

Drive

On Paky Vlassopoulou and the unspoken



Explosions in the sky – Welcome, Ghosts, 2013, clay, wood, paper, cloth, knife, 87 x 62 x 37cm.

There is something that we need to talk about. We need to address the tendency of leaving issues untouched, unclaimed, unspoken. There are times when this is necessary and self-serving, for things find a way of representing themselves and objects, images and actions manage to communicate with us better than words. But what about the times that silence is not deployed with such strategies and sensibilities in mind? What happens when this kind of silence blankets work, art work that is, within and beyond objecthood, time and again? What happens to works that are thirsty for words that never come? Why do we hold our tongues? What is there inside one that drives one to silence?

When I was invited by Enterprise Projects to contribute the text for the inaugural edition of EPJ I immediately thought of the need and the yearning for a space for words and dialogue on contemporary art in Greece over recent years, as well as the prevailing silence that such a project taps into. Art publications seem to have limited life span in this country, with the majority of them already archived or trying to find a way to operate within a field that holds art publishing and writing as unsustainable. I began thinking about the silence that is structurally created, about the lack of an uninterrupted exchange on art, the breaks and blind spots that are inevitably left and met by those with an interest in our current moment or what got us here. I began thinking of words that have not been spoken, of pages that have not been written, of

works that remain unacknowledged due to the pervasive structural silence, of works that are more susceptible than others to these forces, of works that stand without words, of works that are difficult to speak of, of works that I hold dear.

I started thinking about certain aspects of our lives, as well as the art practices that address them, which are resistant to inclusion in what will ultimately be the pervading narrative of history, especially in the absence of publications and platforms that facilitate debate and exchange. I started thinking, again, about the absence of a significant body of writing on art, comparable to what we ultimately end up referencing –that of the Western art historical canon- in order to address art that deals with subjectivity in its shared concerns with feminism, queer theory and psychoanalysis. I keep wondering why is it that such texts and voices have not been and are still largely not part of our discourse, our textbooks, our libraries, and our everyday vocabulary about work that certainly poses such questions and unsettles the silence in which they are drowned.

It is evident whoever suggests that such questions have been answered, or that identity politics are a thing of the past, is either in deep denial about the current state of affairs or is actively supporting the dominant, patriarchal forces in artistic practice and beyond that historically aim to control and ultimately suppress any voices of dissent that disturb what is business as usual. The principal notion that can be felt across the majority of conversations today, and for the past few years, is that subjectivity and art that deals with its politics is no longer relevant unless it is tied with something that is currently in fashion in art discourse, such as the self versus artificial intelligence or the gender non-conforming subject for example. These are of course pressing issues of our times but I am puzzled by the casual way they are brought in and out of focus in exhibitions, conversations, press releases and other publication outlets within a national context that lacks yet borrows from the rich history this line of thought has enjoyed elsewhere. It is striking to see how the dominant discourse engages with them, usually very briefly and nonchalantly, when the hype is right. There is a feeling -or there should be a feeling- of responsibility when one attempts to write about such works and topics in the absence of a bold yet sustained and coherent feminist, queer and psychoanalytically informed line of thought that haunts the art establishment in this country.

Art criticism and art history in modern Greece, as Angela Dimitrakaki suggests, have been “framed and motivated by the desire to establish and secure a cultural/national identity rather than a politics around identity that could have potentially incorporated a range of interconnected references” and this “has been instrumental in engendering the isolation that twentieth-century Greek art has suffered even in explicitly critical contexts such as that of feminist art history”.¹ As Dimitrakaki further presses in the mid-1990s:

The exclusion of the Greek feminist movement from modern Greek history textbooks and the rare, fragmentary references to Greek women artists in art history demonstrate the power relations operating in the formulation of coherent (national) traditions, cultural or other. It is in order to preserve this

¹ Angela Dimitrakaki, “(Post)modernism and Feminist Art History: The Reception of the Male Nude in Twentieth-century Greek Painting”, *Third Text*, Vol. 17, Issue 3 (2003), 241.

coherence, and the chain of meanings the latter supports, that certain elements, which can cast doubt on and potentially threaten established, homogenizing genealogies, are denied presence.²

According to Dimitrakaki, a formalist approach to art and a critical dichotomy between theory and practice, that have so far defined art education, have been instrumental in the reproduction of a carefully maintained gap between art and the ideological matrix of social struggles. Besides, the processes that have informed the issue of gender and art in Greek art history and practice are also inscribed within the sociopolitical dynamics that have characterised the gradual fusion of traditional features and the cultural models introduced from western Europe.

It thus becomes even more problematic to keep thwarting these kinds of conversations based on a supposed certainty that they have already taken place or are no longer relevant, operating within a national context that has always selectively borrowed and capitulated from Western art and literature, discarding what it deemed uncomfortable and unsettling. What is more, Dimitrakaki's remarks came at a time when a certain "fatigue with the politics of difference [was felt] across the board" in Western art discourse, a tiredness with the topic that makes even less sense within the national context.³ Speaking in the mid-1990s, Hal Foster detected "a fatigue with the politics of subject position, of the mobility of the subject in fantasy, of gender performativity".⁴ This kind of ideological exhaustion is still curiously present, as if the work of feminism, psychoanalysis and queer theory is done, and their concerns, which have been supposedly properly addressed and resolved, can now be put to the side. In the same conversation, Rosalyn Deutsche elaborated on Foster's word choice of "fatigue", describing this disposition as one that "is also steeped in an idea of change that is promoted by a market mentality", suggesting that "it's perhaps what very often happens in the art world and in the academic world, where ideas are commodities as much as the works themselves".⁵ This is also part of the reason that makes one feel nervous if they insist on the importance of thinking with feminism, queer theory and psychoanalysis today; these concerns are sidestepped in many conversations by those who argue they are a thing of the past, cutting short a dialogue that has scarcely taken place locally.

It is not my aim here to provide a detailed historical account of the exclusions, misrecognitions and censorship occurrences that haunt Greek art history, this is a much larger yet necessary project that should find a home elsewhere. I do wish, however, to put these words in writing, to bring light to this issue, contribute to the discussions that are undoubtedly taking place, adding volume to a conversation that keeps getting silenced by conservative, patriarchal voices of presumed authority. I wish to focus on recent examples of works of art that have the ability to drive such conversations through the realm of psychoanalysis, feminism and subjectivity, yet they are still at risk of being faulted as futile or outdated, based on critical

² Angela Dimitrakaki, "Elements of a secret history: Women, art and gender in modern Greece, *Third Text*, Vol. 10, Issue 37 (1996), 63.

³ Hal Foster quoted in Silvia Kolbowski, Mignon Nixon, Mary Kelly, Hal Foster, Liz Kotz, Simon Leung and Ayisha Abraham, "A Conversation on Recent Feminist Art Practices", *October* 71 (Winter 1995), 55

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Deutsche quoted in Ibid.

predispositions which stem from a type of fatigue that is “dangerous”.⁶ This text aims to approach works of art through the productive dialogue art history has historically enjoyed with psychoanalysis, a discursive position that is startlingly absent from previous scholarly accounts on the examples that follow and from the majority of our literature in general. The ability of psychoanalysis, as Jacqueline Rose suggests, “to uncover truths that would remain hidden, and to unsettle the most rigid forms of identity as they play themselves out across the stage of political life”, is lost time and again on critical accounts that engage with the works of art that are politically and psychically distressing.⁷

The official narrative in textbooks and classrooms more often than not bypass the challenges certain works pose to such unyielding and stringent theorizations through their subversive materiality and the queer relationships they establish with their viewers. Such accounts betray a penchant to neutrality figured as a position of intellectual authority and superiority and mobilize a very specific vocabulary with accepted words and ideas to be used. It is precisely this sort of critical approaches that advocate the irrelevance of psychoanalysis and feminism, and of art informed by them, in a broader field of political discourses that aim to critique and protest authority and power. Their arguments are meditated on a version of masculinism which, according to Deutsche, “has also been reconsolidated in some sectors on the left; that is, the pressing nature of the world situation is invoked to legitimate a return to leftist political analyses that refuse feminist theorizations of the political”.⁸ The psychical dimension to social experience and injustice continues to be largely blindsided by theoretical attempts, even those on the left, that attempt to account for it and “psychoanalytic feminism is [still] treated as politically expendable”.⁹ As Mignon Nixon further argues:

Pressured into conformity within a militarist research culture suspicious of subjectivity, but also estranged from a left political culture that considers subjectivity antithetical to politics, psychoanalysis finds itself in the untenable position of being both an orthodoxy –a theory that does not go against the grain of ideology –and an orphan- a theory of subjectivity deemed superfluous by a culture that [...] disavows subjectivity itself.¹⁰

Psychoanalysis, perhaps most importantly, is also theory that is capable to evolve and check itself, contrary to popular sentiment that believes it to be a fixed, outdated and reductively pathologizing account of human nature and civilization. It listens and benefits from critical objections, such as the theoretical arguments that stem from the vexed but important relationship that it historically established with feminism. Contemporary psychoanalysis can be seen to be critically revising its positions in its recent attempts to articulate radical and creative arguments, rather than its previous remedial and additive prescriptions, in order to provide “a theory that goes against the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jacqueline Rose, *The Last Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007), xi.

⁸ Rosalyn Deutsche quoted in Rosalyn Deutsche, Aruna D'Souza, Miwon Kwon, Ulrike Müller, Mignon Nixon, Senam Okudzeto, “Feminist Time: A Conversation”, *Grey Room* 31 (Spring 2008), 52

⁹ Ibid., 53

¹⁰ Mignon Nixon, “Minimal Difference: On Siblings, Sex, and Violence” in *Juliet Mitchell and the Lateral Axis*, eds. Robbie Duschinsky and Susan Walker (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 195

grain of ideology”.¹¹ In its determined efforts to theorize the complex relationship between individual and social subjectivity, it provides alternative but complimentary points of view to the discourses that so often resist it, disentangling the theoretical obstacles and intellectual stalemates they sometimes set upon themselves by insisting on splitting, in their fields of inquiry, the subject itself. The decidedly psychoanalytic approach this text embraces in relation to art and its histories feels pertinent and responsible, to account for art that can also be, at times, afraid to openly betray its feminist credentials in order to avoid the urgency and content of its message being decoded as emotional, hysterical and, indeed, irrelevantly subjective.

Paky Vlassopoulou, an artist who is versed in psychoanalytic theory, has produced poignant work that attests to the need to confront the resistance of the humanities and other critical discourses to psychoanalytic insights as a negation of responsibility for the unconscious, a refusal based on an ill-founded “belief that psychoanalytic ideas about subjectivity are a distraction from politics”.¹² To think with the unconscious and reflect on individual responsibility does not automatically necessitate a diversion of our focus on and need for political collective action. What Vlassopoulou’s works offer to their viewers, are challenging encounters with this kind of responsibility, which, albeit its fleeting predisposition, could summon welcome ghosts; violent but familiar phantoms of the self, that we habitually keep away due to their potential to disintegrate our sense of self far beyond their initial scare.

In *Explosions in the Sky – Welcome Ghosts* (2013) a wooden palette is bent by the weight of stacks of pages and raw clay tiles. There are four paper stacks, two of them covered by white pages, while the surface of the remaining two is composed of an image of an explosion from the Second World War cut in half. The divided explosion towers over what appears like a dismembered book, of encyclopedic scale, the pages of which have been torn out and placed on top of one another. Old, worn out white paper covers the other two stacks, while a piece of cloth with a knife rests on top a smaller block of paper. Smudged by clay, the knife betrays its practical use for their making and symbolically marks the violence and aggression that Vlassopoulou tapped into while making this sculpture, while the cloth indicates the complementary dimension of care. Cutting through pages, piling their contents, hiding them under white pages or phantom gunpowder the artist cuts through the stacks of history with an aggressive slight of hand. *Explosions in the Sky – Welcome Ghosts* (2013) stages not just an attack on theory through the symbolic and authoritative weight of the book but on praxis too. Its tiles were not bent by the pressure of a machine but were fashioned by the artist on top of her thigh, curved by her body, each one marked underneath by the stocking she was wearing. Tearing encyclopedias page by page and casting the tiles on her thigh Vlassopoulou created a work that cuts through the presumption that theory and craftsmanship are part of an exclusively masculine terrain.

Since the beginning of her practice Vlassopoulou continues to express fundamental psychic realities such as aggression and anxiety and to give them form. Her work often stages tensions that are palpable both physically in her choice and treatment of materials, as well as psychically within the viewers that encounter it. It is work that

¹¹ Juliet Mitchell, *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 114

¹² Deutsche, “Un-War: An Aesthetic Sketch”, *October* 147 (Winter 2014), 14

intervenes in the way the dominant art discourse continues to approach the work of Greek sculptors since it resists its tendency to ascribe an autobiographical dimension to challenging works in order to tie them to personal circumstances that often lead to naïve psychobiographical musings and circumvent the art object's inherent qualities. Vlassopoulou's work presents subjectivity and objecthood as conditions formed through and constantly changed by bodily and fantasied operations that persist through life; it is work that is produced at the level of the drives.

According to Melanie Klein psychic life is structured by fantasies that are not the result of the unconscious mind (the way that Sigmund Freud theorized fantasy) but the effect of bodily drives. Arising in infancy, these fantasies follow the subject throughout all stages of life and are understood not as moments of regression that one may experience, but as ever-present positions in which the subject can at times remain fixed. The infant relates to its surroundings as a field of objects (part-objects) to attach to or fragment, to possess or attack, according to fantasies of introjection, projection and splitting that are themselves the result of the drives. The part object, in Melanie Klein's theory, is initially comprehended in the infant's mind by its function; it can be part of a person, such as the mother's breast and that person is not recognized as a whole object. In this way, objects are perceived as good or bad according to the feelings of satisfaction or frustration they offer to the subject that relates to them in an immediate and fragmented experience. Annette Michelson suggests that "there is a dominant trend toward the representation of a 'body-in-pieces', of what is in Kleinian theory termed the part object, that runs, like an insistent thread, a sustained subtext, through much [...] artistic production", a thread that ties a number of Vlassopoulou's works too.¹³



¹³ Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005), 209



Θέλω να κάνω σαματά/ σαν τον κακό Γενάρη/να ρίξω χιόνια και νερά/ άλλος να μην σε πάρει. Twinkle, twinkle little star./ how I wonder what you are./Up above the mountain so high/ like a diamond in the sky., 2014, clay, wood, wire, twine, book pages, fabric, tape, dimensions variable.

In 2014, in an exhibition called “A Thousand Doors” organized by NEON and curated by Iwona Blazwick, Vlassopoulou filled a room of the Gennadius Library with a series of small sculptures, small horses placed on stands on the floor. Each horse is part-clay, part-wood, part-wire, part-paper and part-string, molded together to create each creature. In the text Vlassopoulou wrote to accompany her piece she emphasizes that horses were historically used in transportation and warfare and have been represented regularly in public sculpture in statues of famous and heroic riders. Initially commissioned to create a work for the National Garden of Athens but then redirected to an indoor space when the exhibition changed venue, Vlassopoulou contemplated the public monuments of the city that feature men on horses and reduced their symbolic form in order to create an antiheroic pack of sculptures. “The word for horse in Greek is *álogo* (άλογο) and derives from the ancient Greek adjective *alogon* (άλογον) meaning illogical, irrational thinking. The word was originally used in military language in order to distinguish animals from soldiers”, the artist explains.



Tearing encyclopedias and working with clay again to create form Vlassopoulou's work resides in the unresolved and irresolvable contradictions between binary oppositions –language and silence, mind and body, theory and praxis, conscious and unconscious, past and present, active and passive, inside and outside, attack and repair- that cannot be separated from each other more than the mind can be separated from the body. For each horse is created by tearing the pages of encyclopedias and molding them with clay and wire, further held by string; each horse and all of them together charge forward with the force of the drives. Each form is the result of an attack on history and power, of torn and crumpled pages, of the body in front of language and authority, of treating books as part-objects. The horse, illogical and irrational, has a form that is complete only when, as Klein argues, fantasy is understood as a bodily operation, when the patriarchy dismounts its high horse and allows the subject to emerge part-body, part-mind, whole and fragmented, when we allow ourselves to understand subjectivity as arising through the drives, formed and re-formed in moments of strain, even when everyday experiences threaten the integrity of the self.



Vlassopoulou's *33,478* (2014-18) is a sculpture comprised of a large wooden table that hosts ruined objects in a state of arrested suspension. The surface of the table alternates from fragmented wooden blocks, sharp pieces of found white marble to a trail of torn book spines. The artist collected even more books and tore off all of their pages to isolate their spines, some of which have been carefully stitched together with a red thread. The dagger-like marble pieces are discarded remnants Vlassopoulou found in the grounds of the Athens School of Fine Arts, and the wooden blocks, also discarded, are used to construct a fragmented surface on one end of the table on top of which, in its most recent iteration the artist added a half-full or half-empty glass of water. Each element in *33,478* has sustained an attack of the aggressive drive and appears as an object of satisfaction and frustration. It is ripped and stitched, cut and fragmented, attacked and repaired and reduced to a precipitate of the artist's interaction with it; the table is a showcase of the part object.



Vlassopoulou, preoccupied with “associations of power and knowledge”, offers as counterweight her own “bodily and experiential relationship with knowledge and matter” and performs “an excavation on symbols that concern [her] personally”.¹⁴ In one of our conversations, speaking of the spines, she emphasized that she aimed to retain all the information each book contained but isolate the human labour that goes into its making, the hands that bind the books, giving them the support they need. At

¹⁴ Paky Vlassopoulou, Email conversation with the author, 6 June 2014

the same time, she reminded herself of her upbringing, of growing up in a house full of books, with a father whom she describes as a book-eater. In psychoanalysis, as Norbert Freedman writes, the symbol is “always a statement of condensed compromise formation, of contradictory or conflictual wishes, of conflict and conflict resolution... a sign post of underlying psychic work”.¹⁵ Vlassopoulou’s spines are the result of an attack on the book both as a symbol and an object, followed by caring and repair, sawing each spine together to create a surface that is tender yet still charged.

(Paky to provide detailed photo of the spines and red thread)

(Paky to provide detailed photo of the glass of water at the end of the table)

Each spine comes from what may initially be perceived as a contradiction but it is in fact an object that comes from the underlying psychic work of switching between two positions, as described in Klein’s object relations theory: the paranoid-schizoid position, in which the ego manically works off aggression, and a depressive position that arises from it, in which the ego confronts the damage done to internal objects in phantasy”.¹⁶ Speech and language remain purposefully hidden, and straightforward interpretations of symbolism, and materiality are refused by Vlassopoulou’s attack and care, by fragmentation and reparation. For 33,478 “targets not just a symbol, or the idea of symbolism, but the very logic of the symbolic, and it does so from the level of the drives (the part-object), or by grounding the symbolic in the drives”.¹⁷ The objects of 33,478 emerge from an attack on authority, by tearing of the pages of books that father figures consume and disseminate at home or in art schools, or by keeping the dagger-like marble cuttings that students disregarded in their attempt to produce the form required of them. Yet, at the same time, they are cared for. They are stitched, joined, arranged, positioned and displayed. They are there to be read as objects not content: 33,478 refers to the number of pages Vlassopoulou tore in the making of this work. It is a work, as its title proclaims, about numeracy not literacy, a work that examines a movement which art historian Rosalind Krauss has called “a retreat from language” to levels of experience that are “beyond or beneath speech”, to a place where that which is “alogo” reigns.¹⁸ The words behind these objects, the words that are capable of infusing them with the symbolism that in turn renders them persecutory to the subject, have been attacked but not altogether destroyed: they have taken other forms, they have become part-objects, ready for the introjection that will instill in fantasy the subject with their power, as one imagines drinking that glass of water at the end of the table.

Vlassopoulou’s attack on patriarchal authority in this instance took place on a table, an object that served as support to the force of the drives but was itself re-orientated in the process as a signifier. 33,478 is simultaneously a board table, a writing table, a teaching table, a cutting board, a kitchen table and dinner table, supporting the actions that link its objects to a subject that is not necessarily gender conforming.

¹⁵ Norbert Freeman, “Psychoanalysis and Symbolization: Legacy or Heresy?” in Carolyn S. Ellman, Stanley Grand, Mark Silvan, and Steven J. Ellman, eds., *The Modern Freudians: Contemporary Psychoanalytic Technique* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998), 84

¹⁶ Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*, 8

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 237

¹⁸ In her discussion of Eva Hesse’s *Contigent* (1969) Rosalind Krauss suggests that the work ‘delivered a message of privacy, of a retreat from language, of a withdrawal into those extremely personal reaches of experience that are beyond, or beneath, speech’. Rosalind Krauss, ‘Eva Hesse: Contingent’ in *Eva Hesse*, Nixon, M., ed., (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002), p.28.



A Manual to Observe the Stars on a Ceramic Plate – Dinners In Three Acts, 22-23 January 2018.



“If making a feminist point returns us to the table, then the terms of its appearance will be different. It might be that quite a different table comes into view”, Sara

Ahmed suggests.¹⁹ Sitting across another long table I remember the artist presenting her final thesis for the MFA degree at the Athens School of Fine Arts, a session that was open to the public. A long table occupied by the faculty of the school who were asking Vlassopoulou questions about the pieces she presented in her final exhibition, the centerpiece of which was *33,478*. The conversation carried on for a good amount of time and not one question was asked in relation to feminism. Out of sight and running parallel to the examination table, *33,478* punctuated the words that were spoken even more. The silence of the torn books, the chipped wood and the marble daggers was far more signifying than most of that conversation.

Lately Vlassopoulou's practice has grown to include performance to a greater extent since her work has always been performative one way or another. In January 2018, the Museum of Cycladic Art invited guests to a dinner devised by the artist. For the dinner table Vlassopoulou manufactured objects that redefined the classical format of a formal dinner and which were to be approached as ceremonial rather than utilitarian. Through a series of unexpected episodes the dinner evolved into a ritual that invited its guests to handle their primal instincts, as the artist describes. When Vlassopoulou presents a carcass on a flat base with no cutlery or serves desert in a θήλαστρο (thilastro is literally translated as breast-feeder), a supreme part-object, out of which the sweetness needs to be sucked for gratification, one may feel uneasy, awkward, smile and make a joke about it with friends. The feelings of awkwardness and unease are there because we can all relate to the drives, the moment we realise it, each individually and all together sharing the same dinner napkin, can be a queer experience. But they are also present because art that deals with their renunciation served us all.

¹⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 62



“It is a central tenet of psychoanalysis that if we can tolerate what is most disorienting – disillusioning – about our own unconscious, we are less likely to act on it, less inclined to strike out in a desperate attempt to assign the horrors of the world to someone, or somewhere else. It is not, therefore the impulse that is dangerous, but the ruthlessness of our attempts to be rid of it”, Rose argues.²⁰ The bet to tolerate our unconscious, our fantasies, our bodies riven by the drives is, of course, not solely tied

²⁰ Rose, *The Last Resistance*, 166-67

to personal circumstance. It is a bet that is habitually lost by those formulating the dominant narratives that condemn or shield off access to the self in order to provide conventional justifications for trauma grounded in linear, progressive and unjust accounts of historical experience, which cleave the personal from the political, the psychic from the social. Let us no longer fear “moments of theoretical collapse” for they may be also moments that are “inseparable from psychoanalytic truth”.²¹ Let us actively create and support the opportunities that provide us with the space and the time to talk about what has brought us here and what drives us forward.

²¹ Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 5-10