishwashing. What do they tell us? In one respect they show us something that we cannot actually see. They show us the trajectories, which indicate to what extent the body fills the space of the kitchen and which parts of the room are being used. We see the places the hand moves, and whether this is an uninterrupted path (through air) or one that negotiates its way in, around and with objects. These drawings reveal the types movements and their quality – short, long, direct and smooth or jerky – and the presence of repeated actions that set up a visual rhythm. They also reveal the role of perception in our experience of our surrounding environment and the everyday by showing us where the dishwasher’s attention is focused; we see where the person was looking.

This research highlighted the nature of drawing as a research method – its advantages and limitations. A sense of time is communicated by the degree of fluidity of the lines, an idea supported by Betty Edward's (1986) claim that "qualities of fastness and slowness are inseparable from the mark" (p. 61), but only up to a point because they could not communicate the order of events, nor the subtleties and variance of speed. The written notes were important because they could relate the sequence of events, the quality of the movements, for example R's deliberate methodical style, and other aspects, such as O directing the sound of pen on paper. In spite of these apparent shortfalls the power of drawing as an observation technique became clear when I realised I have never actually stood and watched someone wash the dishes, never so closely or with such concentration.

Ideas for further research could include observing the movements of the other hand to discover its trajectories and movements and thereby reveal a fuller picture of the movements taking place around the kitchen sink. To address the question of time a different paper, such as blotting paper, could be used; as the pens slows down a broader mark or line would result.

Embodied awareness as a way of understanding and making sense of the world became apparent because the act of drawing increased my awareness of myself and my body, not only in the space but also 'in' the research. By using drawing in this manner to record the movements as they occur in space and also by sharing the space with the person and actions being observed the experience is one of distinct embodiment. And this is a shared experience because not only is the presence of the researcher obvious to the participant but also by mimicking their observed movements the person drawing also becomes indirectly involved in the task of the washing up.

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