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Blurred Lines: Negotiating the In/Visibility of Maintenance in Feminist Art

Visibility has been a key battleground for social movements such as feminism since the 1970s. In a socioeconomic landscape where the value and purpose of visibility vary according to gender, class, and race, it becomes even more urgent to critically investigate the mechanisms that organise it. By drawing from feminist and postcolonial theories, the article examines the negotiation of visibility in the artworks of Daniela Ortiz, Mayo Pimentel, and Liryc Dela Cruz. Through their work, these artists provide valuable insights into the aesthetic and political implications of in/visibility, particularly in relation to maintenance work, identified as a domain where these contradictions are most pronounced.

Keywords: feminist art; visibility/invisibility; maintenance work; opacity; politics of representation

A young girl writes with a black marker on a paper board. Above her stands the statement ‘Trabajamos para visibilizar la precariedad de los trabajos del cuidado y el hogar en el centro del poder de la Union Europea. Ahora es el momento’ (We work to make visible the precariousness of care and domestic labour, placing it at the centre of power in the European Union. Now is the time), and over that an invitation to join their ‘rebeldía’ (rebellion). This is the opening scene of the documentary *Territorio Doméstico: Politizando los delantales, las ollas y las calles*, realised by filmmaker Mayo Pimentel in 2019 in collaboration with the homonymous group.¹ Territorio Doméstico is an autonomous organisation that consists primarily of women working in the care and domestic sector, with a significant percentage of members coming from migrant

backgrounds. Combining feminist, labour, and anti-racist demands with a critical assessment of caregiving’s social infrastructure, the group advocates for a more equitable restructuring of care work, in society and across domestic and market realms. The documentary, which integrates archive materials spanning from 2011 to 2019 and footage captured by the artist, tells the story of the collective’s founding 15 years ago, as well as their organisational strategy and the various tactics used in their political mobilisation. Following this first symbolic frame, the camera cuts to a corridor where the activists are rehearsing a choir in the privacy of their ‘headquarters’, before leaving for a demonstration, which is then shown at the end of the documentary. The activists are all dressed in black and disguised with coloured wigs and spectacles; each carries a dustbin lid and a toilet brush tightly in their belt. These two clips effectively encapsulate the two sides of visibility discussed in this article. On the one hand, there is the demand for the acknowledgment of care as a productive and extractivist activity; on the other, there is the negotiation of the activists’ exposure in the public sphere. The

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two positions embody a series of contradictions and tensions that engage the author, the subjects represented, and the viewer.

The notion of visibility encompasses a number of issues and articulations, interconnected with material, social, and cultural claims. Due to the term's inherent complexity and layered meanings, I have chosen to refrain from endorsing a singular definition and instead consider throughout the text possible meanings and instances related to the concept. Furthermore, visibility has historically been a key site of struggle and negotiation for different movements and individuals. Since the 1970s, feminist politics has been significantly concerned with the issue of visibility, both in terms of systematic deconstruction of the patriarchal imaginary to reclaim women's bodily and sexual autonomy, and in relation to the representation of reproductive work as a means of economic and political legitimacy.² These initiatives have been underpinned by a variety of approaches, all coordinated with the underlying objective of securing heightened political engagement and equality. This has resulted in a significant legacy of practices and methods that still inform feminist artists and activists today. The article therefore examines the topic of visibility in relation to the field of maintenance work, which is identified as a site where the limitations and ambiguities of the emancipatory interpretation of visibility become more apparent. Although conventionally described as invisible, workers employed in maintenance-related fields are subject to various modes of selective visibility. They often find themselves operating in conditions of utmost exposure, while concurrently passing unnoticed due to class, gender, and race mechanisms that regulate social visual hierarchies.

It is important to note that the actions I consider in the article take place in a significantly altered economic context. I have previously discussed the extractivist nature of visibility in neoliberal (art) production; however, in the current digital media economy, visibility has become even more

transactional, opening up multiple avenues and options for self-exposure as well as consumption of the other.³ In this context, continuing to assert that visibility has an intrinsically liberating and emancipatory function obscures how it actually reflects and reproduces dominant forms of exclusion and social organisation.

Alongside Pimentel's documentary, to which I shall return later, I also analyse the representation of maintenance in the artworks of Daniela Ortiz and Liryc Dela Cruz. Drawing on the dense political and visual history surrounding the issue, the objective is to scrutinise the evolving nature of this representation and discuss how artists experiment with forms of opacity and invisibility to navigate today's hyper-visible society. By analysing artworks that engage with the act of cleaning as a key exemplifier of reproductive work, I intend to focus on the socio-economic and technological structures that mediate the gesture itself. Therefore, the emphasis on opacity does not aim to idealise it, but rather to expose and challenge the mechanisms of control and the societal structures that govern visibility. By critically analysing various strategic uses of invisibility, this article intends to explore the political possibilities and constraints inherent in such endeavours at the intersection of visual arts and social advocacy.

Prior to delving into the case studies, the article begins with an overview of the cultural and political context in which the demands for recognition of reproductive labour arose. I also discuss the different forms of representation of care and cleaning work undertaken in the feminist artistic production of the early 1970s, highlighting different techniques and approaches. By considering the intersections between the potential of remaining unmarked and the right to opacity, proposed respectively by Peggy Phelan and Édouard Glissant, and the refusal of assimilation advocated by second-wave Italian feminism of difference, I intend to explore the possibility of rethinking the idea and con-

straints of visibility as a tool of social advocacy in the visual arts.

Being Visible Our Way or the Struggles over Reproductive Labour in Second-Wave Feminist Art and Politics

The quest for visibility does not only concern the possibility of being seen but also the methods that regulate this visibility and the system of power in which it is inscribed. Those who wield the power of representation determine which qualities and values are emphasised and what messages are transmitted, while also establishing economic and political hierarchies. As art historian Griselda Pollock brilliantly articulated, practices of representation 'are no mirrors of the world, merely reflecting their sources',⁴ but rather systems of signification that define the positions from which these images and symbols are consumed and produced. These ideological frameworks thus influence and shape social processes and demands, along with the ways individuals engage within them.

As noted by Nancy Fraser, the growing emphasis on visibility as representation has produced a substantial shift from labour-centred demands to matters concerning identity, subordinating social struggles to cultural struggles and sidelining politics of redistribution in favour of politics of recognition.⁵ The issue is also addressed by Angela Dimitrakaki, who argues that the association between representation and identity politics poses a substantial obstacle to feminist politics, as it frequently results in tokenism and the endorsement of an exploitative and unjust system.⁶ For Dimitrakaki, it would be necessary to forsake the domain of representation as the primary site of politics so as to fully grasp the complexity of contemporary processes of subjectivation.⁷ Operating in the domain of visual culture, Johanna Schaffer also critically engages with the tension between visibility and

recognition and advocates for a re-politicization of visibility as a field of transdisciplinary analysis and action.⁸ Schaffer conducts a comprehensive examination of representation strategies, highlighting the power dynamics embedded within images and their role in shaping knowledge formation processes. Following extant academic discourse, struggles over visibility should be understood as struggles for political subjectivation that extend beyond the image-object to act on methods of image production and consumption, rethinking the structures and strategies for generating, activating, and navigating the dynamic between the object, the subject, and the viewer.

Within the scope of this article, my focus lies on a specific form of feminist artistic production that depicted the daily lives of women (mainly working-class) inside and outside the domestic space to address issues concerning reproductive labour.⁹ The recognition of housework as exploited work was a key concern for Marxist feminists, such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, Silvia Federici, and Leopoldina Fortunati, who identified in the gendered division of labour the foundation of industrial capitalist development and its social organisation. The International Wages for Housework Campaign, which ran from 1972 to 1977, was one of the most significant experiences in this regard, promoting a transnational network of militant feminist groups whose goal was to reassert women's economic function and their potential as revolutionary subjects.¹⁰ It is crucial to note that the quest for compensation was not an effort to assimilate women into the workforce nor to reaffirm the naturalisation of the caring role imposed on women by the capitalist patriarchal society; rather, it was part of a larger struggle against the capitalist system and for a more equal reconfiguration of social and production relations.¹¹ The wage demand had the objective of making visible a type of employment that often took place within private households or was commonly marginalised. This would have prompted the acknowledgement of

women's contributions as workers, engendering a heightened degree of political conflict.

Although premised on a request for recognition, specifically in being acknowledged as workers and thus political agents, the notion of visibility extended beyond a simple desire for visual representation. Yet this deconstruction necessarily involved forms of self-representation. In militant leaflets and magazines, activists began to provide different depictions of women. Along with images of women at work, both inside and beyond domestic settings, publications featured images of protests and gatherings, as well as images of bodies and aesthetics that diverged from the conventional ideals associated with the virtuous mother and wife.¹² Cheerful or pacifying expressions were absent in the depictions of work and caregiving tasks, instead being replaced with cold and straightforward descriptions that underlined the often difficult and draining reality of women's experiences. In contrast, images of demonstrations and rallies placed significant emphasis on the display of pleasure, fervour, and joy, with the intention of reinstating women's prominence within the realm of political imagination. Although the movement had a fairly short life, the Wages for Housework campaign had and still has major political and cultural resonance.

One of the most noteworthy phenomena in the arts associated with this feminist mobilisation is arguably maintenance art, which is a type of art popularised by American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles and her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969! Proposal for an Exhibition: 'Care'* that entails the inquiry and incorporation of maintenance and care work into artistic practice. Although the manifesto was written before the founding of the Wages for Housework movement, suggesting there is no direct causality between the two, the juxtaposition of concerns and demands reflects a broader tendency. Overall, the artistic inquiry of maintenance labour occurred through different strategies and media,

ranging from performance to sculpture. Of particular interest is the case of photographic and video production as artists began to experiment with choral forms of representation, which documented the experience of women in different social and working environments. The projects *Una, nessuna, centomila* (1974–1979) by Collettivo Donne Fotoreporter and *Dietro la facciata* (1975) by Carla Cerati, Paola Mattioli, Giovanna Nuvoletti, and Anna Candiani are two notable examples from Italy. Using a variety of photographic techniques and genres, from reportage to portraiture to still life, the artists depicted women from different cultural and economic backgrounds inside their homes, both in moments of work and socialising, with the intention of capturing a shared female experience.

Artworks such as Kay Hunt, Mary Kelly, and Margaret Harrison's *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry* (1973–1975), the project *Who's Holding the Baby?* (1978) by the Hackney Flashers collective, and the film *Nightcleaners* (1975) by the Berwick Street Film Collective convey a more militant approach to the representation of reproductive labour, extending it beyond its household confines. Echoing the instances and values of the women's liberation movement, these groups used photography and film to narrate the challenges women face in their jobs. Despite focusing on quite distinct narratives, namely the sexual division of labour in a metal box factory in Bermondsey, the impact of the dismantling of childcare facilities and local forms of self-organisation, and the unionising campaign of the Cleaners' Action Group, these artworks all address the overarching theme of the commodification of care and the difficulty women experience in dealing with various forms of exploitation both within and outside the domestic sphere. These artworks are also united by a representational strategy that serves as a tool for advocacy and activism.¹³

The shift toward waged care and cleaning labour has significant importance as it challenges

the prevailing notion of the middle-class white housewife as a universally applicable archetype. This depiction failed (and still fails) to acknowledge the lived experiences of many people from working-class backgrounds, who are already forced to leave their homes and take on the double burden of both paid work and caregiving responsibilities. This misrepresentation predominantly affects racialised individuals, who undergo different processes of objectification and oppression and whose experience is therefore effaced. In the book *A Decolonial Feminism*, Françoise Vergès explores the racial connotations associated with the dichotomy of cleanliness and dirtiness and the way it is used to organise visibility within the neoliberal context.¹⁴ This is primarily done at the expense of a multitude of racialised bodies who support the reproduction of the system through their work while being exhausted and disposed as 'waste', and whose exposure is thus perceived as a breach in the broader socioeconomic system.¹⁵ Drawing on an intersectional perspective, Evelyn Nakano Glenn notices the persistent occupational segregation through which white women are far more likely to be associated with service work, working with the public, and domestic reproductive labour, while people of colour are overrepresented in paid maintenance jobs in institutional settings, thus fostering a 'racialized hierarchy of reproductive labor' and processes of selective visibility.¹⁶ When discussing maintenance labour, it is essential to recognise that this category is not homogeneous, neither in terms of the setting and conditions of work nor in terms of the subjects involved, particularly in the context of the contemporary globalised economy.

The (Non) Representation of Maintenance Work in Contemporary Art

Staying within the domain of feminist politics, it is instructive to consider the position of a particular strand of Italian feminism on the topic of

visibility, namely feminism of difference.¹⁷ While some feminist groups actively engaged with the representation of women as a way to advocate for increased integration within the art system, others rejected representation as a site of struggle and instead sought to reclaim the power of unintelligibility. This stance was rooted in the rejection of assimilation in the patriarchal-capitalist system, turning otherness into a source of power.¹⁸ According to former art critic and co-founder of Rivolta Femminile Carla Lonzi, by attempting to be recognised as equals, women would mould themselves according to patriarchal ideals, legitimising the power dynamics they should be dismantling.¹⁹ Rather than striving for parity, women should thus hold to their differences as a means to destroy the hegemonic system. Accordingly, art critic Anne-Marie Sauzeau-Boetti argues for the need to preserve the 'negative capability', or the unintelligibility, of women's art, even if it means denying the very possibility of feminist art.²⁰ The possibility of remaining unintelligible, not to everyone but to a specific segment of society, is thus understood as a means to evade rigid patriarchal structures and create other forms of living and creating.

The selected artworks by Daniela Ortiz, Mayo Pimentel, and Liryc Dela Cruz complicate this stance by exceeding the boundaries of the art field and confronting the multiple factors that determine the terms and conditions of both visibility and invisibility for different economic and social groups. They accomplish this by focusing their research on the material reality of care workers as they embody what Dimitrakaki has identified as the 'three basic parameters in the current turn to an economic subject: labor, conflict, and spectacle'.²¹ By combining a range of practices and media, these artworks illustrate three distinct approaches that merge instances of political recognition with the negotiation of visibility, moving away from individual perspectives and instead highlighting the underlying structural challenges that people face. There are



1 Mayo Pimentel, *Territorio Doméstico: Politizando los delantales, las ollas y las calles*, 2019, video still (12:56)



2 Mayo Pimentel, *Territorio Doméstico: Politizando los delantales, las ollas y las calles*, 2019, video still (11:57)

no visual or textual references to external institutional and private market actors in the artworks, with the exception of Pimentel, who incorporates footage of public demonstrations and gatherings. Yet the issue of the structural exploitation of care work and its role in shaping gender and class social hierarchies underpins the three projects. Notably, the artworks all engage with mostly migrant subjects, a logical outcome given the established practice of the Global North commodifying and exporting reproductive labour from the Global South. Referring to the divisions named by Vergès and Nakano Glenn, what is made visible is dirty care, as opposed to the sanitised representation promoted by neoliberal self-care rhetoric. Also, Dimitrakaki observes that, in the current global political context, the representation of 'economic others' inevitably degenerates into additional forms of appropriation and commodification of concrete social experiences.²² The tension between visibility and invisibility is further marked in these instances because of the deletion processes people undergo as care and cleaning workers and racialised women, and the risks that excessive visibility might entail regarding their precarious legal and employment status.

The commodification of maintenance and its relation to exclusionary and oppressive migration policies is at the core of the previously mentioned *Territorio Doméstico: Politizando los delantales, las ollas y las calles* by Mayo Pimentel.

The personal and the political are intertwined throughout the documentary, which alternates between organisational and political events, and more intimate and informal ones. It is also interesting how it shows the many different places where the activists bring their activity, going from the secure and familiar space of the association to the streets and even the stage of a rap concert. What remains consistent across these contexts is the visibility of the women not solely as care workers but as active agents and self-determined individuals. The members are usually identified with their first and last names, and occasionally with an alias or nothing at all. In these clips, the women discuss the significance of the group and the impact it has had on their professional and personal lives, especially as they had to leave their homes and support systems in order to work in the Global North. It becomes clear that the group functions not just as a platform for advocacy, but also as a site for socialisation and exchange, in stark contrast to the isolation and fragmentation imposed by their jobs. Work appears in the film not in its gestural or mechanical aspect, but as embodied by the women as productive and political subjects.

Numerous public demonstrations are also depicted in the film, frequently taking the form of parades in which the women use colourful and inventive approaches to draw attention to their cause (figs. 1, 2). The most prominent are the



3 Mayo Pimentel, *Territorio Doméstico: politizando los delantales, las ollas y las calles*, 2019, video still (23:51)

runways, where they dress up as their employers, called names such as the ‘Neocolonial Employer’ or the ‘Me-Me Employer’, parodying their personas and especially the ways in which they try to justify the poor working conditions they offer. As explained by the activists themselves, these shows play an essential role in their strategy as they publicly enact unstated relational and working dynamics. The use of spectacle holds historical significance within the feminist movement, with its origins traceable back to the suffragette movement, which combined the tactics and slogans of workerist movements with the performative and extravagant nature of Edwardian pageantry, as extensively discussed by Lisa Tickner.²³ During the 1970s, women continued to embrace the spectacle in public demonstrations, organising public exhibitions or installations as well as constructing and carrying in procession floats and puppets.²⁴ In contemporary times, feminist demonstrations still hold on to performativity through actions like renaming and re-signifying streets, statues, and monuments. A notable recent instance is the *Sacra Vulva* processions, which were held in Rome in 2021 and in Padua in April 2023 to defend abortion rights and resulted in significant political and legal pushback for Non Una Di Meno activists.²⁵ In the case of Territorio Doméstico the performative element assumes an additional function that is intricately linked to the diversity of the group. The use of

masks and costumes, in fact, helps protect the identities of the participants, many of whom are undocumented migrants. Individuals thus have the agency to decide how much they wish to expose themselves, maintaining control over their degree of visibility (fig. 3). As the intersection of gender, class, and race has been historically disregarded (or not adequately considered) in Western feminist groups, it is crucial to consider this aspect and how public representation and exposure may affect different subjects.

The members of Territorio Doméstico are not mere background characters, nor are they reduced to their professional roles. Following Fraser’s critique, representation here serves as a documentation of a broader political process, which does not aim to achieve more visibility but a more equitable redistribution of work, resources, and rights. The workers are the primary narrators of their history and openly discuss the centrality of maintenance labour in the economic system, as well as the systematic vulnerability and lack of recognition they face. The film actively resists forms of erasure and marginalisation by providing a platform to share their stories and contextualise the group’s ongoing struggle. It is important to note that the longevity and solidity of Territorio Doméstico as a political group are very important in the dynamic between the collective and the artist. Often, socially engaged artists work with groups that are formed on the basis of the project or with communities that do not necessarily share a working methodology. In this case, Territorio Doméstico has a history of engaging in artistic collaborations, having previously partnered with other artists, activist groups, and cultural organisations. Visibility is not a goal in itself, with the artist portraying marginalised individuals as passive objects, but rather a site of political alliance through which he supports and amplifies their demands.

97 *Empleadas Domésticas* (2010) is a photographic project by Peruvian artist, activist, and researcher Daniela Ortiz. The project consists

of 97 images sourced from the Facebook profiles of people belonging to the Peruvian upper class. Each photograph showcases various everyday scenarios, predominantly featuring white people, particularly children and young adults, engaged in recreational activities. The images are characterised by a cheerful atmosphere, often captured within festive and comfortable settings. A domestic worker can be noticed in the background of every photograph, either blurred, semi-hidden, or cropped out. Their presence is barely noticeable, often epitomised by the arms that keep the children standing or still, or by a presence in the distance.

In her artistic practice, Ortiz creates visual narratives that explore and critique the under-

lying and intersecting power structures of colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism, with a focus on race, class, and gender. A key topic that runs through several of her artworks is the European migratory control system and its historical ties to colonialism, as well as the legal structures put in place by institutions that perpetrate violence against racialised communities.²⁶ 97 *Empleadas Domésticas* stems from the artist's experience working as a video maker for wealthy Peruvian families residing in Playa de Asia, located in the southern region of Lima. Ortiz was tasked with creating home videos capturing the holiday experiences of these families and, as recalled by the artist, she was specifically instructed not to include maids or nannies in the footage.²⁷



4 Daniela Ortiz, 97 *Empleadas Domésticas*, Barcelona, 2010

The profound intersection between race, social class, and gender becomes apparent in the work as the images inadvertently reveal the gender and class hierarchies that structure representation, along with the ludicrous efforts to conceal them. The outsourcing of care to racialised women brings to the forefront the lingering colonial dynamics present in Peruvian contemporary societies. Furthermore, the commodification of these women as disposable props is conveyed through the representation of these women as discrete limbs, hyper-present in their invisibility, and devoid of any agency or control over their image. As in the organisation of everyday life, these women and their work are hidden but necessary for upholding the system these families represent and reproduce.

In her study, American feminist scholar Peggy Phelan questions the implicit assumptions surrounding the opposition between visibility and invisibility in relation to extant representational economies, reaffirming the power that might come from 'remaining unmarked'.²⁸ Akin to Pollock, Phelan engages in a critical examination of representation as a means of empowerment, shedding light on the problematic process of control and classification that results from the convergence of identity politics and visibility.²⁹ Yet, operating within a strong Lacanian framework, she overly focuses on the connection between the exchange of gaze and sexual difference, failing to address the broader implications of selective visibility in relation to specific socioeconomic circumstances. These factors, however, are crucial in determining the many meanings and implications embedded in the 'remaining unmarked' of the domestic workers who are (or are not) portrayed by Ortiz, since their employers intentionally made them unmarked in order to achieve what they see as an ideal portrayal of their domestic environment. Still, this act of erasure serves as an effective device that allows the artist to convey her message without needing to reassert visibility as the primary means of recognition.



5 Daniela Ortiz, *97 Empleadas Domésticas*, 2010, exhibition view. Zaragoza, Casa de la Mujer, Sala de exposiciones Juana Francés, 2011

The artwork took the form of both a publication and a photographic installation, displayed in museums and galleries (figs. 4, 5). The installation consists of a long shelf with photographs positioned side by side throughout the full edge. In the publication, whose cover is completely blank, each photo is individually presented on a separate page, devoid of captions or identifying markers. The title of the artwork is reproduced only at the end of the photographic sequence, along with the artist's name, a critical essay, and the colophon. This final reveal not only characterises the project as an artistic endeavour but also but names its actual protagonists. In both instances, the images form an unbroken sequence, akin to the continuous scroll of online platforms. No names or details of either the families or the workers are disclosed, and no attempt is made to convey a sense of homeliness or familiarity. Everything exudes a cold and efficient tone.

One last project I want to discuss as part of my analysis is the multimedia performance *Il Mio Filipino* (2017–ongoing) by Filipino filmmaker and artist Liryc Dela Cruz.³⁰ The project consists of an audio track, a video installation, and a performance, all realised in collaboration with members of the Filipino community in Rome through a series of workshops. These events, in



6 *Il Mio Filippino: For Those Who Care to See*, exhibition view. Rome, Mattatoio, 2023

which the artist acts as facilitator, are important moments of confrontation and political subjectivation, providing workers with a dedicated space and time to discuss and connect on the premise of similar working conditions, an opportunity that tends to be lacking as the work is typically performed alone and in close relation to the employer.

At its core, *Il Mio Filippino* seeks to investigate how the movements, and consequently the bodies, of Filipinos who have migrated to the Global North have been 'commodified and recoded by international agreements'.³¹ Dela Cruz's explo-

ration delves into the topic of the export of the workforce from the Philippines to the Western world and the pervasive impact of ethnic stereotyping on the representation of Filipino individuals, the organisation and exploitation of their work, and the process of their identity formation. The artist is personally invested in the subject matter, having worked in the sector himself and having experienced similar situations as a migrant and a racialized person. These factors significantly influence his role within the process, as they grant him a distinct level of awareness and sensitivity, as well as greater familiarity with the way these issues are already discussed within the community.

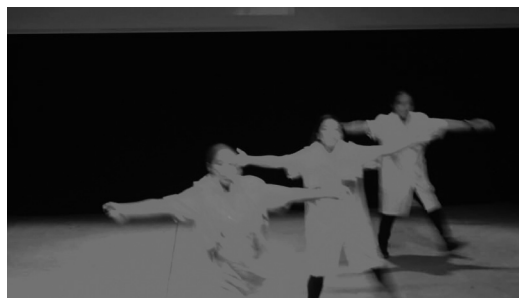
Referring to the project's display at the Mattatoio in Rome on the occasion of Dela Cruz's first solo exhibition staged in 2023, *Il Mio Filippino: For Those Who Care to See*, the video element is presented on four screens in a dimly lit environment (fig. 6). Three of these videos show the workday of a group of Filipino workers as they undertake domestic chores in their employers' households. The videos are in black and white and are displayed on medium-sized screens positioned at an elevated height. At times, the screen is partitioned into four quadrants, remi-



7 Liryc Dela Cruz, *Il Mio Filippino*, 2017–ongoing, video still

niscent of CCTV video. In order to emphasise their shared working conditions rather than their individuality, the workers are generally captured from a distance and in the backlight (fig. 7). Despite being the main characters in the videos, the workers' visibility is thus compromised. Occupying a corner of the room, a notably larger screen, shielded by transparent sheets, displays a close-up of a sleeping woman in full colour. The soundscape, created in collaboration with artist Greg Farough, interweaves audio samples from factories with the hum of vacuum cleaners and the voices of people keeping time, as if in a choreographed sequence. The counting of time refers both to the performance and to the TESDA Housekeeping Training programs promoted by the Philippine government, which the artist sees as reminiscent of the militarised organisation of the workforce during the colonial era.³² The performance is structured into three distinct segments and combines gestures from the daily work routine with elements from traditional Philippine dances. It concludes with the performers interacting with a mound of soil placed in the centre of the stage and then resting under a tent (similar to the one in the exhibition), as if wanting to suggest to the viewer a return to the earth not as a physical space but as an ancestral site of knowledge, care, and resurgence (fig. 8).

While not the central focus, Dela Cruz presents an interesting approach to visibility. Experimenting with various formats, he tries to engage with the topic of Filipino workers' exploitation while avoiding victim-centred characterisations and trauma voyeurism. Different media are used to artistically interpret the data and stories gathered during the workshops. As noted by the artist, these moments are deliberately designed to provide a safe space where individuals can open up without fear of their stories being shared without consent or of unwarranted exposure.³³ None of these conversations are explicitly included in the video or the performance and the resultant out-



8 Liryc Dela Cruz, *Il Mio Filipino*, 2017–ongoing, performance. Rome, Teatro di Roma-Teatro Nazionale, 2021

comes are negotiated with the participants, who collectively determine what to reveal and what to conceal. Dela Cruz's work seems to challenge simplistic and emotionally driven narratives, instead prioritizing what Édouard Glissant refers to as the 'right to opacity', namely the right to decline full comprehension and the obligation to comprehend others fully as the basis of mutual solidarity.³⁴ Glissant advocates for the political value of asserting one's 'irreducible singularity' rather than conforming to Western norms and ideals in order to be understood.³⁵ In this sense, the right to opacity questions the principle of visibility and familiarisation as the basis of political recognition and alliance. In the exhibition, viewers are expected to position themselves regardless of whether they fully comprehend or have an emotional reaction to the artwork. As suggested in the exhibition's title, *For Those Who Care to See*, derived from a text by Vergès, they can actively decide how to interact with it and the amount of information they intend to gather, choosing whether to physically adjust their perspective to view the videos or ignore them, or whether to interact with community members or observe them from a distance.³⁶

Despite the points of intersection, the artists' approach to visibility differs significantly, being either problematised in its negation (in the case of Ortiz) or negotiated with the subjects involved (in the case of Pimentel and Dela Cruz).

Additionally, as Ortiz appropriated publicly accessible photographs from social media, there is an intentional dearth of interaction with the workers, with a focus on their concealed identities and bodies. Through this positional shift, the intention is to make them visible by highlighting their absence. In contrast to Ortiz, both Pimentel and Dela Cruz initiate their projects by engaging directly with the workers, who are involved from the outset, although with varying degrees of autonomy and authorship. While Pimentel assumes an auxiliary role in the group's narrative, Dela Cruz maintains his artistic vision and organises the community's involvement on the basis of a broader idea. Furthermore, in this latter case, there is a clear separation between moments of exchange (the workshop) and the artistic restitution (the exhibition and the stage).

The artists try to escape aestheticized modes of visualization by collecting pictures online or using archival footage and performance, negotiating their authorial insight with respect to the people represented. However, while approaching visibility in a very ambiguous and sometimes openly critical way, the three projects largely remain in the realm of representation, dwelling on the workers' bodies as a site of capitalist extraction and upheaval. Ortiz's artwork directly tackles the issue of anonymization by concentrating on the 'missing bodies'. In contrast, Pimentel's approach proposes a more direct representation where nearly every individual is named, looks into the camera, and shares their story firsthand. In the case of Dela Cruz, the camera's distance from the subject and the lack of a clear narrative in favour of observation result in characters being apparent only for fleeting moments as they approach the camera to work around it. This dynamic changes in the performance, where the performers' bodies are close to the audience. Ultimately, in the workshop, everything occurs away from the public and the camera. These three modes coexist within the same project,

each aiming to tailor the level of visibility according to the context and the topics covered.

Propositions for Evading Visibility

The selected artworks challenge the conventional depiction of reproductive labour by undermining the sense of familiarity and resonance between the subject and the viewer, as well as questioning the idea that visibility is the main purpose and form of representation. They deploy various forms of negotiating visibility that subvert both established notions of identity politics and associated claims for recognition. They experiment with forms of representation that reject demands of transparency, exploring the possibilities of remaining unmarked, albeit not entirely. As the artists embody very different positions in relation to the individuals portrayed, ranging from complete detachment to having a shared background and lived experience, the artworks implicitly reflect the complicated power systems that govern maintenance labour. In this tension between presence and absence, as well as between clarity and opacity, the three works address some of the contradictions and limitations that were already present in second-wave feminist artistic endeavours on the topic, undermining the principles of reciprocity and resonance on which they relied. The evasion of visibility that marks these works places emphasis on the non-universality of the female experience, which was instead prevalent in previous feminist initiatives.

Indeed, it is critical to consider how not only gender but also race and class contribute to defining this experience, and how these factors come into play within and outside of these projects, hindering the triggering of empathy that would allow observers to feel absolved of their responsibility towards what they are observing. By producing a space of ambiguity, the artists attempt to expose and address the economic

and political contradictions experienced by the individuals they portray, without necessarily imposing or pursuing any form of oversimplification or resolution. The ability to address certain topics is conditioned by the very possibility of maintaining a space of invisibility, whether through strategic masquerades or the organisation of semi-open gatherings. Across these various representations, none of the people involved have to conform to a preconceived identity; they can elude the morbid gaze of the audience while simultaneously prompting them to rethink their own position and perspective. In this sense, it is no longer a case of disappearing into appearance, as it occurs daily in the deliberate disregard of these workers in both private and public spaces, but rather an opposite process.

As they experiment with different tactics of visibility and display that intentionally blur the distinction between visible and invisible, the artists under consideration seek to disrupt entrenched narratives and stereotypes by entertaining public discourse away from the people and towards the mechanisms of exploitation and marginalisation they face. In this sense, rather than a mechanism of recognition, what is activated by these artworks is a sense of discomfort, especially in the case of Ortiz and Dela Cruz. As the emphasis is on the protagonists' absence, the socioeconomic context in which the actions take place becomes even more apparent, allowing the audience to potentially acknowledge their own background and role in the global productive and political system. Viewers are thus invited to shift their inquisitive gaze from the care workers to themselves.

Although originating from very distinct political foundations, specifically second-wave feminism and postcolonial critique, the refusal to be legible as a means to avoid neutralisation can be identified as a common thread between Lonzi, Phelan, and Glissant. While the notions they present are very significant in terms of theoretical and political prefiguration, it is necessary to

stress that neither opacity nor unintelligibility can be regarded as definitive solutions. Circling back to the tension between identity politics and visibility discussed at the beginning of the article, these positions risk limiting the scope of social demands by iterating forms of micropolitics that do not connect to a broader political project. However, I contend that opacity as a rejection of irreducibility can be one of the tactics used by marginalised groups, opening up a space of political imagination in which they can act without having to expose, explain, or justify themselves or adopt preconceived oppressive identifications. Indeed, the elusion of visibility should not be misconstrued as a plea to remain concealed and disregarded; rather, as noted by community theatre scholar Sarah Bartley, this idea entails a potential for 'displacement, evacuation, translation' by redefining the boundaries of reality and the ordinary and offering forms of resistance that transcend both location- and identity-based discourses and claims.³⁷ The dominant paradigm of visibility is the one that has to be resisted, but this does not prevent members of marginalised groups from disclosing themselves or recognising one another, thereby producing parallel forms of organisation, collaboration, and identification.

Besides considering the potential modes of opacity developed by the artworks under discussion, it is necessary to look at the people who promote them. Following Glissant, the right to opacity functions within a particular power dynamic between colonisers and colonised, and it can only be interpreted as a tool for emancipation when it is harnessed by the oppressed. In these instances, the conflict to be scrutinised is that between the capitalist system and the cleaning and care workers. However, the individuals experimenting with opacity are not always members of the community, thereby blurring this distinction. All of the artists demonstrate a common political commitment and a stance of solidarity with the people they portray. It is

important to note that they also embody distinct perspectives in relation to class and race, coming from different backgrounds both with respect to the subjects represented and to each other.³⁸ Ortiz comes from a middle-class upbringing, which is influenced by her experience of migration. Dela Cruz, on the other hand, is deeply ingrained in the community he engages with, sharing both its cultural and economic background and working experience. In their projects, the blurring of visibility does not often arise deliberately; rather, it stems from a specific requirement, such as protecting collective members from legal prosecution or as part of a creative endeavour to safeguard the narratives and sentiments of the individuals involved. Or it is a direct response to the formal and symbolic decisions made by the artist.

Furthermore, the sociopolitical intent that underlies the artworks and the legacy of struggles they intersect seems to require a certain degree of presence and visibility so as to avert years of obliteration. In the case of Pimentel and Dela Cruz, the representation of workers' bodies maintains a crucial role as the intent of their projects is not only to acknowledge the presence of these individuals within the public domain but rather to cultivate different imagery that would challenge the prevailing narrative that often depicts them as passive victims. Maintaining a level of discernibility is therefore essential for defining the political position of these artworks.

It is important to clarify that these initiatives should not be viewed as immediate solutions, particularly because they lack the induction of a parallel political programme. While the negotiation tactics discussed in the article

are significant, these projects primarily operate within the realm of representation. All three have a limited reach within the artistic sphere, and their impact expresses in the interaction between the work and the user and, in the case of Dela Cruz, through the modes of subjectivation experienced during the process of co-creation. A distinct position is held by Pimentel and Territorio Doméstico, as the latter already works as a political collective, independent of the artistic project's constraints. Unionisation and political action continue to be essential in ensuring that the political subjectivation processes initiated within artistic endeavours translate into structural actions and propositions.

What these projects effectively propose are strategies to challenge epistemic violence. By calling the imperative of visibility into question, it might be possible to open up to other forms of political imagination that transcend the exploitation of the body as the main site of economic, affective, and symbolic extractions, and reconsider the collective and infrastructural dimension of social action.

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- 1 The documentary is accessible on YouTube. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQeInXaCoFw&list=PL56os&ab_channel=RosaluxEuropa (last accessed 15 March 2024).
- 2 See Helena Reckitt, Introduction: Being Seen. The Politics of Visibility in Feminist Art, in: Helena Reckitt et al. (eds.), *The Art of Feminism: Images that Shaped the Fight for Equality, 1857–2017*, San Francisco and London 2018, 8–17.
- 3 Fabiola Fiocco, Transparent (Support) Structures: On Visibility and Social Reproduction in Socially Engaged Art, in: *Journal of Cultural Management and Cultural Policy / Zeitschrift für Kulturmanagement und Kulturpolitik* 9, 2023, no. 1, 125–144.
- 4 Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art*, London 2006, 8–9.
- 5 Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, New York 2020, 336–337.
- 6 Angela Dimitrakaki, *Gender, artWork and the Global Imperative: A Materialist Feminist Critique*, Manchester 2013, 54–57.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Johanna Schaffer, *Ambivalenzen der Sichtbarkeit: Über die visuellen Strukturen der Anerkennung*, Bielefeld 2015.
- 9 For a more comprehensive reconstruction of the different strategies of visualisation of labour in contemporary art since the 1970s, including substantial examples from feminist art, see Danielle Child, *Working Aesthetics: Labour, Art and Capitalism*, London 2019, and Friederike Sigler, *Arbeit sichtbar machen: Strategien und Ziele in der Kunst seit 1970*, Munich 2021.
- 10 Louise Toupin, *Wages for Housework: A History of an International Feminist Movement, 1972–77*, London 2018, 62–64.
- 11 Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*, Durham 2011, 137–138.
- 12 I refer to feminist magazines, posters, fanzines, and leaflets from the International Feminist Collective (IFC) that I have acquired through online sources and archival research.
- 13 See Josie McLellan, From the Political to the Personal: Work and Class in 1970s British Feminist Art, in: *Twentieth Century British History* 31, 2020, no. 2, 252–274.
- 14 Françoise Vergès, *A Decolonial Feminism*, London 2021, 80–82.
- 15 Ibid., 76–78.
- 16 Evelyn Nakano Glenn, From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor, in: *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, 1992, no. 1, 1–43, here 19–22.
- 17 The 'feminism of difference' is a distinctive political and cultural stand that emerged in the 1970s. It asserts an intrinsic distinction between the two genders, rejecting any demands of equality and promoting, instead, the specificity of the female experience (typically understood in biological terms). The movement gained prominence primarily in Italy and France, with key figures including Luce Irigaray, Adriana Cavarero, and Carla Lonzi. It also left a significant imprint on Spain's feminist landscape. Deploying a separatist approach, these groups resisted assimilation into the patriarchal system, often operating in self-managed spaces set apart from mainstream society. The 'feminism of difference' has been and still is particularly criticised for perpetrating essentialist positions. See Teresa de Lauretis, The Practice of Sexual Difference and Feminist Thought in Italy: An Introductory Essay, in: The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, Bloomington 1990, 1–21; Graziella Parati and Rebecca J. West, *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice: Equality and Sexual Difference*, Fairleigh 2002.
- 18 See Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel e altri scritti*, Milano 2011. The original work was published in Rome in 1970 by Rivolta Femminile. Translation by the author.
- 19 Ibid., 20–22.
- 20 Anne-Marie Sauzeau-Boetti, Negative Capability as Practice in Women's Art, in: *Studio International: Journal of Modern Art* 191, 1976, no. 979, 24–29.
- 21 Angela Dimitrakaki, The Spectacle and Its Others: Labor, Conflict, and Art in the Age of Global Capital, in: Jonathan Harris (ed.), *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, Malden 2011, 191–211, here 192.
- 22 Ibid., 205–209.
- 23 Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907–1914*, London 1987.
- 24 Examples include the exhibitions and processions organised by the Roman Feminist Movement, which emerged as a result of the division within Rivolta Femminile; the shows and processions conducted by the Neapolitan group Le Nemesiache; and the environmental exhibition-installation titled *Damebilleder* (Women's Images or Lady Portraits) realised by the Danish feminist collective Kanonklubben.
- 25 See Giuseppe Pietrobelli, Esibiscono la 'sacra vulva' in processione come fosse la Madonna: indaga la Digos, in: *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 23 April 2023, URL: <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/in-edicola/articoli/2023/04/23/esibiscono-la-sacra-vulva-in>

- processione-come-fosse-la-madonna-indaga-ladigos/7139252/ (last accessed 15 March 2024).
- 26 Examples include the drawing series *The Rebellion of the Roots (France)* (2022), the video work *Empire of the Law* (2019), and the print series *ABC of Racist Europe* (2017).
 - 27 Marcelo Expósito, D-O 1-5: In 2006, the young Peruvian artist Daniela Ortiz de Zevallos approached the wealthy branch of her family for help in order to be able to move to Europe, in: Daniela Ortiz, 97 *Empleadas Domésticas*, Barcelona 2010, 105–114, here 105.
 - 28 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London 2017, 1.
 - 29 Ibid., 10–11.
 - 30 Although the subjects depicted are all women, as is often the case in the care and cleaning services sector, the choice of the masculine title is associated with the prevalent usage of the term in Italy in its masculine form. This practice is so deeply ingrained that the term *filippino* is frequently used to refer to any domestic worker, irrespective of their gender or nationality. As pointed out by the artist, altering the gender of a statement that is inherently racist, classist, and sexist would have been misleading and inappropriate, as the aim is not to correct but to eradicate its use, along with the prejudices and the harm that derive from it.
 - 31 Author's interview with Liryc Dela Cruz, Rome, 7 August 2023.
 - 32 Ibid.
 - 33 Ibid.
 - 34 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* [French 1990], Ann Arbor 1997.
 - 35 Ibid., 189–193.
 - 36 See Françoise Vergès, Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender, in: *e-flux journal* 2019, no. 100, URL: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/100/269165/capitalocene-waste-race-and-gender/> (last accessed 17 October 2023).
 - 37 Sarah Bartley, *Performing Welfare: Applied Theatre Unemployment and Economies of Participation*, London 2020, 118–119.
 - 38 At the time of writing, it was not possible to gather information in this regard as concerns Mayo Pimentel.

Photo Credits: 1, 2, 3 Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung YouTube channel, URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQeInXaCoFw&ab_channel=RosaluxEuropa (last accessed 10 July 2024). — 4, 5 Courtesy of Daniela Ortiz. — 6 Courtesy of Liryc Dela Cruz and Spazio Griot (photo: © Andrea Pizzalis, 2023). — 7, 8 © Liryc Dela Cruz, courtesy of Spazio Griot.