

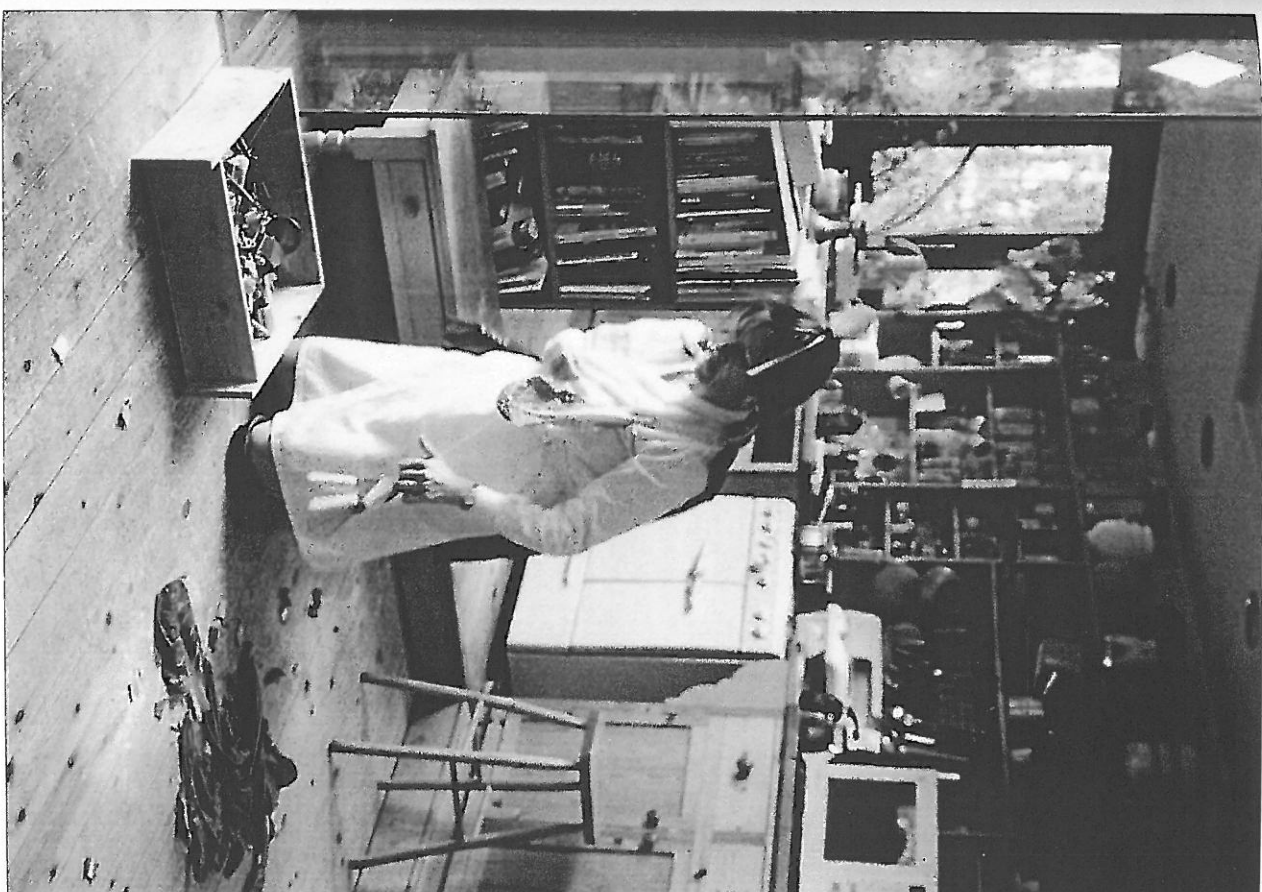
DAILY LIFE 1

Kitchen Show LESLEY FERRIS

From 'Cooking Up the Self: Bobby Baker and Blondell Cummings "Do" the Kitchen', in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (eds) *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance*. Lesley Ferris's publications include *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre* (Macmillan) and *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing* (Routledge). She is a professor of theatre at Ohio State University. Opposite page: *Kitchen Show* (1991). LIFT, North London. Action No. 10: Pulling a drawer right out so as to tidy the contents.

WHEN, IN THE summer of 1991, I purchased a ticket for a performance of Baker's *Kitchen Show*, I was given a small map with directions to Baker's house. She lives in North London, in an unassuming terraced house, on a tree-lined street about a ten-minute walk from the nearest underground station. My two daughters, aged 7 and 12, and I were among the first people to arrive, but slowly a very small line formed. This was a quintessential liminal theatre moment for me: hovering on the threshold of Baker's residence with a theatre ticket in my hand. When we were admitted to the house, the ticket was taken from me at the kitchen door by a woman with a LIFT badge. The programme proffered, the sense of change was heightened, perhaps even more by the presence of my two young daughters. Baker has a large kitchen that looks on to a back garden in a traditional London terraced house. The kitchen table had been removed, and in its place were three rows of chairs seating 25 people. The chairs faced the stove and the sink area.

When Baker entered her kitchen, she was dressed in her signature white smock, appearing as part-doctor, part-chef. She greeted her guests shyly, warmly, and introduced herself: 'I'm Bobby Baker. Once a long time ago someone expected to see a man, so I want you to know that this is me.' I later learned that she uses this introduction for her various performance works. The



performance begins, then, with her identification of herself as a woman with a gender-ambiguous name and a costume that says 'I'm ready to get to work.'

Baker subtitles her performance 'One Dozen Kitchen Actions Made Public'. Her dozen is, of course, a Baker's dozen, or thirteen, and each of what she calls her 'actions' is accompanied by an autobiographical monologue. She begins by pulling out a trolley loaded with cups and saucers from a cupboard and proceeds to put the kettle on the stove. She speaks as she prepares tea and coffee for her audience.

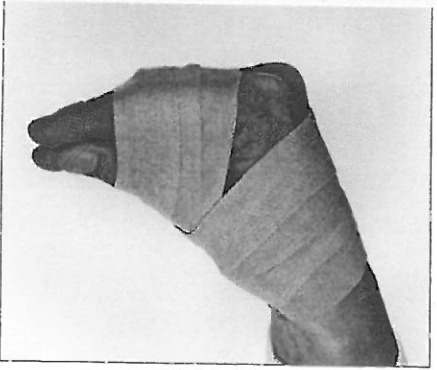
When I welcome people into my kitchen, I always offer them a hot drink straight away – 'Coffee? Tea?' I don't like them to sit there with nothing. It makes me feel anxious.

(Baker, 1991: p. 165)

With remarkable ease and efficiency, Baker delivers her speech, along with a cup of coffee or tea, to each member of her audience. A characteristic of her language, repeated over and over again throughout her performance, is the sense that she is speaking aloud an inner, private monologue. We are privy to her personal thoughts, and this privilege is double-edged: while on one level she plays a straightforward homemaker concerned with her day-to-day travail in the kitchen, on another level she ironically performs a certain kind of dutiful womanhood. Her delivery is disarming; we are caught up in the moment: teacup in hand, sipping and listening, we are guests in her home. It is only later, when I look at her programme, that I see that she distils this activity into a single action that she identifies as 'Action No. 1 Stirring milk or sugar into a hot drink'.

There is a ritualised quality to each of Baker's thirteen actions. Each monologue – which articulates the action while she is doing it – is followed by what she calls a 'mark'. For Baker, the mark is literally marking her body in some way so that she physically retains a 'memory' of the action throughout her performance. For example, *Action No. 1* is followed by 'Mark No. 1 To bandage my fingers into the right shape with Elastoplast'. She describes the bandaging of her hand in the shape required for stirring a cup of tea. The notion of some ideal hand shape for stirring tea gives Baker the opportunity to layer her performance with the inescapable issue of class so present in British culture. Her hand and fingers remain taped in this way during the entire performance and foreshadow that her body will become 'bound' by the tea ritual.

The effect of this ritualised marking is that by the end of her performance Baker is covered with a variety of kitchen utensils and objects, in addition to being bandaged, smeared with margarine and partially soaked with water. She carries the burden of both



Kitchen Show (1991). Mark No. 1: to bandage my fingers into the right shape with elastoplast. Image from booklet.

her performance and her kitchen with her. The kitchen space becomes a site for sharing, telling, demonstrating and enacting her fantasies of chaos and violence. The kitchen is the space where we serve our guests, but it is also a daily battlefield of onerous tasks and repetitive activity.

In Baker's playing space, the kitchen becomes a haven for just such detail in its provision of factual evidence: routines of daily life are examined, minutiae of domestic work are performed and social life is enacted. But interwoven into all this are hints of comic madness, a suggestion that chaos lurks just below the surface. In *Action No. 3*, for example, Baker describes her occasional need to vent her anger and then proceeds to demonstrate this by smashing a ripe pear against a cupboard door.

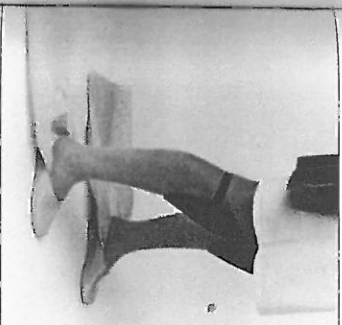
Action No. 7 is a surreal juxtaposition opposing eating and cosmetics. Baker, snacking on small pieces of food that she calls 'taste sensations', describes how important it is to keep up her blood sugar level. She stages how her constant feeding and need for oral gratification in the kitchen have led to some embarrassing mistakes. For example, Baker 'picked up what [she] thought was a crumb of cake only to discover that [she] was chewing on a small piece of masking tape! She then, seemingly incongruously, marks herself by putting on bright red lipstick and explains her action by linking it to a childhood experience.

We went to visit a friend of my mother's who had just had a baby. My mother went upstairs to see her friend and the baby in the bedroom. I went up too but they were embarrassed and annoyed at my interruption because she was breastfeeding. I saw the woman's nipple. It looked bright red like a cherry. I thought she'd put lipstick on it.

(Baker, 1991: p. 168)

Connecting her constant snacking, or 'grazing', as she calls it, to a childhood memory of her embarrassment at discovering a woman breastfeeding is a startling imaginative leap. The kitchen and the remembered woman are linked as sites of potential nourishment, a private association made by her narrative. Baker plays on the duality here – she is both the feeder and the one who feeds. To mark this connection she gashes her mouth – the body part that receives the food – with red.

For Baker the kitchen is a site of constant work, but also of memory and engaging fantasy. In *Action No. 9* she dances to operatic music while sprinkling spinach leaves around the kitchen. In *Action No. 12*, which she calls 'the most significant as it ties all the others together', she moves about the kitchen trying to finish a whole range of uncompleted tasks. She says, 'There is a great deal of skill and versatility attached to this action. It is like keeping a set of juggler's balls in the air.' For the women in the small,



Kitchen Show (1991). Mark No. 12: To tuck two new blue j-cloths in between the sides of my heels and my slippers so that they fly out behind. Image from booklet.

intimate audience such as myself, this notion of 'juggling balls' is a recognisable part of the domestic terrain. The never-ending routine of housework is a commonplace experience, with its rush to pick up, straighten up, clean up. To mark this action, Baker attaches two blue j-cloths (disposable kitchen cloths) to the heels of her slippers, providing us with a hilarious image of winged heels, à la Mercury, the Greek god of speed and flight.

Using her own kitchen, Baker transforms the traditional stage space from one of public, open exteriors to an intimate interior space that is literally lived and worked in. Her autobiographical monologues reposition – one could say semiotise – the audience, transforming them from conventional spectators to invited guests. We witness Baker's rituals of kitchen life just as her friends and neighbours may have occasion to do. But in this duality of a performance, an artistic event. Indeed Baker's performance means to 'transgress the boundaries within which woman is held separate from, the antithesis of culture, society, meaning' (Pollock, 1991: n.p.).

Because we are in Baker's own kitchen, witnessing her talking and working with her own dishes, utensils and appliances, because such work is marked visually (for the spectators) and physically (for Baker), the specificities of this woman, this body, this kitchen, this work are highlighted. Baker's body is both the guiding artistic intelligence and the body artistically marked in performance. As Ellen Donkin has suggested, she is both the creator of meaning and the carrier of meaning (Donkin, 1998: 65). Or, as Baker demonstrates in *Action No. 7*, applying bright red lipstick to her lips, she is both the feeder and the one who feeds. This deliberate conflation of the woman performer and the artwork transgresses cultural boundaries that demand the separation of private and public spheres. Baker turns the misogynistic notion of women actresses *merely playing themselves* on its head. Baker makes playing herself a deliberate creative act, one central to her work. Locating this performance in a kitchen, a site culturally identified with women and women's work (and a site and activity most often hidden from public viewing), adds another layer to this conflation.

In Baker's final action, laced with irony and humour, Baker displays herself as a kind of fantastically decorated cake, turned awkwardly and uncomfortably around on her pedestal. When I saw her performance, Baker, in what appeared to be an impromptu gesture, invited her daughter to come into the kitchen and play the piano for her final pose. She commented that her daughter happened to be available for this touch, so her final image on a cake stand featured her shy daughter's hesitant, charming chords. For me her daughter's appearance in the kitchen/stage paralleled my own in the audience with my daughters as guests/spectators.

This moment emphasised the autobiographical nature of Baker's work for both performer and viewer.

Baker's final pose – her marked body displayed on a cake pedestal to the tinkling strains of her daughter's piano – is a tongue-in-cheek reconfiguration of the Pygmalion myth. Bobby Baker debunks this age-old myth of man transforming woman by presenting herself as an artwork. Instead of the idealised beauty of male fantasy, she is increasingly defaced, soiled and stained by the traces of her kitchen work. Women on pedestals have been served up to us as artworks created by men. They have neither autonomy nor self-definition. But here, standing precariously on a cake stand overtly used for consumption, Baker connects her body to her domestic life and to her artwork. She underscores the importance of this connection in her final line, 'It's the image they make all together that matters most' (Baker, 1991: p. 170). This final image – both serious and tongue-in-cheek – stresses Baker's active participation in interpreting her 'self' for us. As Paul Smith argues, 'a person is not simply the actor who follows ideological scripts, but is also an agent who reads them in order to insert him/herself into them – or not' (Smith, 1988: xxiv–xxv). Baker's self-insertion into these scenes of the kitchen both remakes it as a site of agency and stages her send-up of conventionalised domesticity.