

Primitive Approaches to Domestic Living  
Highlighting our attitudes towards ways of living depending on specific materials and techniques.

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3	Primitive Appreciations
3	Minute Domestic Issues
4	The Nothing
6	Replicated Perceptions
7	Setting Place and Space for the Domestic
9	Controlling the Domestic
11	Domestic Disobedience
13	Bibliography

## Primitive Appreciations

To highlight our attitudes towards ways of living depending on specific materials and techniques this text explores how my artistic practice in relation to the domestic, challenges the use of functional art within our own and other realities. In the hope that it'll give me the answers to my own minute domestic issues.

All heavily dependent on specific materials and techniques that I have to hand, self-discovered and of which can be self-taught. A personal primitive approach.

*"The earliest stages; the beginnings."* or *"A thing from which something else is derived; a foundation, a basis."* (Oxford English Dictionary., 2021)

The term primitive according to the Oxford English Dictionary.

Primitive to everyone else, especially from a western colonialised society can carry negative connotations. Often used as a word to insult, provoke and belittle someone or something considered inferior within society. But without such a term the foundations in which our society is built upon wouldn't come to exist. Primitive is what comes first; appealing to our needs and desires.

To appreciate the primitive in the everyday is important.

This is why I have come to appreciate the primitive tendencies I have found and continue to find within my practice. Using it as an approach to the way in which I work and reflect.

I have applied it to the processes, materials and techniques that I self-discover and learn. Having an understanding of the history associated and the prejudice views used but choosing to exclude them.

Creating my own phenomenology; my own primitive participation. I hope that through my practice I can form the primitive term in a way that it no longer provokes.

Throughout the text I will continue to refer to ways of living and function. Ways of living, and more importantly alternative ways of living is used as a term to consider the everyday routines in which we endure within domestic spaces i.e. the home, as a result of the objects that inhabit them. And how this can be altered due to intentional or unforeseen circumstances and choices.

Function, is a term that can be perceived differently from person to person in reference to how an object should perform for their own personal use. For me, the function of an object is dependent on its value, the aid and domestic relief it provides me while I go about my everyday routines within domestic spaces. Dependent on its material, form and purpose.

## Minute Domestic Issues

Growing up I am sure that we all experienced similar attitudes and responses to bringing home our finger painted portraits or papier-mâché fruits. They would be treasured. Either hung up on the fridge, framed on the wall or displayed on the mantel in the living room. All of these objects in turn got subjected to full exposure and judgment from anyone that decided to enter the house.

As time went by the admiration for these objects would change, as would their purpose. What was once a papier-mâché mask of a duck, now turned upside down on the kitchen counter became a fruit bowl. Or how a lump of clay with googly eyes glued on became a doormat. We saw beyond their previous intentions of play and decoration. Discovering alternative uses and adapting them to our domestic needs. As we would grow and mature, unconsciously these objects would do too.

Russian artist Vladimir Arkipov is probably the best example at capturing this reoccurring natural phenomenon. In his book titled *Home-made: Contemporary Russian Folk Artefacts* (2006); Arkipov had been going throughout Russia since 1994 collecting and documenting what he liked to call 'thingamajigs'. Domestic objects that have gone through transformations. Giving them a secondary

function and appearance; finding new uses for the things that already exist. A true collection of modern day bricoleur artefacts.

In response to this spectacle happening within our own homes I started to make works that would respond and exaggerate to this. Intentionally creating functional pieces of art that could be used to fix my own minute domestic issues, such as a source of light in a dark corner or a stand to help prop-up a mirror without a frame. This in turn has helped me to combat such problems within our own and other realities. Changing our attitudes towards ways of living depending on specific materials and techniques.

As I began to explore this concept within my practice I didn't want to span too far from the nostalgic. Looking back on the time and place to find where these prior treasured objects might have stemmed from. Specifically exploring and sourcing information from books and films of the late 90s and prior. I remember being taken aback by the magic made within *The NeverEnding Story* (1984), a film by German director Wolfgang Petersen. I was mesmerised by the artistry used to produce such a film. All the handmade special effects, costumes and set building to create the world of 'Fantasia' and all the characters that inhabit it. A place of childhood dreams. But revisiting it now, it's easy to see past the faux landscapes and restricting prosthetics. Prior belief into the existence of such an alternative reality is diminished through these flaws.

To grip onto what I had already lost it only seemed right to read the book based upon the film by German author Michael Ende, titled *Die Unendliche Geschichte* (1979) that was later translated to English in 1984, prior to the film. After reading I found that not only was half of the story missing from the film but a lot of the character building also. Having taken a liking to the 'rock biter' and the small role he played in the film I was intrigued to find in the book that..

*"..the rock chewers not only fed on stone, they made everything they needed out of it: furniture, hats, shoes, tools, even cuckoo clocks."* (Ende, M., 1984. p.16)

Now called the 'rock chewers', not 'rock biters' it was poorly demonstrated within the film how heavily reliant and resourceful these species were on a singular source of material. Apart from munching on of a bit of rock and riding a rock tricycle.

It seems that I have built a negative view after revisiting *The NeverEnding Story* (1984). But when positioned in front of the content that shaped your childhood from the perspective of maturity it becomes disheartening to see and learn about the truths surrounding such things. The innocence is lost with the ugly truth. Just like the finger painted portraits and papier-mâché fruits of our childhood, have we lost that same belief and magic within them, or is this diminished with their new purposes depending on the context and situation they are placed within? They no longer function in the ways that they were intended, but offer something new, for now. A new perspective is realised.

### The Nothing

Rocks are such a readily available natural material. It is the foundation to the way in which we come to exist. So why can't we live like the rock chewers do? To be entirely dependent upon it?

Taking the domestic tendencies of the rock chewers as inspiration, I began to construct and still continue to do, a series of works that demonstrate just this. Re-imagining domestic objects in the form of rocks. Using a concoction of what I have around me to make these functional objects, as opposed to real rocks. Similar to the way in which rocks were portrayed within the film; faux and usually made from foam or papier-mâché.

My works *Untitled rock tray* (2019), *Untitled rock stand* (2020) and *Untitled rock with candle* (2020) all of which have been constructed with papier-mâché, but with an altered recipe and application to make pulped paper. Although, not conceivable as rocks they do hold similar characteristics such as the texture and form. Hyper-realistic isn't my aim. The function is more important. With each object I make, there has to be a new intended function. Although I use similar materials each time, I have to think about how my application will affect the form depending on its intended purpose. With every new object made, I gain another primitive experience, a new way of shaping the material. Whether or not the object functions is really dependent on the end result and how well it fits within a domestic environment. This of course can be perceived differently to the audience depending on whether or not it fits their needs.

For example American artist Thomas Barger constructs domestic objects with paper pulp also, although his approach is different. Its interesting to see how our works differ.

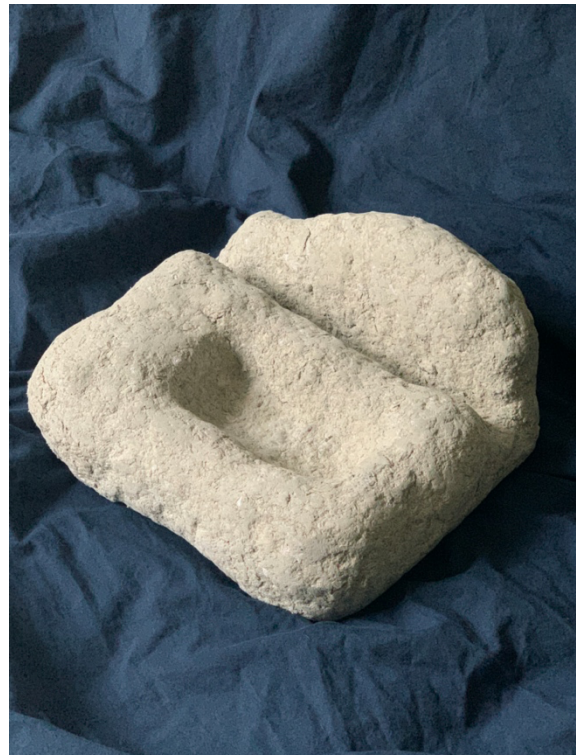
*"I'm more excited about sharing a story than making a chair."* (Barger, T., 2018)

Compared to me Barger is not concerned with the function of his works, but more what he can explain through them. Barger makes his work based upon the furniture he grew up with and the routines and stories that surround them. And he titles his works based upon a specific memory or cultural moment. But with my 'rock' works I have chosen not to title them. The silence created when naming an artwork untitled holds just as much narrative. By doing this I have created a stronger connection with *The NeverEnding Story* (1984). Throughout the film the characters are at constant threat to the diminishment of fantasia, a destructive force called 'the nothing'. Its role is to act as declined belief in imagination; when children grow up, childhood dreams die and are forgotten.

Does 'the nothing' become of us? Is 'the nothing' the result of our childhood objects? Is this why I have chosen to title my works untitled? – are they 'the nothing'.



*Untitled rock with candle (2020)*



*Untitled rock stand (2020)*



Thomas Barger  
*Lounger* (2018)

### Replicated Perceptions

British brutalist architects Alison and Peter Smithson in post war Britain, expressed how the use of materials used to shape the new world, came from those that were easy to imitate from what once was. The need for the nostalgic was replicated with what was available.

*"We were concerned with seeing materials for what they were: the woodness of wood; the sandiness of sand. With this came a distaste for the simulated, such as the new plastics of the period – printed, coloured to imitate a previous product in 'natural' materials."* (Smithson, A. & Smithson, P., 1990. p. 201-202)

The need to achieve what I once had or want is obvious within my own practice, recreating not only a natural resource but a moment in time. The need to have my work situated within the domestic and the familiar. I would to some extent disagree with the Smithsons' view on such distaste in the simulated. I consciously choose not to use real rocks because I didn't want to exploit the natural resource and due to the fact that I don't have the knowledge or skills of how to work with rocks.

Creating something from something else creates endless opportunities in the ways an object can be shaped and used. A perfect example of the primitive processes taken between the artist and material; an unconscious connection is made based on the natural pull towards a familiar resource. Dependent on what is obvious to work with or not, based on the artists capability and whether they are willing to go beyond and place themselves within a primitive situation.

I found that papier-mâché was the best technique and material to achieve what I wanted; a great reference to a childhood material also. Although well-known and easy to work with, it was new to me. I may have worked with it once or twice when I was very young, but most certainly hadn't explored its potential to the extent that I now have. The primitive state that I found myself still continues as I experiment the recipe and ways of application.

I am very fond of the contrast created between the materials. Rock being heavy and durable compared to the papier-mâché that's extremely light and flimsy. Although it can be made very strong when more bonding agents are added and the application technique slightly altered. Then it becomes the perfect material to work with as a substitute for a real rock. The papier-mâchéness of papier-mâché holds an interesting complexity.

Considering I am working with the replication of a natural resource it seems appropriate to mention the implications and environmental effects it can have. I have contradicted myself; previously I said that I didn't want to exploit rocks. I by no means intend my practice to be based on sustainability. But I do have an understanding that using paper, specifically recycled newsprint, which comes from felled trees is by no means a better source of material to create such works.

With our ever-demanding society on its natural resources, we take for granted how easy it is to get what we want from nature with our artificial input. Yet we choose to turn a blind eye to the implications it might have in the future.

The Smithsonian expressed their distaste for the simulated materials produced after the war, and yet we put ourselves within that situation. Maybe their distaste wasn't over the new materials themselves but more about the process that led us to produce them. The harm done towards material aesthetics and sustainability is self-inflicted from our own interference with nature.

Am I more in favour of rocks? Am I making for rocks? Should I be scrutinised for my material choice or do I now have the privilege to pick and choose what I apply to my practice because the damage is already done? By working with other materials, I am preserving the existence of rocks, positing the natural material above all else. And although the use of paper is controversial, when applied to processes such as papier-mâché it can be beneficial to the way in which domestic objects can be made. I consciously choose to use flour as opposed to PVA glue as a natural bonding agent. When both materials are combined, they can make a sustainable, durable object that can be recycled. It would be a shame to disregard such a process due to material prejudices.

### Setting Place and Space for the Domestic

For the next half of this text, I will continue to refer to the gallery. By this I mean the institutionalised idea. The white cube - a neutral space to display art and how this can affect the format in which objects are displayed, in comparison to other non-gallery spaces.

When I have displayed my works within the gallery as opposed to a domestic setting, I find that their function is often lost. But by being positioned within the gallery, they have been exposed to other opportunities. Often being commissioned to be within people's homes, as well as breaching into the public sphere. A series of *Untitled rock tray* (2020) were commissioned as book display cases for the Arctic Art Book Fair in Tromsø (2020). And *Untitled rock stand* (2020) was invited to Oslo Design Fair (2021), featured as a functional object and product. I think that with all these opportunities, it has proven the potential for us to use these objects within domestic environments and the potential for us to be living within a faux rock lifestyle. Just as the 'rock chewers' do.

Having realised the potential of my domestic objects within our reality it made me wonder as to how they might function within alternative realities.

I started to consider the materials I had worked with, the objects I had made and their functions. And how they could create a world around them, solely based upon a singular material or technique and the things that would occur in response to them.





*Sawdust Sonja Bakes Bread* (2021) - screen captures 00:00:03/00:04:00

For example my work *Sawdust Sonja Bakes Bread* (2021) is a puppetry video work that follows a character called 'Sonja'. Using her body as a source of ingredients; 'Sonja' is the host of a cooking show where she bakes bread for the audience. As more bread is demanded for, and 'Sonja' provides, it results in the depletion of the ingredient and 'Sonja's' inevitable death.



Co Hoedmann  
*The Sand Castle* (1977) - screen captures 00:02:35/00:12:30

*The Sand Castle* (1977), a stop motion animation by Dutch artist Co Hoedmann follows a similar storyline. The 'sandman' uses his environment to construct a sand castle with the help of the sand creatures he creates along the way. Once the domestic space is created, a sand storm approaches. As they seek shelter inside and the sand rises, it destroys what has been made. Trapping the creatures within until we are left with the bare sandy plains just as it was at the start.

'Sonja' was made of sawdust and the 'sandman' was made of sand. Both materials can be used for constructing domestic environments as well evoking the acts that take place within them. Although both storylines have a tragic ending, I think that both are a reflection on our capitalist society. An indication to the views based around the handmade, the labour involved and the how such creations can or in this case not stand the test of time.



If these works were to be displayed as static objects or as framed film stills on the gallery wall, I doubt that they would be able to carry across such a strong message to the viewer without the motion. As a video it helps the audience to visualise how the use of domestic objects and materials function within alternative realities can seem achievable within ours.



Donald Judd  
Third Floor, 101 Spring Street Residence, New York  
Peter

Despite the lack of presentation versatility that the gallery holds for functioning domestic objects, I have found that they can be situated most successfully within the homes of dead artists. For example, the deceased American artist Donald Judd has all of his homes and studios open to the public; almost as walk in shrines. Judd was known for creating furniture alongside his sculptures. *It's Hard to Find a Good Lamp* is a text that accompanies his book *Furniture Retrospective* (1995).

*"The furniture is furniture and is only art in that architecture, ceramics, textiles, and many things are art. We try to keep the furniture out of art galleries to avoid this confusion, which is far from my thinking."* (Judd, D., 1995. p. 21)

And yet this is where we find Judd's furniture, outside of the gallery. And put within a context that is comfortable. Although it does allow the viewer to gain an insight into the way Judd constructed his environment around him, dependent on his needs and as a reflection upon his practice. The only change is the role of the domestic space. Changed into a viewing platform, similar to that of a gallery. The domestic space no longer functions as it should.

### Controlling the Domestic

Just as 'Sonja' comes from a constructed reality we as artists tend to go beyond from our practice to construct our reality around us. Just as Judd did. The fate at which our practice is influenced is dependent on the environment in which it is created and can be well explained by Michel De Certeau in his book *Practice of Everyday Life* (1988).

*"The television viewer cannot write anything on the screen of his set. He has been dislodged from the product; he plays no role in its apparition."* (Certeau, M., 1988. p. 31)

To be situated within a prefabricated space constructed by someone of other needs means that we no longer partake in its actions. We are subjected to the objects controlling us when it should be the other way around. I am sure that many domestic issues to the individual go unnoticed and are even outdated. We go on day by day continuing with the same routine, tackling the same obstacles to get the things done we need done, without considering of the implications it has on us, our actions and its influences. The power dynamic between us and objects can be best visualised in the film *The Bed Sitting Room* (1969). Set in post nuclear war England, we find a few lone characters feeling the effects. Throughout the film they slowly start turning into the inanimate domestic objects they find around them. Within the first ten minutes we are meet with the 'BBC', a man sat behind a tv set with

the screen missing. As if controlled by the set, he only starts reporting as soon as the viewer turns the tv on and adjusts the channels. Although a fictional situation, it is still one in which we are controlled by the objects around us. The interaction between the 'BBC' and the tv set is one built from routine. We are familiar with the function a tv should have and when this is lost, we don't approach the object any differently. Here the 'BBC' chooses to replicate and imitate the role it should play; to sit behind the screen and report the news.

Opposed to Certeau, Swiss artist duo Peter Fischli and Weiss made a work titled *Untitled (Tate)* (2000). Commissioned by the Tate Modern gallery in London for its opening in 2000, the pair went to visit the location before it was completed. Inspired by the construction site they made a room sized installation of hand carved polyurethane sculptures that imitated everyday objects, some of which could be considered domestic. Arranged in a way to replicate the state in which the gallery was before it was completed, as if it were still under construction.

*"They're a bit like will-o-the-wisps – there in visual terms but not corresponding in terms of touch. Phantoms."* (Heiser, J., 2006)

As described by Fischli in an interview with writer and curator Jörg Heiser. These 'phantoms' still create a presence within the space. They still function as a visual understanding of incompleteness. Although these objects don't function, Fischli and Weiss challenge Certeau because they have the capability of controlling them. They could've easily used ready-mades, but they choose not to. They have an understanding that by setting this scenario they can also control the audience. Such a scene in a gallery would make the viewer unconsciously consider it to not be an artwork, due to the domestic tendencies implied by such objects. They created a narrative, highlighting and preserving how something came to be.



Peter Fischli and David Weiss  
*Untitled (Tate)* (2000) - installation detail



Mierle Laderman Ukeles  
*Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance (Outside)* (1973)

American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles also highlights the unseen activities that take place within the gallery in her work *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside* (1973). A documented series of images that captured Ukeles cleaning and maintaining Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, USA. Although she is controlled by the objects, Ukeles used the domestic tendencies evoked by them to produce a performative act and interaction. Ukeles herself is the 'phantom', carrying out the visual understanding of incompleteness.

*"I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as art. I will live in the museum as I customarily do at home with my husband and my baby for the duration of the exhibition, and do all these things as public art activities: I will sweep and wax the floors, dust everything, wash the walls, cook, invite people to eat, clean up, put away, change the light bulbs... The exhibition area might look 'empty' of art, but it will be maintained in full public view. My working will be the work."* (Laderman Ukeles, M., 1969. p. 3)

Ukeles transferred these domestic tendencies from the private to the public. This act is just as important as the objects that inhabit the space. And similar to how artists make an environment for themselves, because without it no work would come to exist. Just as the art within the gallery wouldn't exist without the domestic tendencies used to preserve them. The small parts of the everyday are just as important and should be considered as art. Necessity art.

To construct the environment in which we produce and place art is dependent on control and perspective. It depends on how much you consider the routines of the everyday, how the objects that inhabit it have an effect. Although the works of Fischli and Weiss, and Ukeles are both works set within the gallery, they are both works that place the private into the public. The 'phantoms'. That's not to say that these works wouldn't work outside the gallery. It's just dependent on how you control it and how you want it to be seen.

### Domestic Disobedience

As I continue to expand on my practice, I have found weaving to be an interesting form of domestic production. It can be used to make anything from a decorative wall tapestry, to curtains, a blanket, a washcloth, oven mitt and more. I really enjoy taking part in the process. It becomes extremely therapeutic. *Untitled* (2021) is one of my most recent works that looks into this craft. Part of a solo show titled *Primitive Tendencies*; I had the woven work hung within the centre of the space. Suspended in the air and weighed down with bread. At the time I was making a lot of bread – a domestic act that I also find to be just as therapeutic. With both materials and techniques you have to follow a recipe. A continuous set of instructions to abide by. Otherwise, it won't be successful or rather it won't function as it is intended to in the end. Both are loaded with historical importance in terms of basic domestic survival. But basics that I would take for granted. This is why I decided to title the solo show *Primitive Tendencies*. Both therapeutic and both two new techniques I self-taught. The way in which they were framed within the space helped elevate the power they possessed; the function became more evident. The intertwined strings became more than just a weave. It divided the space. It offered the opportunity for shade, for privacy and protection. The bread became more than a means of sustenance. It became an anchor. A viable strength in supporting the canopy above. I built a domestic frame of power; an installation that contributes to the way in which we interact within the space.



*Untitled (2021) - installation details*

As I have done and will continue to do; constructing objects tailored to my needs and way of living, it becomes evident that I am in control of my domesticity. I am disobedient to the objects that preoccupy my domestic spaces. Whether they're made for our reality or not, successful or not, the experience of making such things rejuvenates the primitive state I experience. With each object made, I am continuing to build the foundations of my practice. Deciphering the way in which I choose to live my every day and objecting to the prefabricated dictatorship of the ready-mades that exist within our homes. Whether this turns out to be evident to the viewer or not doesn't matter. What matters is the domestic relief I find in my objects. But the way in which it is perceived by the viewer is important. They're still art works. That's why the choice of location and format in which I choose to present such works needs to be precise. And that is why I find it most beneficial to slowly integrate these objects into the public. A subtle change to the everyday until they become a part of the norm. They are objects of functions, they're possibilities of alternative living. They don't represent a specific time, image or story. They are a story being told, an ongoing exploration into domestic life.

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