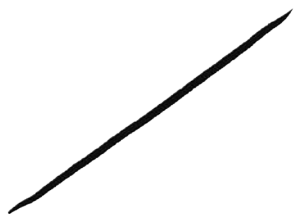


FREEING THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE.

FROM CARE WORK TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH TO CREATIVE WORK AND ART MEDIATION

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Abstract: The current historical time is characterized by many crises that are deeply affecting bodies and their politics, amongst which feminist movements have highlighted an urgent “crisis of care”. This paper discusses how this crisis permeates all realms, affecting the art world as well, and suggests that a historical perspective on the intersections between care work and creative work in the context of body politics can provide efficient investigative tools to address specific contemporary art field-related labor issues. The role and number of intermediaries involved in the process of artistic and cultural production tend to be all the more invisible, unrecognized, and exploited as the art world becomes an increasingly important and complex economic market. Under capitalist relations of production, the work of many is deemed economically unproductive although it is essential in sustaining the economy as such. This is an important, urgent, and growing cultural debate, which needs expanding within interdisciplinary research fields, as this paper suggests and demonstrates.

Keywords: contemporary art, body politics, art sociology, labor, care work, mediation, invisibility.

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Introduction: Relevance of body politics today

The issues around body politics are more urgent today than ever, making them a topic of utmost concern for the field of contemporary cultural production and debate, as well as other areas of research.

The current global political climate and the rise of the radical right parties in far too many countries—including various European ones—underlines this renewed relevance and urgency for discourse around body politics in contemporary society. A striking example is the tragic regression in terms of sexual and reproductive rights: despite decades of legislative advancements and liberalizations in many countries, there have been many cases lately where things have dramatically regressed or are at significant risk of regression in the near future—an exemplary and historical case in point was last year’s overturning of the 50-year-old landmark *Roe v. Wade* ruling, ending the constitutional right to abortion in the US in 2022. Militant feminist scholar Silvia Federici has repeatedly pointed to how policies criminalizing abortion and laws restricting reproductive rights and (especially female) bodily autonomy could be “decoded as devices for the regulation of the labor supply” (2012) within capitalist society: the simultaneous invisibilization, extraction, and exploitation of women’s reproductive labor.

The theme of reproductive labor—more broadly referred to as care work—also seems to have been strongly called into question in the most recent

times, first by a pandemic highlighting an unparalleled global health and “care crisis,” and then also by the horrors of Russia’s war against Ukraine, which fueled displacement, new migration flows, and fed the so-called “global care chain” (Feder Kittay, 2009; Geymonat and Marchetti, 2019, pp. 124–125)—those gears of invisible care work performed by migrant people, more often women, separated from their families to be employed in cooking, cleaning, assisting, and caring for the families of others. The choreography of global migration flows that draws this complex system of interrelationships also raises the question of movement and the organization of this movement, which has become central to contemporary public discourse in terms of the politics of mobility. We have witnessed and continue to witness harsh biopolitical re-definitions in the management, allocation, and control over bodies: decisions regarding who is able or authorized to move, under what circumstances, and on what basis; defining which bodies can choose full mobility and which bodies are *forced* to move (Caleo, 2021a).

All of these issues and many more current ones represent the critical climate and geo-political framework in which we all operate, as cultural workers and producers, and they should drive the urgent choice to develop more in-depth and interdisciplinary reflections on body politics. Precisely in these contexts of crisis and weakening of social and relational ties, new struggles have emerged and keep emerging often from those same conditions of extreme precariousness and invisibility (Caleo, 2022), and they deserve careful consideration and analyses. This acknowledgment gave rise to the majority of the avenues of investigation traced and explored in this piece. Even the art world—and even more so—needs to critically ask these questions, which we can start addressing from the words of Françoise Vergès: “Qui nettoie le monde?” (Who cleans the world?) (2020).

Research methods: finding the significance of the intersection between care work and creative work

The most recent geo-political events and crises have altered the status of many things, including the status of relationships, the status of freedom of movement, and responsibility, bringing to light what feminist movements refer to as a care crisis.

Care work has been made transparent (Feder Kittay, 1999) and invisible, often through the process of “naturalization” (Federici, 2012)—considering how the entire workforce was socialized to internalize the duty of care as a “mere deposit of unlimited resources to be exploited” (Fragnito, 2022, p. 77)—and through confinement to the private domestic sphere. Not only has domestic work been imposed mostly on women, but it has also been transformed into a natural attribute of the female body and personality, into an inner need, an aspiration,

supposedly emerging from the innermost female nature (Federici, 1975). From the beginning of capitalist projects this type of labor—reproductive work—was meant to go unpaid. Capital had to create the illusion that it was a natural, inevitable, and even rewarding activity to make women accept this unpaid work (Federici, 1975). Even outside of the domestic space, and in all contexts where care work is—intrinsically—necessary and therefore vastly present, through the same logic it has been delegitimized, time and again made precarious, unpaid, sexualized, and racialized. The current care crisis has at best contributed to finally making these types of work and mechanisms somewhat visible: giving visibility to the critical capitalist contradiction of the coexistence between the centrality of care labor and its “lack of recognition by the neoliberal device” (Baravalle et al., 2022, p. 15).

By grasping and elaborating on the production/reproduction nexus, in recognition of the material and economic dimensions of affective, care, relational, and properly reproductive work, one could link the idea of the paradox of a “reproductive” work that does not actually (re)produce to artistic work—thus collapsing the classical dichotomies on which the very definition of “work” is based (Caleo, 2021a, p. 69). In fact, the boundaries separating materiality from non-materiality, work from life, and creation from production have constitutively become imperceptible in artistic work (Kunst, 2015, p. 135). How can we, in fact, distinguish between those moments when we produce during working hours and under contract, as it were, and those when we think, imagine, dream, investigate, research, elaborate or “only” live (Caleo, 2021a, p. 76)? If creating doesn’t always or necessarily entail production, is then everything that the artist does, anytime and everywhere, art? Can the things that artists do outside of their professional time be termed art at all? Is it physically possible to work outside of one’s professional time?

If one were then to interpret these blurred boundaries as a kind of “naturalization” of artistic work, which would thus perfectly adhere to life, and also take into account the high level of precariousness that the majority of the artistic, creative, and cultural workforce experiences, it would perhaps be possible to glimpse some points of contact with issues surrounding domestic and care work. With the interpretative tools on domestic work and social reproduction we have inherited from theorists and feminists such as Silvia Federici, bell hooks, or Françoise Vergès, we could investigate the asymmetries, hegemonic and power relations that proliferate within the art world—approaching them through the lens of love, natural inclination or aspiration, as already argued by Federici (1975). Care and affective, relational, and social reproduction, activities traditionally carried out by women, have been naturalized and interpreted as

a freely available resource also and precisely due to the blurred border between love and care (notably care work is often defined as “love’s labor” [Feder Kittay, 1999]). Arguably, not only the lack of boundary between life and work, but also the passion and keenness (love) for one’s activity can be similarly transformed into a trap in the context of creative work, leading to a proliferation of ever new and elusive forms of (self-)exploitation (Caleo, 2021b, pp. 149–150). Ultimately, the disappearance of the distinction between work time and private time is one of the founding characteristics of contemporary creative work at the core of the new spirit of capitalism (Kunst, 2015). Feminist artists have frequently taken an interest in the work-life distinction, as, due to the nature of their activity, they have paid special attention to the difference between professional, care, and motherhood-related work, or public social work and private household work (Kunst, 2015, p. 147). We must therefore think of the art sector as a place to experiment with and expand research to create unforeseen, non-corporate, non-sectoral alliances between care work and precarious cultural and creative work—both of which are considered unproductive activities (as in lacking an end-product)—perhaps also taking our cue from the more recent perspectives offered by queer temporalities, which question and interrupt reproductive and productive timeframes (Caleo, 2021a).

Continuing to explore the possible points of contact between creative work and care work, another useful strategy for reconfiguring art institutions is not to think of them as separate, impenetrable, professionalized, exceptional spaces: art is not an “innocent field,” and the idea that contexts of art production and fruition are immune to dynamics of power, exploitation, violence, sexism, racialization, and invisibilization is a serious oversight, resulting from the idea of a supposedly exceptional status of artistic and creative work (Baravalle et al., 2022; Caleo, 2021a). “Art is not a world apart, it needs de-romanticizing and depatriarchalizing” (Caleo, 2022, p. 65).

(In)conclusions

Going back to the question that Françoise Vergès (2020) helped us to formulate, it is urgent to question who cleans the world, including the art world.

Care work has often been made transparent and invisible in all institutional spaces, those of art and culture included: it is the work of an “army” of marginalized, racialized, poor, often immigrant, underpaid, or exploited subjectivities—mostly women—recruited to clean and maintain the spaces we use, visit, in which we operate. Furthermore, their work is so devalued that it is considered to be *unskilled* (Vergès, 2019, p. 1). Their working bodies are made invisible even though they perform a necessary function for society and infrastructures: to clean, prepare,

install, and supervise the spaces in which the “clean” (considered skilled and cultured) ones walk, eat, drink, work, capitalize, curate, create, exhibit, write, photograph, and so on. The work of these millions of tired, exhausted, invisible bodies is indispensable for the functioning of any society, and, as Vergès (2019) tells us, “must remain invisible” (p. 3). The materiality of the invisible work that takes place in the crevices, passageways, utility spaces, between the folds, hidden, precarious, and poorly paid must instead push us to further question and make visible the relationships between care work and cultural work and to rethink them also through the political lens of care that feminists have made available to us.

Artistic institutions still tend to consider themselves progressive, yet too many of them are only able to survive or thrive due to the exploitation of flexible and unremunerated work: this “system of co-dependence” (Caleo, 2021a, p. 65) is formulated as a ceaseless repetition of short-term assignments, temporary residencies and extensions of endless education, unpaid internships, and precarious zero-hour contracts, with institutions benefiting from structural “artsploitation” (Szreder, 2022, p. 45; Kunst, 2015). Furthermore, this free, precarious, barely paid, and flexible labor often knows no distinction between free time and working time—a mechanism at the center of the capitalist processes of exploitation (Kunst, 2015).

It is therefore urgent to move beyond the obsolete belief in the exceptional nature of artistic work and finally formulate a critique of the political economy of art and of what we would call extractivist modern capitalism, by addressing the fragmentary galaxy of art and cultural work (Baravalle et al., 2022). The field is in all actuality far from pure or ideal. Cultural work as a whole is highly fragmented, with individuals’ incomes often resulting from a set of quite composite economies: from the “relentless grind of freelancing” (Szreder, 2022, p. 41) to bartending or working as a trainer in different fields (e.g., workshops), but also as a technician, DJ, rider, janitor, babysitter, or working in clubs and the nightlife economies, and also tutoring, translating, writing on its own or combined with different research jobs (Caleo, 2022). The norm is to make ends meet through a composition of precarious jobs, that “even if put together, do not make a whole” (Caleo, 2022, p. 64), while only a few—due to fortunate circumstances or class privilege—can devote themselves entirely to cultural work and earn a living from it (Caleo, 2022). In order to make it or simply survive in the ultra-competitive artistic field most people need to commit to long years of unpaid or underpaid activities: this is the vicious cycle of the “projectariat” (a particular wording that refers to the project-based nature of jobs, dominant within contemporary cultural production, but also to *proletariat* and *precariat*, see Szreder, 2022), a chain of circumstances shared with other segments of the precarious workforce.

If we wish to delve deeper into the topical closeness of art and capitalism, we therefore need to focus on the (in)visibility—beginning with these concealed activities and professional profiles—as it constitutes an important characteristic of today’s artistic/creative/cultural work (Kunst, 2015). It may be fruitful to consider two metaphors or images used to visualize and describe the forces at play within the cultural field, unveiling the hierarchies of earnings, success, and prestige, as well as the mechanisms of exploitation that keep them in place. Inspired by feminist economic geographers Gibson-Graham’s representation of the economy as an iceberg, artist Kathrin Böhm and curator Kuba Szreder—in their effort to map and reimagine economic systems—elaborated the short visual essay *Icebergian Economies of Contemporary Art* (Böhm and Szreder, 2020), depicting the art world work ecology as having a similar architecture to that of an iceberg: a small and highly visible group of individuals and institutions dominating a vast, invisible social mass of art producers (Szreder, 2022). This invisible mass of ghost bodies, the artistic producers—metaphorically termed “artistic dark matter” by activist artist and writer Gregory Sholette to denote the “shadowy realm of artistic labor that sustains the social gravity of the artistic universe” (Böhm and Szreder, 2020, p. 10)—even though they perform indispensable labor for the reproduction of the entire structure, it remains essentially unseen, is undervalued, and therefore easily exploited (Szreder, 2022).

The labor of the artistic multitudes, that is the less prestigious subsection of the industry—art students, amateur and professional emerging artists, outsider artists, art handlers, assistants, facilitators, mediators, curators, educators, and so on—is indispensable for the artistic universe to function. The sociology of art reminds us that without all these people there would be no “works of art”: their effort is essential to the very existence of these works and to the creation of the social value of art (Heinich, 2016). And yet their (our) role is deliberately negated by the hegemonic ideology that keeps presenting success in the arts as strictly derivative of individual talent, effort, or merit, and not as a result of complex intersectional and multi-layered structures of exploitation and privilege (Szreder, 2022). This relationship between the forced invisibility of various forms of labor and their economic undervaluation bears undeniable similarities with the status of the care labor, which once again, under capitalist relations of production, is deemed economically unproductive while remaining essential to sustaining the economy as we know it (Federici, 2012; Szreder, 2022).

Having said that, the portrayal of the exploitative and self-exploitative nature of project work and of how cultural capital rarely translates into its monetary equivalent is both accurate and poignant, yet it does not adequately address the issue of class privilege (Fokianaki, 2022). Geopolitics, as well as class,

play a role here, since in certain parts of the world grants and infrastructures help democratize entry into the “projectariat.” Beyond the established centers, art markets are nearly non-existent, and institutional or academic positions are a rarity. Once again the feminist lessons on care labor warn us about the intersections with racism and racialization and invite a broader, more complex, conscious problematization pointing to decolonization.

Case studies: recent debate on the Italian scene

The debate within the art world—and especially its radical fringes and transfeminist subcultures—is open and alive, providing a new possibility of change. The importance of the artist’s worker dimension is gaining ground (Baravalle, Braga and Riccio, 2022; Kunst, 2015), along with a growing awareness of the class dimension of art work, but also of the crucial role art and culture play in shaping the whole of the labor market. We are witnessing various experiments in radical pedagogy and practices based on decolonizing, attempts at post-capitalist cooperation, care, and self-management.

Within the Italian and European contexts, performer, activist, and researcher Ilenia Caleo has been reflecting and writing on the relationship between care, queer commoning, and the possibility of re-making institutions with a corporeality approach. This can be achieved by starting to speak of income and material conditions in an embodied way, namely focusing on the presence of bodies and movements of art workers that have generated experiments in cultural squatting such as in Teatro Valle in Rome, Asilo Filangieri in Naples and Macao in Milan. In a kindred way, the German contribution to this year’s Venice Architecture Biennale *Open for Maintenance* focused on an approach to care, repair, and maintenance based on the occupation and squatting of the German Pavilion itself. Again, in the context of the Venice Biennale, another interesting and generative approach was the one adopted to conceptualize and structure the mediation program within the Romanian Pavilion at the 59th Biennale, hosting artist Adina Pintilie’s work *You Are Another Me—A Cathedral of the Body*, an audio-visual installation and performative-discursive public program on the poetics and politics of intimacy and the body. Reflecting the artist’s research around bodies, intimacy, empathy, and sexuality, the awareness that bodies are always political informed the mediation program, thus creating a continuum between the artist’s, curators’, and mediators’ roles. In an attempt to queer the traditional and conservative role of exhibition custodian, the invitation was to do the opposite of blending into the background, making instead the mediation personal, affective, involved, and political.

Regarding other, more policy-oriented, initiatives, it is worth mentioning the autonomous organization Art Workers Italia which was created in 2020 with the aim of giving voice and rights to contemporary art workers in Italy. Moreover, confronted with the generalized precariousness of artistic work, many art workers—through various experimentations of post-capitalist artistic practices as proposed by the Institute of Radical Imagination—are responding by positioning themselves for a Universal Basic Income (UBI) to combat “structural inequalities inherent to networked societies” (Baravalle et al., 2022). This is arguably a claim inherited from the historical experiences of feminist protests demanding a wage for domestic labor (e.g., the Wages for Housework campaign led by Silvia Federici).

How to read (with) ghost bodies

Overseas, a fertile example derived from a simple proposition yet radical in and of itself—readily implementable in institutions—has been the Reading Room experience led by curator Laura McLean-Ferris at the Swiss Institute in New York.

In response to the general sort of screening off from the curatorial discourse, which makes it a very privileged dialogue, existing within cultural and art institutions, a reading group was organized, open to *everyone* working at the Swiss Institute, regardless of their job title. The project was launched by McLean-Ferris when working on Cally Spooner’s exhibition *SWEAT SHAME ETC.*, in response to the artist’s will to create a sort of school—on the model of her existing itinerant pedagogical and performative project *OFFSHORE*—to be open and active during the exhibition period. The idea was then to create a context and modality for a different type of conversation within the institution’s team and create a horizontal space and time for co-thinking, sharing thoughts, and learning together, thus opening up the curatorial discourse to *ghostified* presences, team members normally kept away from these privileged, “cultured” positions. It is an interesting example of the relationship between power and hospitality, and how the latter can be used to challenge dominant power structures. Hospitality can be a means of resistance, enabling the creation of spaces of welcome and belonging that challenge the exclusionary practices of mainstream culture and open up generative frameworks of possibilities for thought and action. With this simple act of self-caring hospitality and queering of the sectoral and institutional hierarchies, a freer and more fertile space was created for addressing the extremely opportune question proposed by the artist: “How might we tell the difference between what is alive and what is dead in the machinery that is advanced techno-capitalism and neoliberalism?”

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