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# Subject To Change

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SUBJECT TO CHANGE

by

CHRISTINA PRICE WASHINGTON

Under the Direction of NANCY FLOYD, MFA

ABSTRACT

*Subject to Change* is the culmination of a two-year investigation of the idea of home. This thesis discusses the journey of creating a home for my family and the work it spawned. Various cultural and artistic influences that shape the work include Grimm's fairytales, my upbringing in Germany, Sigmund Freud, Bernd and Hilla Becher, and Josef Beuys. This work reflects a situation and transforms material that takes on symbolic meaning.

INDEX WORDS: Video, Installation, Home, Investigation of patterns, Breadcrumbs, Milk, Dishes



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CHRISTINA PRICE WASHINGTON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012







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2012

SUBJECT TO CHANGE

by

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Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

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May 2012

## **DEDICATION**

For Keith, Hauken and Tillman

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## INTRODUCTION

I am married. I have two children. We live in a home all together. When my husband Keith and I were building our house, we did not model our ideas on the economic boom. It was not a monetary investment, but a spiritual one. This was going to be our family home. While the house was under construction, I began to question what I would bring to our home. Mores and rituals are an essential part of establishing a sense of belonging and I wondered how I would nourish my children with the ideas and the practice of rituals.

Influenced by my upbringing in Germany, where each season had its own distinct character, I realized that, despite my efforts, I would not be able to reconstruct or recreate that ambiance here in the United States. As a child in Germany, each day brought exchanges with the butcher or the baker and everyone else in the village that made up my everyday life. This gave me a strong sense of who I am and where I belong. It also engendered a sensitivity to all the materials touched and used in everyday rituals, which endowed them with mysticism and meaning. This is what infiltrates my work today.

*Subject to Change* investigates the potential of everyday objects to hold ritualistic meaning and convey notions about the family bond. The content of the three videos that comprise *Subject to Change* feature the most basic items of my household: breadcrumbs, milk and dishes. Each are materials that my family touches or ingests on a daily basis.

## FAIRYTALES, FACT AND FAT

In undertaking my graduate studies, many aspects of my traditional and non-traditional role within my own family came into question. And a myriad of artistic and cultural experiences influenced the direction of the art I would make.

The Hänsel and Gretel fairytale is especially potent in my imagination. When I was a child, initially the story was told to me in the village where I grew up—nearly an exact replica of the location of the fairytale: in the foothills of the Alps and next to a deep, dark forest. These fairytale images linger in my mind as perfect symbols of my German childhood: full of mystery, danger, and with moral teachings about character, obedience, magic, ingenuity and industriousness.

Of course, growing up in Germany, it would be hard to discount the influence of such a seminal artist as Joseph Beuys. Aspects of his work speak directly to *Subject to Change* and the creation of my own private mythology and system of iconography. Beuys used materials in his art making that have autobiographical significance. Whether it is true or not, Beuys created a story of his rescue during WWII. Items such as felt, thread, fat, flashlights and sleds dominate Beuys oeuvre and he uses these materials repetitively. Oscillating between their healing power and nourishment, the materials have transformative properties. Fat is an ideal material for Beuys to signify chaos and spiritual transcendence. In the role of twentieth century shaman, Beuys guides his audience to a closer connection to nature, human nature, and an idea about magic that has very much been removed from the discourse of contemporary art.

As we recognize the commonplace materials in Beuys arsenal, the rearrangements and reassignments of the meanings of these items are startling; the viewer acknowledges the objects and consequently needs to reorganize his or her understanding of them. New and unfamiliar use

of the materials enforces questions about the purposefulness of those objects; Beuys' sculptures out of felt and fat carry negative and positive associations; the amorphous element of these sculptures can change with temperature and time. In particular I am fond of his pieces "*Fat Corner*" wherein five kilograms of butter installed in a corner of a room could not be closer to represent what I conceive of 'home' -- a constant changing organic object exposed to the elements of a room or structure of a building.

Perhaps unintentional, a connection to the idea of transubstantiation exists: some thing in the physical world can be re-organized into a spiritual experience.



<sup>1</sup> Figure 1: Josef Beuys – *Fett Ecke Prozess*      Figure 2: Joseph Beuys – *Fett Stuhl*

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<sup>1</sup> The illustration above, "*Fat Corner in Box*" and "*Fat on Chair*" substitutes for "*Fat Corner*" which was accidentally destroyed after a janitor at the Kunst Akademie in Düsseldorf failed to recognize the fat in the corner of the faculty office as art. It was removed or 'cleaned up' after Beuys' death.

In contrast, *Subject to Change* is also influenced by the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Their photographic approach to conceptual work and formalism is fascinating. While they documented industrial buildings, the Bechers established that the subject itself is aesthetic and pure. Their objective approach created a uniform series of photographs stripped of all sentimentality. Influenced by their upbringing in Germany during the rise of the national socialistic regime, their work is free of any ideological weight and void of subjective associations. Their work operates like typologies from botany or zoology, offering comparisons when grouped together according to function, such as lime kilns, cooling towers, or water towers. The Bechers' life project uses repetition and rhythm, giving the buildings they photograph anonymity or even an abstract form rather than certain specificity. The Bechers divorced meaning from the original purpose and everyday cultural function of their objects, which allows the viewer to read them as autonomous aesthetic objects or sculptures. Their use of the same formal distance of object to camera, near identical flat lighting, lack of human presence, a controlled black and white chromatic spectrum, and a precise uniform print avoids historical references and re-contextualizes the subject as merely object. The Bechers preserved anonymity in their work, disallowing their objects to be monumentalized and exploited by a political regime. Their documentary approach was clinical and conceptual. Shaped by this non-subjective aesthetic practice, their work does not express personal feelings and opinion.

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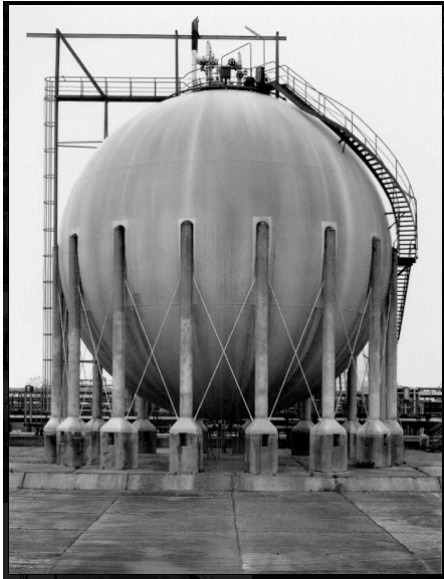


Figure 3: Becher – *Water Tower*

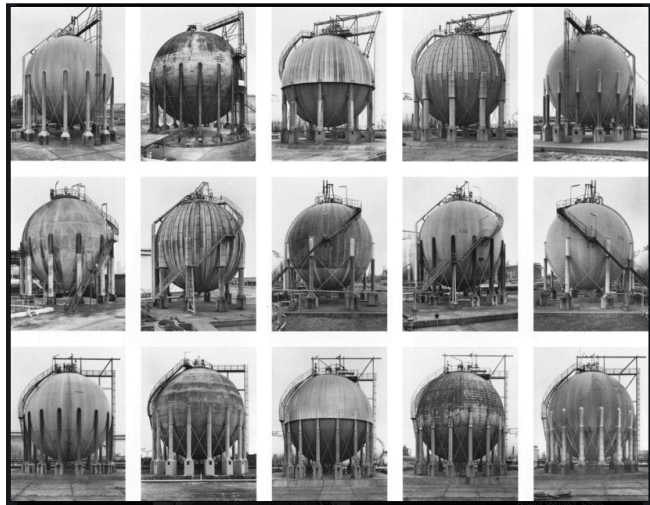


Figure 4: Becher – *Typology of Water Towers*

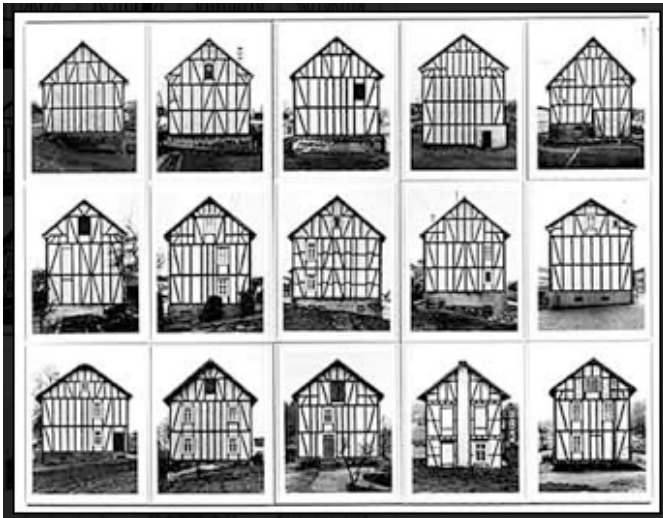


Figure 5: Becher – *Typology Fachwerk Houses*

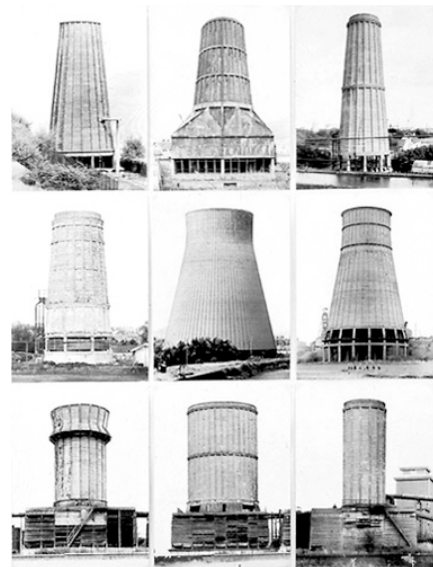


Figure 6: Becher - *Typology Cooling Towers*

## THE UNCANNY

Sigmund Freud wrote in his 1919 essay, *The Uncanny* (unheimlich in German), that the familiar relates to comfort while the uncanny is its opposite. Freud explored the epistemology of the word “heim”, which means home, belonging to “house”. Heimlich also has the connotation of friendly and can act as an adjective. In his essay, Freud discusses the word “heim” or ‘heimlich’ in the aim towards ambivalence until it overlaps with its opposite, namely ‘unheimlich’. Relevant to the analysis of the iconography of home, which is invested with the feeling of security and the familiar, “heimlich” can be destabilized and turn into something strange when adding “un”. With this transformation, simple everyday objects can evoke confusion and uncertainties. When the action of endlessly falling, endlessly pouring, and violently shattering transforms the breadcrumbs, milk and dishes of *Subject to Change*, they become a source of puzzlement and discomfort (or perhaps humor?). “There are thus two courses open to us: either we can investigate the semantic content that has accrued to the German word unheimlich [of which the nearest semantic equivalents in English are ‘uncanny’ and ‘eerie’, but which etymologically correspond to ‘unhomely’] as the language has developed, or we can assemble whatever it is about persons and things, sense impressions, experiences and situations, that evokes in us a sense of the uncanny, and then go to infer its hidden nature from what all these have in common. I can say in advance that both of these courses lead to the same conclusion – that the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.”

(Freud 2003, 124)

In addition to Freud’s *Uncanny*, C.G. Jung’s idea of an archetype is applicable to the analysis of *Subject to Change*. Jung established that archetypes are an instinctive part of the unconscious and are shared by a collective unconscious. As I draw upon my experiences of every-



day life, the rituals and mores of countless centers of cultures come into play. Connections to ancient history of man and his symbols have been rediscovered by archaeologists and religious historians and philologists, who work to translate these beliefs into modern concepts. (Jung 1968, 97). *Subject to Change* offers a translation of rituals taken directly from my home.

Jung makes a distinction between instinct and archetypes, a recurring symbol in mythology. He describes archetypes as primitive mental images inherited from the earliest human ancestors and are present in the collective unconscious. While he calls instincts psychological urges that are perceived by senses, archetypes are the manifestation of the symbolic images. Universally understood symbols, archetypes are terms or patterns of behavior that are often used in myths and storytelling across different cultures and times.

## PRELUDE TO *SUBJECT TO CHANGE*

In a larger project previous to my thesis work, titled *Studies from Home*, I pursued several lines of inquiry through diverse media including drawings, photograms, photographs, and videos. Important to these investigations was the tone maintained throughout, which is not unlike the consistent vision found in the Bechers. The mapping and documentation undertaken in *Studies from Home* had the potential to be sentimental but I purposefully removed sentimentality from the equation.

*Studies from Home* was a visual diary derived from home activities that produced material residue that was sparked with meaning. In my home, this is what happens. We do not buy bread from the grocery store packaged in a plastic bag. Instead, we buy our bread from the baker, bring it home, cut it on the cutting board, and eat it. As it happens, everyday our family creates a surplus of breadcrumbs and, like the story of Hänsel and Gretel, for me, these breadcrumbs are infused with the energy of my family and my home. Using the collected breadcrumbs, weekly photograms were produced that look more like abstractions from the universe than breadcrumbs. The method of working was strictly controlled with set parameters similar to the Bechers' practice. My practice was to collect the breadcrumbs and create photograms on a weekly basis while always working in the same conditions: the use of same size and kind of photo paper, the use of same lighting conditions. This activity took place over one semester. The resulting series of photograms has a tension between the neutral photographic object (its index) and the magical nature of the breadcrumbs.

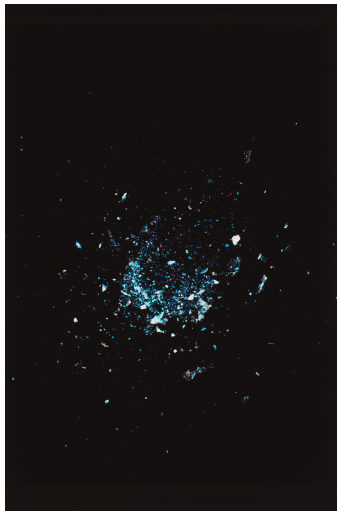


Figure 7: Photogram # 12, *Breadcrumbs*, 20'' x 30''



Figure 8: Photogram # 9, *Breadcrumbs*, 20'' x 30''



Figure 9: Photogram # 3, *Hair*, 20'' x 30''

Parallel to the breadcrumb exercise, I also investigated the daily act of going to bed each night by tracing with graphite on artist paper the things that landed on the floor at bedside before getting into bed, like clothes and discarded pillows. Again, strict parameters were followed: every night I traced the things on my husband's side and my side of the bed for a pre-determined period of time on the same sheet of paper.



Figure 10: *Her Side*, Graphite on Paper, 32'' x 44''

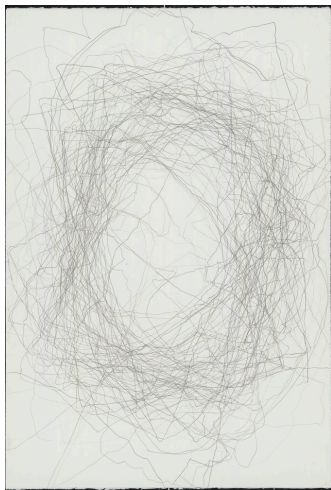


Figure 11: *His Side*, Graphite on Paper, 32'' x 44''

The resulting drawings are pure mechanical documentation but the source material is imbued with emotion as it comes from the people closest to me in the home. Though these are not

images of the earliest industrial complexes made of steel, the viewing experience is dramatically altered when the title informs the viewer of the process and ritual involved in the making of these abstractions. In addition, the breadcrumbs, and the tracings of mine and my husband's pillows and clothes, assume a transformative quality not unlike Beuys' fat and felt.

*Studies from Home* also included a series of experimental videos exploring the space of my house using a child's toy—a spy video camera wristwatch. Focusing on household items and fixtures as subject matter, such as window shapes in the pantry, the kitchen counter island, and walking patterns through the home, these pieces had a playful quality as they investigated and explored objects and motion. The toy camera offered a low pixel resolution, a pinhole instead of a lens, and a low-grade sound recording that incorporated the camera's own mechanical sound. This low-tech aspect permitted easy handling with little restrictions, which influenced my approach to the final work in *Subject to Change*

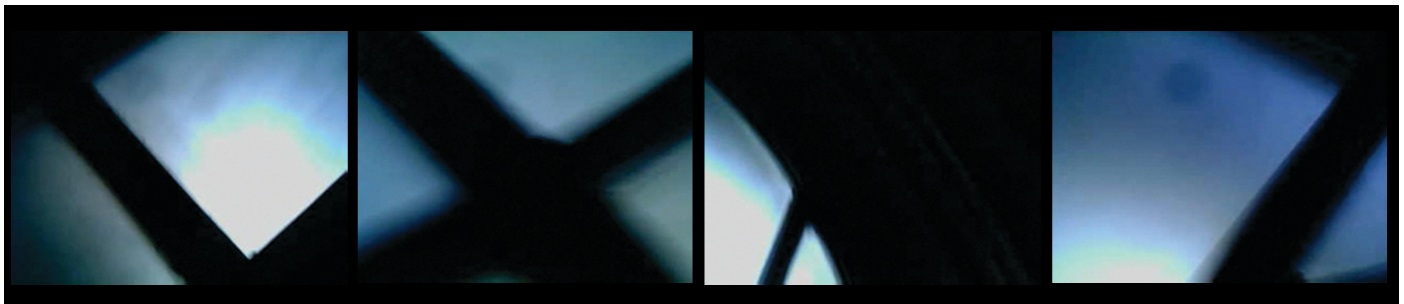


Figure 12: Film still, *Round Window*

## *SUBJECT TO CHANGE AND OMA*

*Subject to Change* is a three-channel video installation that uses three materials that represent the bond and ritual in the making of my home meaningful. The objects we touch (plates), the food we ingest (bread and milk) coalesce into something larger and serve as evidence of an important familial communion or bond.

My family and I are living in the home we designed and built, but we do not know how much longer we can stay in it. Like so many American families, we, too, are touched by the economic downturn and by uncertainty. Looming on the horizon is the great probability of change. While the preceding work was filled with energy and an eagerness of finding our patterns and rituals, *Subject to Change* exists as the quiet cell in the center of a storm.

*Subject to Change* begins with the story of Oma. In the very small town where I grew up in Bavarian Germany, a woman who was the grandmother of my friends and neighbors adopted all the children in our village as her own grandchildren. She would sit us on the sofa in her kitchen and read to us the stories of the Brothers Grimm. In a way, like Beuys, she was the shaman—introducing to our young imaginations our first ideas about fantasy, magic and the uncanny. Also, she provided us with a funny kind of treat: with a spoon, she would make little piles of sugar on her kitchen table and each child was allowed to lick the sugar directly off the table! I'm sure our parents would have been horrified but in hindsight what Oma gave to me was my first experience of the transformative properties of one substance for another. The pile of perfect sweetness was a symbol of her love and caring. In my mouth, literally, sugar was transformed to love: transubstantiation. This key experience emerges in the work of *Subject to Change*.

In the first of three videos, in a dramatically lighted dark space, 100+ pounds of bread-crumbs fall onto a surface, eventually creating a perfect pile – the symbol of my home. Collected

over a six-month period, the 100+ pounds of breadcrumbs fall for approximately six minutes, building up to an enormous pile that eventually starts falling off the surface and out of the frame.

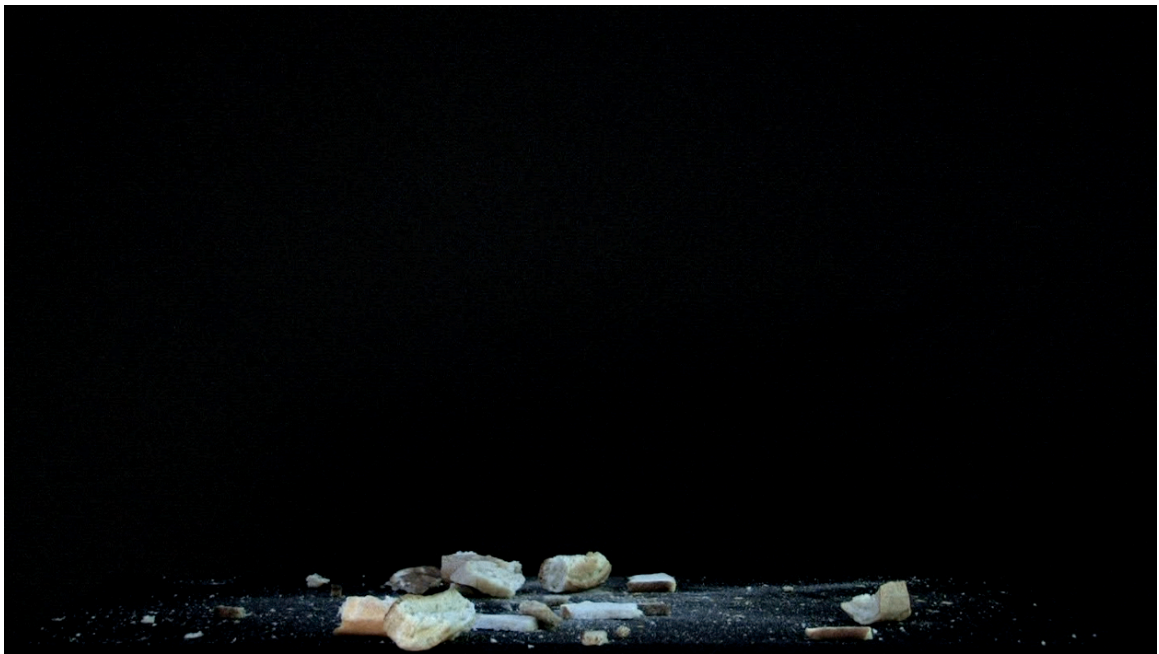


Figure 13: Film still - *Breadcrumbs*



Figure 14: Film still - *Breadcrumbs*





Figure 15: Film still - *Breadcrumbs*

In the second video *Milk*, twenty gallons of milk is poured into a large glass fish tank sized container, serving as a monumental expression of the simple pouring of a glass of milk. Toward the end of the video, again, milk pours over the top, down the sides of the glass, and out of the frame onto the floor.





Figure 16: Film still - *Milk*



Figure 17: Film still - *Milk*



Figure 18: Film still - *Milk*



Figure 19: Film still - *Milk*

When growing up in the village where Oma lived, one of our daily chores was to walk to the farmer's barn, watch him express milk from the cow, and then carry it home to Oma in a spe-



cial milk can. We even knew the cows by their names. Today milk is always in our house. It is one of the most essential nutritional items we as a family cannot live without. We are never out of milk. Ever. It serves as the most significant staple for providing nourishment in our home. The proverb “Don’t cry over spilled milk” resonates as a metaphor for the plentitude of milk. When milk is spilled, nothing can be done; it has to be let go. As children, when we went to pick up milk from the farmer, he sometimes would aim the udder of the cow towards us while expressing the milk, hitting our legs and feet. Eventually the milk would seep into the ground.

Jung believed that there are basic patterns how archetypes exist at the unconscious level: shadow, self, animus/anima, and persona. These lead to an infinite variety of images. Jung purports that basic archetypes are building blocks important for linking the rational world of consciousness and the world of instinct. (Jung1968, 33). The archetype of the nurturing mother is common to all of us, which links with the idea of mother’s milk. “The archetypal experience of the Feminine as all nourishing is all evident in the multiplication of the breast motif...the breast motif involves the symbolism of milk and cow. The Goddess as a cow, ruling over the food giving heard is one of the earliest historical objects of worship...” (Neumann 1974, 124)<sup>2</sup>

In the third video, 150 white ceramic plates are hurled against a stonewall at my home, shattering into bits and pieces upon impact. Though not within view, a large pile accumulates on the floor below. In Germany it is customary to throw dishes (or anything porcelain) the night before a wedding. Breaking dishes relates to an ancient matrimonial ritual, the origin I cannot trace,

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<sup>2</sup> Erich Neumann, a student of Jung, wrote a book explaining the structure of the archetype, two characters of the Feminine and the Central symbolism of the feminine amongst other archetypes, though concentrating on the feminine. Neumann added plates and illustrations to demonstrate an Urform (first model) of the archetype; his methodology of classical studies makes him a ‘historical’, with the incorporations of archaeological evidence.

but is well recognized in many countries and cultures. The bride and groom are obliged to clean up the broken dishes as a metaphor for their future life in which they will successfully work on problems together. The stability we provide our children within the context of home depends on how disruption is negotiated. *Subject to Change* alludes to my future task of working out a new living situation for us as I continue to provide my family with what is important and meaningful in making our home a home.

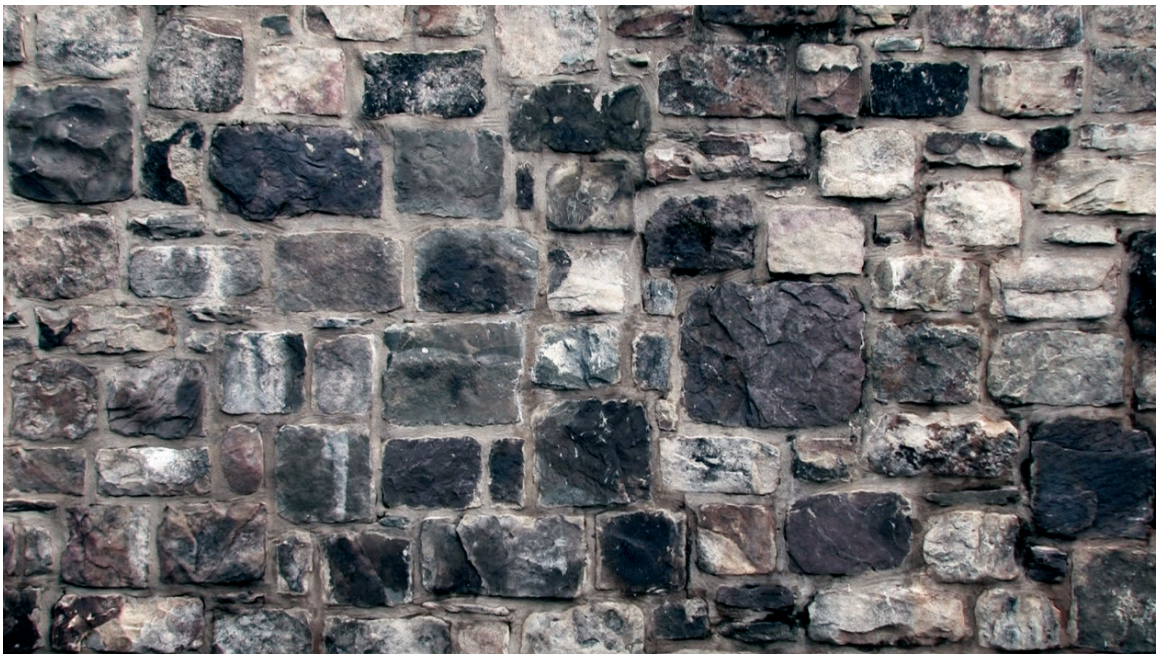


Figure 20: Film still - *Dishes*





Figure 21: Film still - *Dishes*



Figure 22: Film still - *Dishes*

The idea of nourishment and the significance of marriage are fundamental to *Subject to Change*. Perhaps I have realized (unconsciously) that the archetypes explored in this work allow me to express my role as one who wants to create a mindful home. Breadcrumbs, milk and dishes suggest abundance, not dissimilar from Beuys' piles of fat or Oma's pile of sugar, but the prevalence is tempered by a formal restraint shared with the Becher's work. Most importantly, the experience of commonplace materials takes on new significance. The remnants and residue of my life in the home are transformed from the substance of material to the substance of meaning.

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