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# Performance Art and Feminism: Bodies of Care and Patience

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the concepts of "care" and "patience" under capitalism and in relation to social reproduction theory through performative works of art. The idea that reproduction is not about creating life but instead the creation of new workers has preoccupied a new wave of feminist theorists and activists who wish to explore women's place and labour in and outside the sphere of production and explain the relationship between oppression and exploitation. Although working class women have been carrying the burden of the extra physical, mental and emotional labour generated by the Coronavirus disease of 2019, social reproduction theorists and survey data show that women have been performing a disproportionate amount of unpaid care and housework long before the pandemic. The feminisation and devaluation of care labour that patriarchal capitalism promotes can only lead to women's systematic subjugation. Through the critical feminist analysis of performative works by Chrysi Tsiota, Fotini Kalle and Angeliki Avgitidou that draws on the writings of Silvia Federici, Tithi Bhattacharya and Emma Dowling among others, and the theorisation of "patience" by philosophers Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou this paper interconnects the notions of care and patience to expose women's economic and sexist exploitation and deepen our understanding of everyday life in neoliberal capitalism. Arguing that despite the intense engagement of Greek women artists with issues around reproductive labour, the lack of a feminist art history and theory in Greece has led to the marginalisation of such discussions, this paper aims to bring in light important works of performance art and the necessity for such issues to be addressed within the Greek borders.

**Keywords:** social reproduction; capitalism; women's exploitation; housework; child rearing

## 1. Introduction

This paper explores the concepts of "care" and "patience" under capitalism through performative works of art by Greek artists. Care is considered here as the act of tending to the emotional and physical needs of others. It is examined therefore as emotional, mental and physical labour and in connection to social reproduction. As sociologist and political scientist Emma Dowling (2021, 21) explains, "The propensity to care and the work of caring are the lifeblood of our social and economic system. Care is central to the reproduction of society and thus one of its bedrocks, part of a fundamental infrastructure which holds society together. Without care, life could not be sustained". Care is therefore interwoven with reproductive labour which encompasses remunerated as well as unpaid activities that are necessary for the reproduction of the population and therefore the work force; this includes domestic work, child rearing, taking care of the elderly and people in need but also occupations such as health care, child care, teaching.

Care and domestic labour, both paid and unpaid, is undoubtedly still considered a women's responsibility. Likewise, "patience" continues to be expected by women more often than men as is stereotypically regarded feminine trait. Along with patience, qualities such as nurturance, sensitivity, supportiveness, gentleness, passivity, humility, empathy, affection and tenderness are also acknowledged as stereotypically feminine. Several of them are considered integral to the labour of care providers.

Women performance artists have been addressing such issues through their art since the 1970s. Martha Rosler, Mary Kelly, Faith Wilding, Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Bobby Baker, among others have challenged the maternal and domestic role of women and exposed the labour behind the love. This paper examines more recent performances by Greek women artists who again pose questions around the invisible and unvalued labour women do in the home, the production of female subjectivity and the notion of "patience" that accompanies them throughout their lives. Although there are several paradigms of performative practices that address such issues in Greece since the 1980s —though mostly after 2000—, most of them are not being recorded or analysed anywhere but the artists' personal archives and websites. The aim of this paper is therefore to bring to light and discuss performances by Greek women artists that address issues around the feminisation of care labour and women's oppression that stems from it, and contribute to the discussion on social reproduction and the crisis of care that has reemerged the last decade or so. The first section of the paper discusses the works The Pleasure Principle (Portrait of a Spouse) (2003) by Chrysi Tsiota and Domestic Performance (2020) by Fotini Kalle that address women's everyday life as housewives and mothers. The second section considers the production of gendered subjectivity through the performances Reproduction (2015) by Kalle and Patience (2012) by Angeliki Avgitidou.

## 2. Home, a site of unseen and unvalued care labour

The idea that reproduction in capitalist societies is not about the creation of life but the creation of new workers has preoccupied a new wave of feminist theorists and activists who explore how race and gender oppression are produced by capitalism and explain why the subordination of social reproduction to production for profit that capitalism sustains, is connected to women's subjugation and exploitation. As feminist historian and activist Tithi

Bhattacharya (2020) has noted, "The best way to define social reproduction is the activities and institutions that are required for making life, maintaining life, and generationally replacing life" or else the "life-making activities". As she explains, "Life-making in the most direct sense is giving birth. But in order to maintain that life, we require a whole host of other activities, such as cleaning, feeding, cooking, washing clothes. There are physical institutional requirements: a house to live in; public transport to go to various places; public recreational facilities, parks, after-school programs. Schools and hospitals are some of the basic institutions that are necessary for the maintenance of life and life-making. Those activities and institutions that are involved in this process of life-making we call social reproduction work and social reproduction institutions." In other words, social reproduction labour encompasses all the activities involved in the reproduction and maintenance of the population, namely of the labour force, and care work is vital part of these activities.

Women's reproductive labour and hidden exploitation are addressed in the work of Chrysi Tsiota and Fotini Kalle. Tsiota's installation *The Pleasure Principle (Portrait of a Spouse)*, realised in 2003, comprises a bed with a monitor that displays a video, a photograph in an old frame and a hanger full of clothes. In the video the artist is performing household chores such as cleaning, dusting, washing dishes, setting the table, shopping groceries. At the same time the artist's voice is narrating in an ironic tone, excerpts from the *Encyclopedia of Women* [ $E\gamma\kappa\nu\kappa\lambda o\piai\delta\epsilon_{I}a$   $\tau\eta\varsigma$   $\Gamma vvai\kappa a\varsigma$ ], published in Athens in 1968. The encyclopedia, far from feminist, consists of six volumes with advice on the behaviour and attitudes women should have to become ideal housewives. The advice concerns women's appearance, way of walking, way of dressing, habits they should and should not have. Generally, the "encyclopedia" suggests a very specific way of being and living as a woman and particularly as a housewife. To mention an example: "The creation of a nice family atmosphere is in essence a woman's responsibility. The rational distribution of labour is extremely helpful and imperative. She has to carry out household chores during the time her husband is not home" (excerpt from the artist's narration in the video).



Figure 1: Chrysi Tsiota, The Pleasure Principle (Portrait of A Spouse), 2003 (Courtesy of the artist)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The Installation *The Pleasure Principle (Portrait of a Spouse)* was first presented in Tsiota's solo exhibition "Fictio" at Zefxis Gallery in Thessaloniki, Greece. It was later presented in other exhibitions as well, such as the Triennale der Photografie in Germany in 2008.





Figures 2,3: Chrysi Tsiota, The Pleasure Principle (Portrait of A Spouse), 2003 (Courtesy of the artist)

In the photographic portrait —a synthesis of performance for the camera and digital processing of the photograph— the artist is wearing household cleaning gloves and holding a mop and a cleanser spray. Instead of her own legs, she has wooden table/chair legs and a halo, a symbol of holiness, on her head. She looks neither sad nor happy. There is no indication of anger or frustration. She looks trapped but also calm and patient. Performing domestic chores, unable to escape, the spouse in Tsiota's work is obliged to identify with the icon of virgin Mary and suffer for the sake of others and foremost for the sake of capitalism. This suffering and exploitation are well hidden behind love and care in everyday life. Feminist theorist and activist Silvia Federici (2012) used the term "labour of love" in the 1970s to refer to the unpaid labour women were —and still are— expected to do in order to keep the capitalist system moving forward. She argued that housework is "the most pervasive manipulation, and the subtlest violence that capitalism has ever perpetrated against any section of the working class" (2012, 16). As she explained, while under capitalism every worker is exploited, the wage gives the impression of a fair deal even though in reality the wage rather than paying for the work we do "hides all the unpaid work that goes into profit" (Federici, 2012, 16).

In regard to the feminisation of caring labour and the exploitation of women, Federici (2012) argued in the 1970s that it is capitalism that naturalises women's subjugation since capital normalises women's unpaid labour as care and housework that does not need to be recognized economically or socially. As she explained, the difference between housework and paid labour "lies in the fact that not only has it been imposed on women, but it has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character. Housework was transformed into a natural attribute, rather than being recognised as work, because it was

destined to be unwaged" (Federici, 2012, 17). And it was destined to be unwaged so as to reinforce the common assumption that care work is not work and therefore women do not need to struggle against it (Federici, 2012).

An extensive debate on reproductive labour was firstly brought up by the International Feminist Collective (IFC) who initiated the campaign "Wages for Housework", an internationalist campaign that emerged in 1972 with alliances across Italy, Canada, America, the UK and more. The campaign called for recognition of the invisible unpaid labour in the home and demanded remuneration to make such hidden work visible. They exposed the double burden women shoulder and argued that the unvalued work that women were and are still doing in the home is vital to reproducing and sustaining capitalism (Toupin, 2018).

Since the 1970s several forms of the organisation of reproductive labour have changed. Many women entered the labour market and some reproductive activities, such as house cleaning, cooking, child care and care of the elderly have been organised to a larger degree through paid labour. Specifically, since the 1990s caring labour such as cleaning or childcare and eldercare have been often carried out by women migrant workers from Eastern Europe or the Global South. These women are leaving their own families to travel to more developed countries to care for the children of other families and hire other poorer women in their countries of origin to care for their children. They often work in the informal economy, are underpaid and do not have access to social protection. The shift of this care labour is met by the term *global care chain* coined by feminist labour scholar Arlie Hochschild (Nadasen, 2017).

Despite the changes, research has shown that women still shoulder the burden of care labour. Especially since the financial and economic crisis of 2008 when austerity policies hit public sector and caring activities relying on the provision of unpaid work, the double burden women shoulder has worsened. The Coronavirus disease of 2019 has made this more visible and has generated discussions on the care and social reproduction crisis. According to recent surveys, more than three quarters (76.4%) of unpaid domestic care work worldwide is done by women, while only 23.6% is done by men. In developed countries, the women's share is somewhat lower (65%), while in developing and emerging economies, women perform 80.2% of unpaid care labour (FreeNetwork, 2021). Oxfam has also calculated that women and girls worldwide perform 12.5 billion hours of unpaid labour every day. This work adds \$10.8 trillion to the economy every year (Coffey C. et al, 2020).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, research shows that worldwide, mothers (but not fathers) experience income loss when they have children. The lack of affordable childcare is often a reason why mothers, especially of young children, are not engaged in paid employment or work part time. Moreover, women with caring responsibilities are often employed informally or in self-employment and are therefore less likely to be able to pay into social security or are deterred from taking jobs that require long or irregular hours (Dowling, 2021).

The burden of being a mother and care provider is also addressed in Fotini Kalle's *Domestic Performance for One Visitor* in 2020. The performance was realised for the camera at her apartment in Thessaloniki with no viewers. The artist sat in front of a dining table filled with leftover food, objects such as baby and children's toys and books, baby bottles, plates,

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> See also Wiggins Brandon, February 20, 2020. "Women and Girls Contribute Trillions of Dollars in Unpaid Labour Every Year", *Global Citizen*, <a href="https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/women-and-girls-contribute-trillions-of-dollars-in/">https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/women-and-girls-contribute-trillions-of-dollars-in/</a> [accessed 4/12/2022].

spoons, books on motherhood and anything else that has been placed on it during the day. Starting with the edible materials and gradually passing on the rest, food and objects were incorporated into her head and chest with the help of adhesive tape. This went on until the table was empty and everything was attached to her head and upper body, creating a new portrait of herself. Her whole face, head, chest, belly and hands were fully covered with the objects of her new everyday life.





Figure 4,5: Fotini Kalle, Domestic Performance, Thessaloniki, 2020 (Courtesy of the artist)

As the artist explains, her day as a mother of a toddler and a baby seemed condensed at this table: "All the activities taking place during the day passed over this table and stayed on it until dark. Every day would start and finish there. I'd keep spreading things over it, and before I could pick something up, something else would be laid on it. The body of the table as my own body was constantly loaded and absorbed the actions and tensions of the daily time until everything was quiet. Then it could be cleaned so that it is ready to get refilled the next day. A continuous loop and a continuous addition on a table-body that must bear everything patiently no matter how demanding its occupants are". The artist's body becomes an extension of this table and of this new life whereas whatever knowledge she has acquired in the past, degrees, artistic work, participations and initiatives, everything fades, almost disappears to turn into baby food, jars and toys. A

The long period of self-confinement and social isolation, that people have experienced because of the Coronavirus disease, is a common condition for many women that experience motherhood. Being a mother is often an exhausting process that involves endurance, alertness, repetition and endless patience, an ability strongly associated with female subjects, as discussed in the next section. The physical, mental and emotional abilities required in biological and social reproduction are considered to be in the feminine nature and are usually attributed to women's maternal instincts instead of being considered valuable skills.

## 3. Patience and the Production of Gendered Subjectivity

In 2012 Angeliki Avgitidou realised her performance *Patience* in a room of her apartment while it was transmitted live for the 4rth Biennale of Chile. The artist repeatedly and patiently folded and unfolded a piece of cloth for several minutes while uttering the word "patience" in different voices, tones, moods and volume.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Fotini Kalle, communication with the author, Thessaloniki, Greece (20/2/2021).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Ibid





Figure 6,7: Angeliki Avgitidou, Patience, 2012, Thessaloniki (Greece) online streaming for 4rth Biennale of Chile (Courtesy of the artist)

According to the definition by Cambridge dictionary (2022) patience is "the ability to wait, or to continue doing something despite difficulties, or to suffer without complaining or becoming annoyed". Having patience is considered a virtue, which is disproportionately expected by women. As Avgitidou (2012) notes in relation to her performance: "Patience is what is asked of us. Patience contains a promise. This promise is for a long anticipated change. Patience includes a prolonging of waiting. Patience contains endurance. Patience is connected with suffering but also sympathy and acknowledgment of the other. Stereotypically associated with women, patience is present in women's efforts, lament and predicaments. In this performance the different voices of Patience, internal and external, will be heard. Voices will overlap, compete, be silent and submit. Which voice is mine? What am I being patient for?". The virtues attributed to women have been feminised and are thought to derive from their feminine and maternal nature while in effect they are cultivated in women from the moment they are born so that they carry the care burden without struggling against it.

It is well known that religious rules and institutions, foster the patriarchal character of social relations (Stepaniants, 1992). The traditional image of women has been that of the wife and mother who passively and good-naturedly endures, with patience, all of the problems that she and her family face, who does not question her traditional role and constantly offers her help and care to the other members of the family and, especially, to her children, to whom she ought to be utterly devoted, without asking for anything in return. In Greek society, in which the Church is identified with the nation, the aforementioned characteristics of a woman's identity are considered as part of her nature; thus, when women diverge from this specific model, they may be considered as being deviant (Papageorgiou, 2008).

Fifty years ago, in her performance *Waiting* (1972), Faith Wilding addressed the same issues concerning the concept of patience, which is inextricably associated with waiting; therefore, women are required and expected to wait patiently for something or someone throughout their lives. Wilding sat, passively, with her hands in her lap and rocked back and forth as she listed examples of the endless waiting involved in a woman's life. In a fifteen-minute monologue, performed as part of the programme at the Womanhouse project in Los Angeles, Wilding emphasised the monotonous, repetitive cycle of waiting for life to begin that women experience while serving the lives of others: waiting to be beautiful, to be loved, to get married, to have a baby, to raise children, to be beautiful again and for something to happen

(Warr and Jones, 2002, Goldberg, 2004).<sup>5</sup> The fact that Wilding was invited to re-enact *Waiting* in 2007 and 2009 indicated the need for such issues to be addressed again, even after so many years.<sup>6</sup>

Patience is a notion that has been examined in political thought and philosophy as well. Promises of improvement and social change are always accompanied in political rhetoric by reminders of the importance of patience, especially in periods of financial and economic crisis. Patience is not only associated with waiting but also with tolerance. As philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2009) has noted, many problems today are perceived as problems of intolerance, rather than as problems of inequality, exploitation and injustice: "Why is the proposed remedy tolerance, rather than emancipation, political struggle, even armed struggle?", he asks. The immediate answer lies, according to the philosopher, "in the liberal multiculturalist's basic ideological operation: the 'culturalisation of politics'. Political differences—differences conditioned by political inequality or economic exploitation—are naturalised and neutralised into 'cultural' differences, that is into different 'ways of life' which are something given, something that cannot be overcome. They can only be tolerated" (Zizek, 2009, 119). Tolerance is used as a "post-political ersatz" because of "the failure of direct political solutions such as the Welfare State or various socialist projects" (Zizek, 2009, 119). Gender differences based on stereotypes and constructed roles, are also naturalised so that gender inequalities and women's exploitation can be sustained.

On the other hand, patience and passivity, when framed differently and within a broader context, could also be viewed as reactive and capable of functioning in a critical manner. As Wilding has noted, when she was asked to re-enact *Waiting* she decided instead to re-envision the piece and focus on a more positive reading of the potential of waiting as a "non-violent action, as a possibility of identification with activists who have staged waiting demonstrations as political actions" (Jones, 2012, 254). As she explained "I'm trying to investigate ideas about positive uses of passivity, of refusal to act or produce" (Jones, 2012, 254). She titled the reenactment *Wait-With* and approached waiting as an act of resistance, reflection and refusal.<sup>7</sup>

Passivity has also been considered as a form of resistance in philosophy. Philosopher Alain Badiou (2004, 119) argues that "[i]t is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognises as existent". Likewise, for Žižek (2009, 183) it is "better to do nothing than to engage in localised acts

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Womanhouse was an art space and Feminist Art Programme in California oragnised by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro in Los Angeles in 1972. It was one of the most important sites for the making and theorising of feminist art. "The goal of the program was to help young women realise their ambitions as artists without having to excise evidence of their gender from their work, something Judy Chicago had been forced to do in order to succeed as an artist in the male-centered L.A. art scene". See Womanhouse Website, <a href="https://www.womanhouse2022.com/">https://www.womanhouse2022.com/</a> [accessed 15/12/2022].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Wilding was invited to redo *Waiting* for the exhibition *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2007. See Amelia Jones. 2012. "Faith Wilding, Waiting and Wait-With" in Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (eds), *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (University of Chicago Press and Intellect), 253-258. In 2009 she re-enacted again the piece for the conference on feminist performance art of the 1960s and 1970s organised by re.act.feminism. See <a href="http://www.reactfeminism.org/nr1/konferenz\_en.html">http://www.reactfeminism.org/nr1/konferenz\_en.html</a> [accessed 17/4/2022]. Wilding's poem *Waiting* can also be found online, <a href="http://faithwilding.refugia.net/waitingpoem.pdf">http://faithwilding.refugia.net/waitingpoem.pdf</a> [accessed 15/4/2022].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> For further information see *Re.Act.Feminism*, https://www.reactfeminism.org/nr1/artists/wilding\_en.html#wilding\_faccessed 15/11/2022].

whose ultimate function is to make the system run smoother (acts like providing the space for the multitude of new subjectivities, etc.) The threat today is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to 'be active', to 'participate', to mask the Nothingness of what goes on. People intervene all the time, 'do something', academics participate in meaningless 'debates', etc., and the truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw from it. Those in power often prefer even a 'critical' participation, a dialogue, to silence—just to engage us in a 'dialogue', to make it sure our ominous passivity is broken'.

In 2015, Fotini Kalle in her performance *Reproduction*, presented during the Athens Biennale, addressed issues around reproduction and the production of subjectivity. In a video projection during the performance a child was building a wooden tower; meanwhile, the artist placed pieces of carbon on a table. She took her clothes off, covered her eyes with a piece of tile and started breaking the pieces of carbon with a hammer. While the child built, the artist destroyed. Kalle then used the dust from the carbon to cover her face and body. According to the artist, the juxtaposition of the two events, creation and destruction, underlined the contradiction between reproduction, a natural process that encompasses life, and social reproduction, which involves death: "the death of ideas, thinking and existence".<sup>8</sup>





Figures 6,7: Fotini Kalle, "Reproduction", 5th Athens Biennale, 2015 (Courtesy of the artist)

As Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Frazer (2019) explain in the *Feminism for the 99% A Manifesto*, although the labour of people-making is not only vital but also extremely complex, not only is it undervalued but it is also treated as a mere means to the making of profit. As explained earlier, the activity of people-making not only creates and sustains life in the biological sense but also our capacity to work, namely our labour power. "That means fashioning people with the 'right' attitudes, dispositions, and values-abilities, competences, and skills" appropriate and essential for capitalist production (Arruzza et al., 2019, 21). Working class mothers and schools are expected to prepare their kids for lives as proper workers, namely obedient, submissive to bosses, and willing to accept their exploitation (Arruzza et al., 2019). Likewise, women are prepared with the "right" abilities and attitudes, such as to be patient and caring. In fact, as it has been discussed earlier, women are very often given specific instructions on how to live and behave. What Kalle juxtaposes in this performance is the life-making condition of biological reproduction and the vital but also destructive condition of social reproduction and production of subjectivity.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Fotini Kalle, communication with the author, Thessaloniki, Greece (16/1/2017).

## 4. Conclusions

To return to the issue of care and conclude, this paper examined the ways "care" and "patience" intersect at the feminisation of reproductive labour and the production of gendered subjectivity through performative works of art. As has been demonstrated, the reproductive role and labour of women encompasses the care and maintenance of the existing and future workforce of the family. The Coronavirus crisis has made evident that care and life-making work are the essential work of society. However, care and domestic labour remains unpaid and invisible in the home and undervalued and underpaid in waged labour. Currently, no country in the world seems to have achieved gender equality with regard to the unpaid care distribution in households (FreeNetwork, 2021). Greece, with 53.4 out of 100 points, ranks last in the European Union on the Gender Equality Index having 50,9 points in care activities. Specifically, 85% of women and only 16% of men are involved in cooking and/or household outside paid work every day while 38% of women and 20% of men are involved in caring activities such as care for children, grandchildren, elderly and people with disabilities (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021). It is therefore urgent to bring in discussion women's oppression hidden behind patriarchal love. Art history and theory can contribute to this direction. Even though several Greek women artists have addressed such issues through their work, the discussions on social reproduction theory remain scant in Greece. This has to do with the lack of a feminist art history in Greece. My aim has therefore been to contribute to a discussion on the feminisation of care labour and bring in light performances of Greek women artists who have negotiated such issues in their work.

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