

# THE PANDEMIC AND ITS SHADOW.

## FEMINIST THEORETICAL AND ART DISCOURSES ON TRAUMA AND COMMUNITY IN COVID-19

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### INTRODUCTION: THE PANDEMIC AS A COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

To approach the pandemic COVID-19 from the paradigmatic angle of collective or communal trauma can meet with objections of two kinds. The first possible set of problems is that this theoretical and conceptual move might psychologize, and potentially also de-politicize, the social responses to the pandemic. Insofar as the COVID-19 pandemic has reconstituted “the connection between our species life and our political life”<sup>1</sup>, to reduce its traumatic responses to matters of individual psychology would be to downplay its status of an event in the Badiuean sense—that which has the potential to change the state of the world and to initiate a new beginning and a new time<sup>2</sup>. The second set of problems arising from the use of vernacular of group trauma in relation to the COVID-19 is that it potentially homogenizes and unifies the collective ‘we’ as the subject/object of the pandemic response. We should ask if to speak of the pandemic ‘collective trauma’ is thus not to apply a highly homogenizing rubric of collectivity to plural, diverse and mutually irreducible experiences, including the differential experiences of vulnerable embodiment and illness.

At this stage of the pandemic – more than two years after its first outbreak and the subsequent worldwide dispersal of the virus and its many variants – it is beyond any doubt

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<sup>1</sup> M. Vatter, “One Health and One Home. On the Biopolitics of Covid-19”, in: *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy. Conversations on Pandemics, Politics, and Society*. Eds. F. Castrillón, and T. Marchevsky, (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. Badiou, F. Tarby, *Philosophy and the Event* (London: Wiley, 2013).

that, COVID-19 has not produced many socially equalizing effects. In contrast to the initial enthusiastic proclamations of togetherness and solidarity, the pandemic has highlighted the diversity of the populations, casting into stark relief the inequities, disadvantages and at times nothing short of cruelty underpinning the dominant social and economic arrangements, including the disparities between the global south and the global north<sup>3</sup>. Much has been written about the pandemic disclosing and rendering visible, catalyzing, and perhaps consolidating, structural and systemic precarities of populations, from the difficulties of implementing social isolation regulations in situations of homelessness, in refugee camps, and in overcrowded or precarious housing conditions, to the differential effects of school closures on children from disparate economic backgrounds and vulnerable communities<sup>4</sup>. As Patricia Gherovici writes in *Death Does Not Make Us Equal*, focusing specifically on the “disproportional Covid-19 infections and deaths” among marginalized, poor and racialized groups, the use of the word ‘crisis’ in relation to COVID-19 responses is highly appropriate in this context precisely because the Greek *krisis* not only designates an emergency situation (a sense in which it is predominantly used in its anglicized form today), but also a decision, a judgment, a separation, and a “critical point” at which future is decided<sup>5</sup>. Or as Jamieson Webster puts it in her warning against pandemic ‘celebrations of togetherness’ and “salvific narratives” of community, COVID-19 has

travel[led] along the cracks of a society, exposing us to our weaknesses and failures, to how fragile our identities are, or our security as a group; [the pandemic] almost mimics the unconscious in this way<sup>6</sup>.

I use the conceptual rubric of ‘collective trauma’ in a sense that is never exclusively psychological, but also inescapably social and cultural, following in this regard Kai Erikson’s theoretical outline of communal trauma that is irreducible to a cumulation of individual experiences. Erikson suggests that there is a dialectic interplay between the traumatic “blow to the psyche” and the “blow to the basic tissues of social life”<sup>7</sup>. As such, Erikson articulates a key insight that locates in shared traumatic experience an emergence of sociality, whereby, he argues rather provocatively, “trauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common cultural backgrounds can,” generating mutual re-

<sup>3</sup> K. Libal, K. Prakash, “Solidarity in Times of Crisis”, *Journal of Human Rights*, 5, 19 (2020); S. Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (London: Polity, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> N. Brando, K. Pitasse Fragoso, “Assessing the Impact of School Closures on Children Through a Vulnerable Lens”, in: *Political Philosophy in a Pandemic: Routes to a More Just Future*, eds. F. Niker, A. Bhattacharaya (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021); D. Jenkins, K. Wells, K. Brownlee, “Adequate Housing in a Pandemic”, in: *Political Philosophy in a Pandemic: Routes to a More Just Future*, eds. F. Niker, A. Bhattacharaya (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021); S. Nanda, “Inequalities and COVID-19”, in: *COVID-19. Volume I: Global Pandemic, Societal Responses, Ideological Solutions*, ed. M. J. Ryan (London: Routledge, 2021); S. L. Smith, A. G. Sanford, D. Blum, “Spotlighting Hidden Inequalities: Post-Secondary Education in a Pandemic”, in: *COVID-19. Volume I: Global Pandemic, Societal Responses, Ideological Solutions*, ed. M. J. Ryan (London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> P. Gherovici, “A Polemic on the Pandemic: Death Does not Make us Equal”, *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/a-polemic-on-the-pandemic-death-does-not-makes-us-equal/> [06.09.2021].

<sup>6</sup> Jamieson Webster in J. Webster, A. M. Gingeras, “The Real Real”, *Artforum*, 2020, <https://www.artforum.com/slant/jamieson-webster-and-alison-m-gingeras-discuss-psychoanalysis-during-the-pandemic-82992> [06.09.2021].

<sup>7</sup> K. Erikson, *A New Species of Trouble: The Human Experience of Modern Disasters* (New York: Norton, 1995), p. 455.

cognition and feelings of kinship<sup>8</sup>. In this essay I look closely at the conjunction of collective trauma concept and the pandemic – a conjunction that is simultaneously also a disjunction – from the critical perspective of gender, the differential distribution of labor, including affective labor, in society, and the alarming amplification of globally reported cases of violence in the domestic sphere (the ‘shadow pandemic’). By following feminist psychoanalytic and feminist materialist accounts of the pandemic, I suggest that pandemic trauma cannot be encapsulated solely as an ‘event’ that exerts certain ‘objective force’ upon those affected by it, but that it exists in a more complex and perhaps intimate relation to what it disrupts, which is to say the community and communality that it allegedly delivers a blow to. In what follows, I take my cue from feminist, psychoanalytic and artistic discourses to argue against the notions of the pandemic as a traumatic intrusion or infringement upon societies, communities or domesticities. Rather, a closer look at the psycho-social dynamics underpinning the ‘shadow pandemic’ reveal a more complex, and far closer, relation between domesticity and violence, which is frequently obfuscated, invisible and unseen, not only in social discourses, but is removed from the conscious mind as well. Jacqueline Rose has captured this dynamic as ‘invisible murderousness’, and, demonstrating striking relevance of this insight in the pandemic context, Rose positions

the link between the ability to inflict untold damage and a willed distortion – whether conscious or unconscious – in the field of vision<sup>9</sup>.

In Erikson’s paradigmatic model of communal trauma, trauma damages “the tissues that hold human groups intact” and it corrodes “social climates [and] communal moods”. This draws out an image of community as a benevolent, non-violence and positive social and affective formation, which the ‘event’ of the pandemic disturbs as if a force entirely external to it. Among others, Richard Flanagan demonstrated the dangerous appeal of such thinking in an essay written for *The Guardian* on the occasion of the Australia Day where he praises the Australian “communal instinct” demonstrated in the pandemic<sup>10</sup>. Drawing out a highly problematic historical parallel between, on the one hand, the (allegedly) differential social responses to COVID-19 in Australia and in Britain (the former a repository of social solidarity and selflessness and the latter characterized by a lack thereof), and, on the other hand, a narrative of a Japanese POW camps where British officers refused to share their privileged access to food and medicine with the common soldiers, thus contributing to their demise, while Australian officers refused rank and class privileges in gesture of solidarity with others, Flanagan utters what to my ears is a deplorable and myopic claim: during the pandemic, “once more the English are dying and the Australians are surviving”<sup>11</sup>. The communal ‘instinct’ and communal action are imagined in this context as a force that can be mobilized against the broader social effects of the pandemic, by way of overcoming or at least mitigating the consequences of trauma, as a depository of sociality and empathy that helps exceed a solipsistic orientation of the individual pandemic experience.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p.459.

<sup>9</sup> J. Rose, *On Violence and On Violence Against Women* (London: Faber & Faber, 2021), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> R. Flanagan, “Australia Day is an Annual Reminder of the Theft of a Nation. As It Is, It Can Never Unite Us”, *The Guardian*, 25.01. 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/jan/25/australia-day-is-an-annual-reminder-of-the-theft-of-a-nation-as-it-is-it-can-never-unite-us> [26.11.2021].

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

## PUNISHING WOMEN FOR COVID: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND GENDERED PRODUCTIONS OF SECURITY

The language of ‘unconscious effects’ introduced by the trauma discourse is particularly insightful when paired with the discussion of the pandemic’s ‘shadow’, proposed in the UN Women report on the differential impact of the pandemic on women globally<sup>12</sup>. The term ‘shadow pandemic’ has been used in social and cultural discourses as an idiom for the increased physical and psychological violence against women, the extent of which cannot be explained away by simply invoking pandemic’s disruptions in the functioning of public institutions and infrastructures available to women (infrastructures and networks that had been highly affected by austerity policies). By calling violence against women the pandemic’s ‘shadow’, the UN Women’s Executive Director, Phumzila Mlambo-Ngcuka referenced the plural and thought-provoking associations of this term. Violence against women is invoked as something that closely follows and trails the pandemic, a kind of a ‘pandemic wake’. Thus, the figure of a ‘shadow’ suggests that at hand are social contours of the pandemic, as well as a social reality characterized by reduced visibility. Finally, ‘shadow’ also suggests an affective force, whereby gendered violence featured as something that casts shadow of grief and mourning onto those too eager to see in the pandemic a source of emancipatory possibility.

It has been established beyond doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with dramatic increase in domestic violence. The UN Women report *Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women during COVID-19*, published in December 2021 and based on survey data from Albania, Bangladesh, Côte d’Ivoire, Cameroon, Colombia, Jordan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Morocco, Nigeria, Paraguay, Thailand, and Ukraine, concluded that the pandemic resulted in (and exacerbates already existing problem of) women’s vulnerability to physical, sexual and psychological violence and to sexual harassment in both public and domestic spaces, as well as trafficking and other types of exploitation<sup>13</sup>. An intersectional perspective has been crucial for identifying the most vulnerable women, as violence disproportionately affected mothers or women with other care responsibilities, as well as those who lived in rural areas, and were unemployed or in other socio-economically precarious situations. Similar discussions, estimates and analyses were made independently within the fora of World Bank<sup>14</sup>,

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<sup>12</sup> See for examples: “Covid-19 and Violence Against Women and Girls: Addressing the Shadow Pandemic”, *UNWomen*, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Policy-brief-COVID-19-and-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf> [16.11.2021]; “From Insight to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of Covid-19”, *UN Women*, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Gender-equality-in-the-wake-of-COVID-19-en.pdf> [16.11.2021]; “Impact of Covid-19 on Violence Against Women and Girls and Service Provision: UN Women Rapid Assessment and Findings”, *UN Women*, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Impact-of-COVID-19-on-violence-against-women-and-girls-and-service-provision-en.pdf> [16.11.2021].

<sup>13</sup> “From Insight to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of Covid-19”, *UN Women*, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Gender-equality-in-the-wake-of-COVID-19-en.pdf> [16.11.2021].

<sup>14</sup> H. Brixi, F. Haishan, P. J. Uribe, “Global Crisis of Violence against Women and Girls: Tackling it with New, Better Data Use”, *World Bank Blogs*, 05.01.2022, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/global-crisis-violence-against-women-and-girls-tackling-it-new-better-data-use> [09.05.2022].

Open Society Foundations<sup>15</sup>, World Health Organization<sup>16</sup>, and numerous women's rights organizations.

One of the problems with the celebrations of communal 'instinct' or pandemic sociality is the scarce attention paid to the gendered (material as well as psychic) labor that produces communality and domesticity. Two feminist psychoanalytic thinkers, Julia Kristeva and Jacqueline Rose, who have been vocal participants in the public debates about the pandemic and its psycho-social effects in France and United Kingdom respectively, offer insights that debunk the idealized notion pandemic communality as a locus of non-violent sociality that the pandemic trauma disrupts. Rose, drawing on Kristeva, points to a task that is typically assigned to women of tackling what Kristeva calls the "phobic core" of humanity<sup>17</sup>. That task consists, Rose argues, of expelling or effacing the negative core of the subject, which consists of the fragility, limitations and precarity that underpins and frames any embodiment and any life (in this view, mortality features as the 'unconscious knowledge' of human life). At the risk of overstating the binary organization of gender in contemporary British society, Rose suggests that the labor of producing safety and security in the face of this "phobic core" during the pandemic becomes

above all the task of women [who] make their partners, children, and dependents feel secure, [they clean] the dirt and debris [of the world] away<sup>18</sup>.

Viewing the pandemic through the lens of trauma theory requires thus making a link between the pandemic and Kristeva's notion of humanity's "phobic core," whereby death and dying are viewed as something that permeates and 'infects' life<sup>19</sup>. Kristeva rearticulates her insights on abjections in the pandemic context, arguing that it demands a recognition of "the fact that death is within us," and that death is "integral to the process of life"<sup>20</sup> even at the cellular level of apoptosis (the dying and regeneration of cells)<sup>21</sup>. For Jacqueline Rose this points into relief the psycho-social connection between the pandemic, violence and the unconscious and fantasy life: she writes that violence perpetrated within domestic spaces during the pandemic is a kind of Freudian symptom that shows that "a death [...] has become too visible, for the bodies that are failing and falling all around, as psychic defenses start to crumble in the face of unbearable fear and grief"<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> L. Khateeb, "Tackling a 'Shadow Pandemic' of Gender-based Violence", *Open Society Foundation*, 21.01.2022, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/tackling-a-shadow-pandemic-of-gender-based-violence> [09.05.2022].

<sup>16</sup> World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, "Responding to Violence Against Women and Children during Covid-19. Impact on Service Provision, Strategies and Actions in the WHO European Region", <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/349504/9789289056403-eng.pdf> [09.05.2022].

<sup>17</sup> J. Rose, "Living Death", *Gagosian Quarterly*, 2020 (winter), <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2020/12/04/essay-living-death-jacqueline-rose/> [08.09.2021].

<sup>18</sup> Rose, *On Violence...*, p. 365.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, trans. L. S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> J. Kristeva, "Humanity is Rediscovering Existential Solitude, the Meaning of Limits, and Mortality", in: *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy. Conversations on Pandemics, Politics, and Society*, eds. F. Castrillon, T. Marchevsky (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 102. Cf. J. Rose, "To See One's Own Death", *London Review of Books* 42, 22 (2021), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n22/jacqueline-rose/to-die-one-s-own-death> [08.09.2021].

<sup>21</sup> Kristeva, "Humanity...", p. 102.

<sup>22</sup> Rose, "Living...".

As feminist scholars have long argued, the site of domesticity and homeliness are domains of social activity infused with danger, ambivalence, risk, and power struggle<sup>23</sup>. Rose has remarked on how the phrase ‘stay at home, safe lives’, used by the British government during the lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, is not only highly ironic when placed adjacently to the figures and stories documenting the ‘shadow pandemic’, but also actively draws on, and reinforces, traditional imaginaries of home as a place of safety and non-violence. It is useful in this context to remember Bonnie Honig’s characterization of home as a “dilemmatic space” – a fantasy figure and a mythic place, which is

free of power, conflict, and struggle, a place [...] unmarked or unruined by difference and untouched by the power brought to bear upon it by the identities that strive to ground themselves in its place<sup>24</sup>.

Jacqueline Rose borrows Diana Russel’s word ‘femicide’ (and Kristeva’s somewhat reformulated term ‘feminicide’) to open the question of the murderous impulse underwriting the ‘shadow pandemic’<sup>25</sup>. She thus draws the readers’ attention to the mechanisms whereby the expectation of gendered others to make the world safe and secure is taken as one of the defining attributes of ‘femininity’. From this perspective, physical and psychological violence on the one hand and the dominant symbolic order on the other imbricate closely. ‘Home’ as a mythic place of safety is not only a high social good that needs to be protected from the intrusive strangers, but also is deconstructed as an enclosed and confined site of sanctioned activity by those relegated to the role of the guardians of its hearth.

In a passage of striking insight, Rose connects the two parallel developments – the pandemic and its shadow – by calling the violence against women a form of “punishment” for women’s perceived failure to construe a space of uncompromised safety (a failure “to clean up the world and the mind”<sup>26</sup>). Insofar as it

has been the task of women through the ages [...] to make their partners, children and dependents feel secure in a messy and uncertain world

the pandemic has provided a striking example of the unfeasibility and implausibility of this ‘task’<sup>27</sup>. In a psychoanalytic vernacular, then, the eruption of violence occurs in a perceived response to the failure of the feminine to seal the cracks of home, to secure it for the masculine subject. Instead, the ‘phobic core’ of humanity, or what Rose calls “the vulnerability that is in us, that lives in us,” continues to gape at us throughout the pandemic, causing for many unbearable anguish, emotional stress, anxiety and depression. Finally, Rose goes on to suggest that women are being punished not only for their ‘failure’ to render the world secure during the pandemic (punished, as she puts it, for “a death that has become too visible, for the bodies that are failing and falling all around, as psychic defenses start to crumble in the face of unbearable fear and grief”<sup>28</sup>), but also, in a more long-term historical perspective,

<sup>23</sup> See for example B. Honig, “Difference, Dilemmas, and the Politics of Home”, *Social Research: An International Inquiry* 61 (1994); I. M. Young, *Intersecting Voices. Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); A. Weir, “Home and Identity: In Memory of Iris Marion Young.” *Hypatia* 23, 3 (2008).

<sup>24</sup> Honig, “Difference...”, p. 568.

<sup>25</sup> Rose, “Living...”.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> Rose, *On Violence...*, p. 365.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 366.

for their emancipatory achievements, which questioned the ‘norm’ of women’s confinement to the domestic sphere. For that reason, Rose calls the ‘shadow pandemic’ a ‘backlash’ and a ‘revenge’, which both “makes these women the scapegoats for the awfulness of the hour,” and takes the public health tactics of ‘sheltering in place’ and social isolation as a kind of opportunity to react against “their hard-won freedom”<sup>29</sup>.

### THE ‘SHADOW PANDEMIC’ IN VISUAL ARTS PROJECTS

This psychosocial and political imbrication of the pandemic and the ‘shadow pandemic’ has been captured with poignancy by visual artists. An installation called ‘Shielding’ by Brighton-based bio-artist Anna Dumitriu (Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4) includes spatially separated (‘distanced’) miniature beds, which are completed with personalized hand-made miniature blankets. It accompanies Dumitriu’s more recent art project called ‘Collateral Effects’, which considers non-immediate, indirect and long-term consequences of the pandemic in science and society. In ‘Shielding’ Dumitriu tackles directly the problem of pandemic-related domestic violence through a critical interrogation of the idiom of home as a shelter, and its paradoxical meanings. The installation brings together on the one hand, materials traditionally associated with feminized domestic labor (knits, crochets, felt), which connote domestic intimacy, cozy aesthetics, and subjective security, with, on the other hand, metal 3D-printed bed-frames, which carry contrary semantics of impersonal atmosphere, hospital infrastructures and industrial productions. The miniature aesthetics are also significant in their associations with the uncanny reproduction of real-life places and institutions: the organization of the beds in the installation is modelled on the spacing of beds in a COVID-19 ward in a Wuhan hospital. What is more, the artist has incorporated in her objects artificially produced genetic material of SARS-CoV-2 (it features in a non-infectious form as part of the installation and had been achieved from a plasmid construct obtained from National Institute of Biological Standards and Control). At play is thus a contrast between, and dialectic of, the broader semantics of aesthetic objects classed as industrial, mass-manufactured and impersonal (hospital beds) and artistic, handmade, and personal (the crafted bedding). The uncanny effect of the installation has to do with the presence of a highly securitized viral element (‘object’ or even ‘hyper-object’)<sup>30</sup>, becoming inseparable from objects traditionally aligned with discourses of the subject’s safekeeping and protection (in liberal accounts of domesticity and its inscription within the distinction between the public and the private).



<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>30</sup> See S. Iovino, “Hyperobject COVID-19”, Cambridge Reflections: Covid -19, <http://www.cambridgeblog.org/2020/05/hyperobject-covid-19/> [1.03.2022].



Anna Dumitriu's installation elicits conflicted and paradoxical affect focused on the act of 'shielding' which, first, interrogates domesticity as a fantasy figure that promises the subject a retreat into the space of safety, or even as a kind of sanctuary. This is paired with a contrasting affective register of anxiety and dread, whereby the omnipresent viral matter passes through the walls demarcating the household by attaching itself to inanimate objects or human persons that are either permitted admittance or become adjacent to its entry-points. For the many households whose members had become infected with the virus, the meaning of domesticity as shielding was inverted from household protection to viral containment. This semantic shift is specific to the kaleidoscopic dimension of the notion of *cordon sanitaire*: from household as a site of sheltering and protection from disease to household as site of viral containment or viral enclosure through isolation and distancing<sup>31</sup>. The kaleidoscopic shift from home as security to home as *insecurity* underpinning the 'sheltering in place' policy has also broader philosophical dimension; with the pandemic becoming the "central paradigm" of our ethics and politics all people are simultaneously considered to be the "potential victims and vectors to one another"<sup>32</sup>.

Through the striking aesthetic conjunction (and *disjunction*) of gender, household and disease Dumitriu's artwork accentuates domesticity as a fantasy figure, which is premised on the erasure and invisibility of violence. By thematizing gender as a social and cultural pivot

<sup>31</sup> Cf. G. Spitale, "COVID-19 and the Ethics of Quarantine: A Lesson from the Eyam Plague", *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 23 (2020).

<sup>32</sup> M. Battin, L. Francis, J. Jacobson, Ch. Smith, "The Ethics of Defeating COVID-19", *UOPblog*, 30.04.2020, <https://blog.oup.com/2020/04/the-ethics-of-defeating-covid-19> [29.11.2021].



of domesticity, the installation casts into stark relief the stakes and costs of the gendered structures of labor, whereby women have been traditionally tasked with the production of homeliness and communality. The visual aesthetics of Dumitriu's installation dovetail with Jacqueline Rose's critical analysis of the pandemic as a "spectacle of the rampant lengths not only in terms of denial also of false self-idealization"<sup>33</sup> through the polysemy of 'shielding' not only as an internally divided and contradictory notion, but also as a constitutively failed and unsuccessful concept. Dumitriu poignantly asks who pays the price and the retribution for this failure of fantasy.

Another visual artwork worth considering in relation to the social and gendered contexts of the pandemic, including domestic violence and collective trauma, is the work of Estonian artist Flo Kasearu. Her projects 'Cut Out of Life' (Figures 5, 6, 7, and 8); 'Violence Grows in Silence' (Figures 9, 10, and 11), and 'The Game Isn't Over Until I Say So' (Figure 12) were exhibited in Tallin Art Hall in 2021, and, I suggest, they articulate a more nuanced (and less binary) view of the relation between trauma and community. In 'Cut Out of Life' and 'Violence Grows in Silence' Kasearu 'sculpts' distorted shapes and arrangements of household furniture and other materials. The result is an uncanny, body-like appearance, which invests inanimate material objects (such as household furniture) with testimonial and mnemonic affordance. These objects occupy a relation of proximity and contiguity to violence that occurs 'behind the closed doors'.



<sup>33</sup> Rose, *On Violence...*, p. 363.

The furniture in Kasearu's installation appears vegetal and plant-like, but also feminine in its voluptuous aesthetics (the shapes are reminiscent to bodily parts and the surfaces have a skin-like appearance), blurring the oppositional binaries of 'animate' and 'inanimate'. In another section of the installation Kasearu has gathered numerous household plants and subjected them to a process that, in a way, inverts the animization of her furniture objects. Kasearu exhibits the plants in the state of withering and decay, or, in other words, in the process of becoming-inanimate. The striking visual aesthetics of Kasearu's vegetal presentation is a kind of play on (and, potentially, a dialectic of) the perceptual indistinction between the vegetal and inorganic matter, as well as between a force of aliveness and processes of evanescence or deadening. In result, the gendered activities of, on the one hand, nurturing, fostering and nourishing life, and, on the other hand, giving in to decay, are not opposed to each other as contradictory, but become reciprocally involved and imbricated.

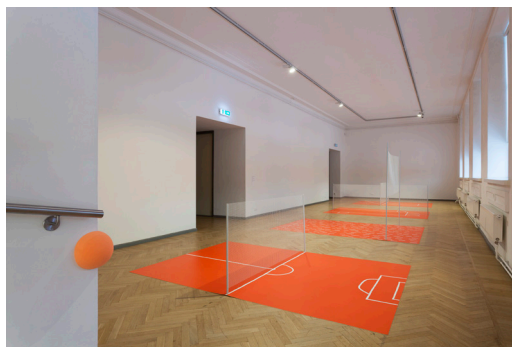


At this point, we could consider Kasearu's visual bio-art as not only an aesthetic undoing of the trope of feminine as a nurturing 'pillar' of domestic and reproductive labor, but also as a sign or a symptom of death occupying place within life, or what Kristeva has called the vulnerability "that lives [within]"<sup>34</sup>. Paradoxically, it is thus not a 'plant', but domestic violence that 'grows' – swells, expands, and intensifies – manifesting within the folds of the ordinary and the quotidian gendered experience.

Finally, Kasearu's artwork 'The Game Is Not Over Until I Say So' references the effects of quasi-legal biases and social prejudices in situations of divorce. Inadvertently, it also echoes the wording of one of the iconic statement of the 'shadow pandemic' in Britain. Aired in August 2020, a BBC program 'Escaping My Abuser' tackled the problem of domestic violence during lockdowns and social isolation, documenting cases of domestic abuse and rape

<sup>34</sup> Kristeva, "Humanity...", p.102.

that shocked the public. In the case, the perpetrator used the words “let the games begin” to his partner upon the government’s lockdown announcement. Bringing forth the image of ‘games’ as a euphemism for violence, Kasearu throws into relief what Jacqueline Rose so accurately articulates in her book on violence against women as a situation when wounded narcissism and entitlement mutate not into a sense of loss, but “an accursed gift”<sup>35</sup>.



### IN LIEU OF CONCLUSIONS: A POSTSCRIPT ON THE DIVISION OF LABOR AND PANDEMIC SOCIALITY

The insights from the artistic documentation of the psycho-social dynamics of the ‘shadow pandemic’ (and the feminist and psychoanalytic interventions) unequivocally suggest that we should question the dominant imaginaries of community and sociality in the pandemic. Specifically, critical analysis of detrimental social effects of social isolation, social distancing and ‘sheltering in place’ (etc.) problematizes the dominant understanding of community as precious and benign unit, which is disrupted and damaged by the pandemic, and as a repository of unambiguously positive forces that can withstand and perhaps even overcome these detrimental effects. What feminist psychoanalytic approaches cast into stark relief is that communality exists in a more complex and intimate relation with violence, which the pandemic brings to our attention and renders visible, but also that it catalyzes and intensifies. In Jacqueline Rose’s words, the pandemic has made conspicuous “the fragility of [the] ‘we’” simultaneously problematizing community (and domesticity) as paradigms of togetherness. This has foregrounded an important point, recurrently made by feminist scholars, that the political vernacular of domesticity, frequently used during the pandemic in public health discourses (‘stay home, save lives’), obfuscates the ambiguous (and at times straightforwardly dangerous) realities of home. For the victims of domestic violence during the pandemic, terms such ‘sheltering’, ‘home’, ‘isolation’ and ‘distancing’ have carried antithetical meanings to the officially sanctioned ones: threat and danger instead of safety, and harm and even death instead of health and well-being.

In the closing of this essay, I want to go a step further by way of recognition of the importance of intersectional and materialist (as well as critical global South and post-colonial) perspectives on gender and sexual politics of the COVID-19 pandemic. Arjun Appadurai has written persuasively about the processes of the “production of locality,” and their volatility and temporariness (with a focus on urban places, especially the mega-cities in the

<sup>35</sup> Rose, *On Violence...*, p. 4.

global South)<sup>36</sup>. In Appadurai's perspective 'locality' is materially produced, and includes, for instance, medical and hospital infrastructures, food and medical supplies, housing and schooling arrangements. The important aspect of these 'localities' and their social operations is that they ensure the continuous and routinized functioning of the social. As Appadurai argues, "[t]he production of locality is an effort to produce the sense of continuity in the face of the temporariness of things"<sup>37</sup> – the temporariness, precariousness and volatility is what the pandemic has starkly revealed. As such, locality includes the "spatial arrangements" of human habitation, movement and mobility<sup>38</sup>. The experiences of underprivileged and marginalized groups during the pandemic (in the global South, but also in well-off societies among migrant workers, the poor, the homeless, the refugees, etc.) speak volumes about social realities where (to paraphrase Appadurai)

huge amount of social energy and personal creativity is devoted to producing, if not the illusion, then the sense of [...] stability, continuity, or something like permanence in the face of the known temporariness or volatility of almost all the arrangements of social life<sup>39</sup>.

The extent to which the pandemic has brought to a halt social stability and continuity of social arrangement for populations globally (though with highly differential effects) must thus be supplemented with these accounts of under-privilege and of the ways in which marginalization has played out in ordinary and quotidian scenarios of life during the pandemic. Adopting Appadurai's perspective, we could perhaps speculate that what the pandemic has illuminated and brought into the sphere of visibility is the labor, energy, inventiveness, initiative and creativity that marginalized people have always already invested to produce 'locality', or the 'illusion of permanence' – the ostensible stability of communal forms, social arrangements, and relations of care<sup>40</sup>. At the level of embodiment, what it brought into light is, for instance, that for marginalized populations the conditions where "physical co-habitation has become enormously strained, the potential of the body to be a trope for community, for solidarity, trust, integrity, and integration," can take "just the reverse form: bodies become a site for the location of fear, images of pollution, contamination, filth, and danger"<sup>41</sup>. These bodies "suffer from a surplus of visibility" and from their inability to implement and practice domesticity in accordance with the sanctioned and normalized public health directives. The situation of migrant workers in Singapore or Dubai, and elsewhere, or the precariously employed workers in Germany's factories, provide acute demonstration of the veracity of that observation.

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<sup>36</sup> A. Appadurai, "Illusion of Permanence: Interview with Arjun Appadurai", *Perspecta* 34 (2003), p. 44-52.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p.47.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>41</sup> Paraphrased: *Ibidem*, p. 50.

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**SUMMARY:**

This article explores the philosophical and psychoanalytic trajectories of conceptualizing the Covid-19 pandemic as 'collective trauma', and considers what would be the risks, but also productive possibilities, of such a theoretical move. The context of this inquiry is the so-called 'shadow pandemic' – the drastic increase in domestic violence globally, which accompanied introduction of lockdowns as a measure of containing the impact of Covid-19 on public health infrastructures. For the women who were victims of violence during the lockdowns, the discourse of 'sheltering', 'isolation' and 'staying home' has carried antithetical meanings to the officially sanctioned ones – those were meanings of threat, danger, harm, and death. Drawing on the work of two feminist psychoanalytic thinkers, Julia Kristeva and Jacqueline Rose, and on installations by bio-artists Anna Dumitriu and Flo Kasearu, I argue against notions of the pandemic as an external traumatic event that disrupted societies and communities worldwide. Rather, the 'shadow pandemic' suggest that there is a more complex, even intimate, relation between the pandemic, violence, and gendered productions of sociality.

**KEYWORDS:**

Covid-19 pandemic, 'shadow pandemic', violence against women, collective trauma, psychoanalysis