



INVISIBILITY

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## **Rite of the Waters: procession through the Campanhã Washhouses**

*Chloé Darmon, Gabriela Manfredini*

### **Abstract:**

This article aims to reflect on the invisibility of women's work. We focus on two interconnected themes: the devaluation of domestic work as a de facto job; and the neglect of public washhouses, which were spaces for women to meet and work in the past.

Initially, Chloé's research discussed the public wash houses in Porto in order to cover their history, their impact on women's lives and their current state of deterioration. Gabriela's research reflected on the relationships and developments between domestic labour and performance art in an amalgam of repetitions, deviations and accumulation.

As a result of the Des/oriente project, there was a combination of these two areas of knowledge that gave rise to new multidisciplinary research carried out in two distinct areas: fine arts and architecture. The project in question aimed to realise narratives in the public space in the parish of Campanhã in Porto with activations by local artists.

In practical terms, the research materialised in a performance held in three washhouses where we were able to reactivate these spaces in an artistic way while also exploring different narratives about domestic work. It was possible to once again create a place for meeting and sharing in these spaces.

Keywords: architecture, performance art, domestic work, wash-houses, women

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**Gabriela Manfredini** (1994) is a Brazilian artist based in Porto. Her artistic practice is multidisciplinary, but in the past three years she has been working mostly with drawing and performance. She is interested in addressing themes such as feminism and Anthropocene and has recently focused on investigating the relations of contemporary work culture, body and productivity to create performances. In 2021, she completed her master's degree in art and design for public space in the Fine Arts Faculty at the University of Porto. In 2018, she presented her first exhibition at Instituto Adelina in São Paulo and since then has participated in shows, exhibitions and artistic residencies in Brazil and Portugal.

## Introduction

Women are largely responsible for domestic and care work. They do almost twice as much housework as men on a daily basis for unpaid work<sup>1</sup>. During the pandemic, it was noticeable that it was mostly women who took care of the laundry and the house in general. Walking around Campanhã carefully, it was also possible to find some abandoned washhouses with no water. Based on the rhythm of everyday life as a source of research and artistic expression, we intend to reflect on the invisible spaces of the wash-houses and the invisible, undervalued labour.

We began by approaching domestic work from the transition from feudal rule to capitalism, where it ended up becoming "women's labour" and over time was devalued to the detriment of waged labour. This transition redefined the role of labour and women in society in general. We also see that even with the inclusion of women in the labour market, gender disparities are still clear and evident.

Public washhouses, which used to be vibrant spaces of community life, ended up being erased both physically (architecturally) and in terms of the historical erasure of women in the public space of cities.

The construction of the narrative contemplates and follows the water: leaving the River Douro and arriving at the River Torto, passing through three washhouses along the way. Rite of Water arises from this desire to ritualise these spaces, women and nature.

Ritual is also intrinsically connected to performance art. However, performance repeats acts, ritualising them and modifying their meaning. Schechner calls this characteristic *restored behaviour*: "The practitioners of all these arts, rites, and healings assume that some behaviours – organise sequences of events... – exist separate from the performers who "do" these behaviours".<sup>2</sup>

This essay delves into the invisibility, unearthing the silent, uncelebrated work of women, both within the walls of the home and in the communal washhouses.

### **Domestic work: the invisible labour**

Both the domestic work<sup>3</sup> and the care work made in times gone by in the laundries fall under the heading of unpaid labour when practised in the context of households.

This work is directly linked to gender differences. With the fall of feudalism and the beginning of enclosure policies and wage labour, women found it much harder to support themselves and

1. Perista, Cardoso, 2016

2. Schechner, 1985, p.36

3. Domestic work can be defined as tasks related to food, the upkeep of linen and clothing, childcare, housework, other household chores (gardening, repairs, care of adults, etc.) and various errands. INSEE, 1974

when they did manage to work, they earned much less than men. The philosopher and teacher Silvia Federici explains the difference between feudal and capitalist system:

Women worked in the fields, in addition to raising children, cooking, washing, spinning, and keeping an herb garden; their domestic activities were not devalued and did not involve different social relations from those of men, as they would later, in a money-economy, when housework would cease to be viewed as real work.<sup>4</sup>

These historical changes meant that the work done at home has become invisible to those who enjoy it without having to do anything.

However, domestic labour is tireless and endless and even today the gender gap survives. Simone de Beauvoir even compared it to myth of Sisyphus when she said "There are few tasks that resemble the ordeal of Sisyphus more than those of a housewife: day after day, you have to wash the dishes, dust the furniture, mend the clothes, which will be dirty, dusty and torn again the next day"<sup>5</sup>.

Women are still largely responsible for domestic and care work. A study carried out in Portugal by CESIS (2016) reveals that unpaid work entails a daily time of 4 hours and 23 minutes for women, and 2 hours and 38 minutes for men: 1 hour and 45 minutes less. The work done by women represents 70% of the total. One curiosity that this research points out is that the value of unpaid care and domestic work in Portugal will represent at least around €40 billion each year. And if this figure were taken into account when calculating GDP, it would represent 20 per cent of the total.

This accumulation of work on women sometimes ends up affecting them mentally and physically. And when they have children, their work and careers are often affected too. Claudia Goldin, who recently received the Nobel Prize in Economics for her research on women in the labour market. She argues that in the past, wage differences were due to different educational levels between men and women. Today, the most decisive factor in these differences is the arrival of the first child and the interruption in work that motherhood causes.

In the field of art, Mierle Laderman Ukeles is the biggest reference. After her artistic work took a back seat to motherhood, Ukeles decided to turn her routine as a housewife into her artistic endeavour through what she called maintenance art. In her 1969 Manifesto For Maintenance Art, she wrote her utmost phrase: "The sourball of every revolution: after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?"<sup>6</sup>.

4. Federici, 2004, p.25

5. Beauvoir, 1975, p.200

6. Ukeles, 1969

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During her residency at the New York Department of Sanitation, she shook hands with the 8500 cleaning staff and thanked them for their work in maintaining the city. She also worked closely with the maintenance workers at the Whitney Museum of American Art and even her children were research subjects in her artwork.

### **Washhouses: invisible places**

Washhouses are places where domestic work takes place in the public space, and are places of living memory. After a major process of industrialisation, they became invisible and the community life associated with them gradually disappeared.

The invisibility of the washhouses is symbolic of the erasure of women's history in the public space, and in particular of women's work in the public space. To understand the invisibility of the washhouses, we need to understand how they fit into the landscape and the fabric of the city. Like temples or fragments of a bygone era, they tell us about the history of water, but are frozen in time. More than ruined architectural elements, their presence in the public space is a phantasmagorical one, giving way to the creation of an incomplete history that we have to reconstruct, or fabricate, as in "critical fabulation", a methodological concept from the author Saidiya Hartman, in the essay *Venus in Two Acts* she says,

The task of writing the impossible, (not the fanciful or the utopian but "histories rendered unreal and fantastic"), has as its prerequisites the embrace of likely failure and the readiness to accept the ongoing, unfinished and provisional character of this effort, particularly when the arrangements of power occlude the very object that we desire to rescue.<sup>7</sup>

This story begins with the hygienist movement, which took shape in 19th-century Europe and which can be likened to a triumphant return to the control of women and their bodies, a control materialised by architectural structures, the washhouses.

Hygienists' discourse was based on the family, which meant that it was essentially based on women, with the image of the Mother at its centre. Because cleaning up the family also meant cleaning up the population. All their efforts will therefore be focused on regulating, according to their standards, this most important function in their eyes: motherhood. [...] The real aim of hygienists and eugenicists is to set up a network to control the population.<sup>8</sup>

There is a contemporary misconception that women did not have a significant presence in the construction of the city and also in public space: this commonplace is a widespread thought in studies of urban planning and the city. However, it is an erroneous commonplace that portrays

7. Hartman, 2008, p.14

8. Clédat, Louis, 1979, p.55

the invisibilisation of the experiences of working-class women and domestic workers, so important in the functioning of the modern city of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Those women were part of the everyday panorama of the city, but as everyday spaces linked to domestic tasks were devalued throughout the 19th century, the reproductive sphere became invisible, as did the spaces associated with it in public space:

For the working class woman, the house was where she slept and ate, but the street was a means of subsistence: the fountains where she fetched water, the public wash houses, the stairway, etc. Almost all daily needs implied a displacement or use of public space.<sup>9</sup>

If washhouses are the embodiment of the invisible work of women, who once populated the streets, markets, squares and fountains, the domestication of women's work has contributed to the slow, long disappearance of public washhouses. The history of hygiene, which is often associated with women because of their role in household chores, is intimately linked to the history of water in the city. In *Proliferations*, Anna L. Tsing says that first tried in the colonies in the 19th century, the public vs. private hygiene dichotomy is directly linked to the condition of women and the control over their bodies:

Re-imported into the metropolis, this public and private hygiene loaded class dichotomies [...]. Vulnerable upper-class women became the angels of the house; poor women were accused of being the agents of infection.<sup>10</sup>

It could even be said that you can't tell the story of the city and the progressive urbanisation of its territories without telling the story of water, and the story of water is the story of women and the story of care. This interweaving of different histories represents the different layers in the stratification of the construction of the urban environment, as Michelle Perrot says: "The wash-house, a place of sociability for women, which became the means of their socialisation, constitutes a privileged observatory of the modes of urban hospitality."<sup>11</sup>

The gradual, slow disappearance of washhouses is accompanied by the gradual disappearance of women's voices, songs and words, and of the fabric of daily life, as Martine Segalen in *Women and power in rural society*, says about the big seasonal laundries as feminine encounters:

Together, women talk, criticise, denounce, revile, slander, weave family histories, deepen rivalries, and in so doing, they ensure that the whole of social relations is carried out through violent and slanderous speech, of which they seem to have a monopoly.<sup>12</sup>

9. Col·lectiu Punt 6, 2019, p.76

10. Tsing, 2022, p.101-102

11. Perrot, 1997, p. 160

12. Segalen, 1980, 126

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The silence that surrounds washhouses makes them invisible in the public space. Often found in isolated/disadvantaged areas, near streams and springs, washhouses are spaces of silence in the contemporary city. Women's voices have faded to the point of disappearing, their stories have gradually dissipated into the interstices of the home, and little by little the water has stopped flowing in the basins, washhouses, fountains and so on.

The transformation of washhouses into urban ruins is fragmented by their "uselessness" and the disappearance of their associated function. This multi-speed transformation is taking place all over Europe, leaving these memorial sites in complete disuse. A projectual and architectural vision of these spaces will want to re-signify them at all costs, through design and rehabilitation, through heritage enhancement and construction, will want to give them a new use and a new function, but perhaps none of this will bring them out of the invisibility and silence into which they have gradually fallen. For the project vision is a technocratic one, seeing water as a resource to be exploited. The extractivism of resources through architecture is already a reality, and even with a discourse on renewable development, in vogue at the moment, this position of constant exploitation gets us nowhere in the case of the washhouses, it is an utopia – very unaware and critical of the environment/context, and far removed from the practices, uses and emotional charge conveyed by the washhouses.

Water, both used and exploited for washing clothes, also made it possible to render the unspeakable invisible – washing away the blood stains of an abortion, the menstrual periods of young girls, or the violence experienced the day before – the washhouse is a memorial space in the town. You could compare it to a cemetery, a tomb or a mausoleum that cannot be desecrated. As Michelle Perrot says,

The wash-house appears to be an ambivalent place. It is the centre of a real female solidarity – material, emotional, cultural. The wash-house is also a means of educating the space-time of the housewife, which the [hygienist] urban planners consider excessively fragmented, fluid and irrational.<sup>13</sup>

This is also perhaps why all the attempts to make washhouses visible, whether folkloric or technocratic, fail to make them appear on the public stage as innovative, new, rediscovered spaces, with the potential of a great urban plan for the city.

Invisibility in the city is an exception or an inevitability, in an age of hypervigilance and exacerbation of urban control over bodies and voices, especially those of women. Invisibility is fertile ground for the creation of utopias, and in the case of the washhouses it can be argued that the hyper-visibility of their existence and location can potentially destroy the ecosystems and communities that have grown up around them. Non-human ecosystems, such as the proliferation of plants and nature, or communities on the margins of society, against the tide,

13. Perrot, 1997, 159



who use invisible places to live, sleep, wash, live and hide for a few... The duality between the visible and the invisible, in the case of the washhouses, leaves us with an ethical question about the compulsive projectual practices of architects, town planners and technocrats, and the potential damage that can be caused to this heritage of common – public – good.

In short, reclaiming these spaces requires careful work to make them visible, between personal archives, public archives, the valorisation of (proletarian) women's work and their contribution to the making of the city, through domestic work, whose invisibility is still undeniable today, and cuts across all spheres of daily life, both public and private.

## **Des/oriente**

Des/oriente<sup>14</sup> was a collective exhibition project that was presented along public art routes in the parish of Campanhã in the city of Porto. The multidisciplinary artistic production was developed collectively with residents of the parish through Laboratories that served as meetings to recognise the territory, reflect on and discuss the space, and then to develop the personal projects of each artist.

From the many walks and the identification of the space, it was clear how many washhouses there are in Campanhã. There are seven in total and only one is still in operation. Because it is a space whose invisibility and sacredness offer a whole range of possibilities for narrative and poetic intervention, art enters into the unknown part of the equation: what should we do with washhouses? And art's answer is that this ancient women's space, linked to water in the city, is perhaps not destined to have any other function than the one for which it was designed. The invisible space of the washhouse allows us to create on the fringes of a hegemony, a mainstream; in short, invisibility and the fringes allow us to encounter a multiplicity of voices on the washhouses. As Rebecca Solnit wrote in the text "Abandonment", in *A Field Guide To Getting Lost*:

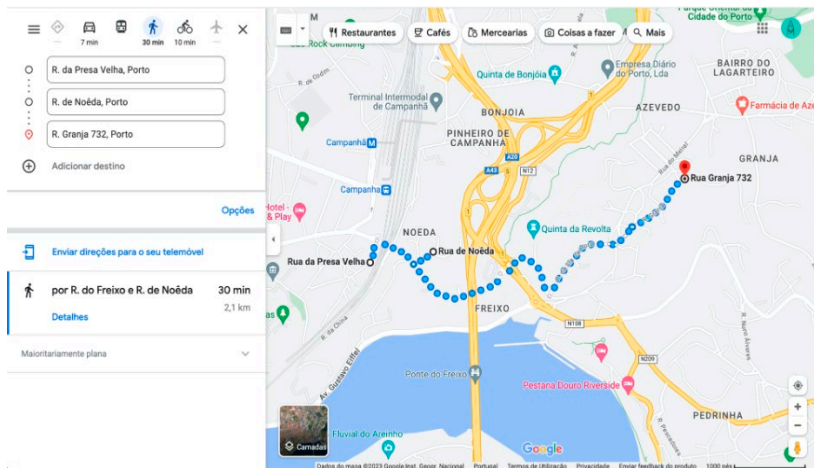
"Ruins become the unconscious of a city, its memory, its unknown, its darkness, its lost lands, and in this way make it truly come alive. [...] An urban ruin is a place that has fallen outside the economic life of the city, and it is in a way an ideal home for art that also falls outside the ordinary production and consumption of the city."<sup>15</sup>

The first step was to decide which washhouse we were going to go to and determine a route between them. We also decided to reverse the historical route taken from the countryside to working in the textile industry in the city. Another important fact to mention is that the "maintenance work" actually began two days before the performance took place, as it required a thorough clean-up of these neglected spaces with a large accumulation of rubbish and dirt.

14. Project funded by Plaka Porto's Criatório support. <https://desoriente.net/>

15. Solnit, 2017, 89–90

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### Act I – Presa Velha: clothes and clotheslines

The procession begins at the Presa Velha washhouse. This washhouse has three levels. The ground floor which has access to the street, the basement where the covered tanks are and the top floor where the clotheslines are. We were dressed in typical Portuguese housewives' aprons and crocs.

When the public arrives, we start hanging clothes on the clotheslines. There are a total of 80 garments in the colours red, orange and pink. We hang one garment on top of the other in a slow process. In the background, you could hear the ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) sound of scrubbing and washing clothes by hand. ASMR is an acronym given to pleasurable sensory stimuli that brings a feeling of relaxation and even makes some people sleep. This sound, together with the slow, repetitive movement of the clothes being ironed, brought a meditative air to the action.

The performance takes place from a deviation in the activity of hanging clothes on the clothesline. The performative action is based on the rhetorical operation *adiectio* – addition – which refers to adding, repeating and accumulating. There is thus a transfer of scale and weight.

Procession route, Google Maps



For art historian Sven Lütticken, “cleaning and caring would be the most common forms of general performance if they were not forced to be invisible and socially denigrated as rote routine”.<sup>16</sup> The invisible act of caring for the clothes is then emphasised through their growth and volume throughout the washhouse.

## **Act II – Noêda: buckets and tanks**

The second part begins at the Noêda washhouse, the only one still in operation in the parish of Campanhã. Here, we decided to remember the past and the women who used these washhouses.

The action is based on five large translucent fabrics, each of which contains an old photograph of the washhouses and some of the women who used to go there. These photographs belong to the Águas do Porto Municipal Archive and were taken in the 1940s.

16. Lütticken, 2012



We soap, scrub, wash, squeeze and hang these fabrics in the tanks with great commitment and dedication. You could hear the voices of old ladies telling stories about the work of washing clothes. One of those voices is of an old woman from a Lisbon washhouse who has continued her work as a washerwoman, finds herself quite alone with all her laundry, which she washes for the local residents. She remembers the old days, and how the gesture allowed women to speak freely. Her voice occupies the space of Noêda's washhouse, while, paradoxically, we wash the clothes in silence.



We washed the past with the *sabão rosa* – pink soap – , bringing back childhood memories for some in the audience. The metaphor of washing clothes by washing the archives takes us back to the past lives of the women in these photos, unknown to us and whom we were trying to rediscover. A kind of link was created between us as we washed the images of these women washing their clothes in the 1940s, as we tried to create our own living-memory in the washhouse.



Rite of the Waters: procession through the Campanhã Washhouses, Act III, Granja, 2023. Photo: Aline Cavalcante.

### **Act III – Granja: planting the feast**

The procession walked for almost 30 minutes until it reached Rua da Granja, an idyllic-looking street with vegetable gardens, lots of trees and the sound of the Torto river running through it. The rubbish dump had a lot of rubbish and was used to feed some of the cats that live on the street.

The performative action aimed to transform this space into a place of fertility, abundance and beauty in harmony with its surroundings. The water tanks were replaced by soil, and the soil was sown with a variety of seedlings. As gardening is an activity incorporated into household chores, domestic work invites itself into the public space. The act of planting and creating a place for a banquet, with very bright colours, contrasts with the brutalist character of the Granja washhouse.

At the end, the spectators are invited to take part in the banquet served on planks above the washhouse. A banquet in the middle of nature evokes the image of Alice in Wonderland, where the space becomes timeless, almost magical, but it's also a way of re-signifying the socialising power of the washhouse as a space for sharing our stories and experiences of everyday life.

### **Conclusion**

Using everyday life as a starting point, we have succeeded in reinventing the possibilities of the washhouse spaces: "The activation evokes the past in order to question the fate of these spaces in the present and speculate on potential futures sustained by collective encounters and experiences".<sup>17</sup>

These utopian speculations are based on everyday life and domestic work, supported by women and their gestures, handed down from generation to generation. And the exploration of the dichotomy between the visible and the invisible, what needs to be shown, let be seen and what needs to be hidden, has become a procession in the neighbourhood of Campanhã, between the rural world in transformation and the city. In short, our work aims to highlight the link between the history of women and water in the public space, between oral and official history, the unspeakable and the invisible. *Rite of Waters* is a moment of exchange and communion, at the intersection between art, urban planning and architecture.

The invisible gradually becomes visible, and from the combination of our personal experiences and our theoretical work, a space for creation emerges, based on everyday domestic work, where gesture and repetition become a pretext for telling stories, our stories, and enhancing the value of everyday spaces, so present and important in the lives of the majority of women. *Rite of Waters* also reconnects us with the waterways and rural spaces of the city, opening up new paths for a drift to the margins of the global city.

17. França, Merlino, 2023

In conclusion, these margins are prolific for the creation of a fragmented history, between performance and critical reflection on domestic work, and the condition of the body in movement in the public space. It is through these possibilities, between utopia and potentiality, that we are constantly building new practices in the city, making visible the invisible work of women and the spaces associated with it.

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