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Spaces of Care: Exploring the Performance of Caring as a Teacher with a Doll's House

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Spaces of Care: Exploring the Performance of Caring as a Teacher with a Doll's House

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Abstract

This flash talk presentation discusses my artistic research practice with a doll's house, part of a PhD research project which inquired into what it feels like to do care as a teacher. Coming from the perspective of a teacher and artist, the project proposed an intimately artistic way to examine the nuanced experience of performing care in teaching through methodologies of performance, spanning performance/live art, performative installations and participatory performance at schools. The practice unfolded in a ritualistic, private performance engaging with an old doll's house as a place of exploring the embodiment and temporality of care. This compressed space created caring meaningfully in the absurdity of an adult/teacher playing with a doll's house, claiming a space for the possibility of imagination for the teacher, ultimately in an embodied performance of an insistence to stay still, in the present. Staying still and silent with the doll's house eventually became an unsettling, hopeless performance, the performance of radical caring by the despaired teacher who insists on waiting instead of hoping, staying still in facing an also 'unmovable', uncertain future. The project contributed crucially to the newly established research area of care aesthetics by examining the lived experience of a group of professionals that has not been previously researched from a performance perspective. It argued for the sustainability of caring practices and experiences through an engagement with the notions of the spatial and temporal in the space and practice of performance.

Keywords: performance, care, care aesthetics, doll's house, hope, waiting

Spaces of Care

The PaR *doll's house* (2021) (Figure 1) was a private artistic exploration of collection and recollection of mementos I had kept from my students and memorabilia from my teaching practice, unfolding inside an old doll's house that offered something like a getaway space in my short breaks from teaching long online hours during the pandemic. The practice, which resembled a performance improvisation with something ritualistic and liminal about it, became an autoethnographic tool and a space for self-reflection on my lived experience of caring for my students. In this account I want to suggest my insistence to stay in prolonged stillness, both spatial and temporal, next to and with the doll's house as a performance of the nuances of the temporality of care in teaching

Figure 1

Doll's House (Par 2021. Ongoing) Performative installation (30 X 50 X 120 cm). Image by Christina Vasileiou.



A relation to the future, being able to hope, is not only an indication but also an ingredient of care as Sara Ruddick (1988) suggests. Hoping also suggests a certain orientation to time, what Rita Felski states as “a hopeful orientation to the future, or what we sometimes call belief in progress” (Felski, 2002, p. 22). This orientation is not unrelated to emotions of fulfilment and a positive disposition, or the well-known rewarding experience of caring. These are intricate orientations of care that we want to result into something, to produce something with it, to actualise a future, even if we may not be there to witness it, a sense of redemption (Felski 2002) and a fulfilment projected onto the future. On this basis, therefore, the duty of care could translate as a duty to hope, and although, I do not suggest that all

teachers are orientated towards visions of redemption, I do believe that a sense or amount of optimism is necessary for teaching to happen.

However, Sara Ahmed's (2010) critical feminist thinking on the notion of hope, suggests hope and the chasing of happiness as a conditioning that is failing us in recognising the causes of our unhappiness on a social, structural level. And that may not be far from what Jack Halberstam (2011) suggests as disciplinary correctness and conditioning, and relates to Foucault's (1977) technique of modern power. Indeed, teachers can experience hopelessness when social and economic injustices are sadly reflected in the classrooms, leading to painful realisations that there is little that they can do for some children, or when the teachers themselves, are broken. As such, the authors of *Dark Pedagogy* (2019) argue that "the darkness of our times is uncanny" (Lysgaard et al., 2019, p. 11). In this grief of bearing the knowledge of pain in the world, it is unclear if teachers are allowed to grieve without being seen as failing to embody future and hope. However, I want to suggest these as performances of caring subjectivities in struggle and ambivalence that illuminate how hard it is to care for others at the end of hope. And grief may indicate, not only the end of times, but the end of care, as we know it, signalling an urgent call for re-imagining what constitutes success in care and a call for a politics of hope.

Figure 2

Becoming a Memory (Par 2021). Image by Christina Vasileiou.



The doll's house practice staged an idiosyncratic performance of hopelessness or failure to hope by showcasing an insistence to stay in the present, staying still, perhaps stuck. It

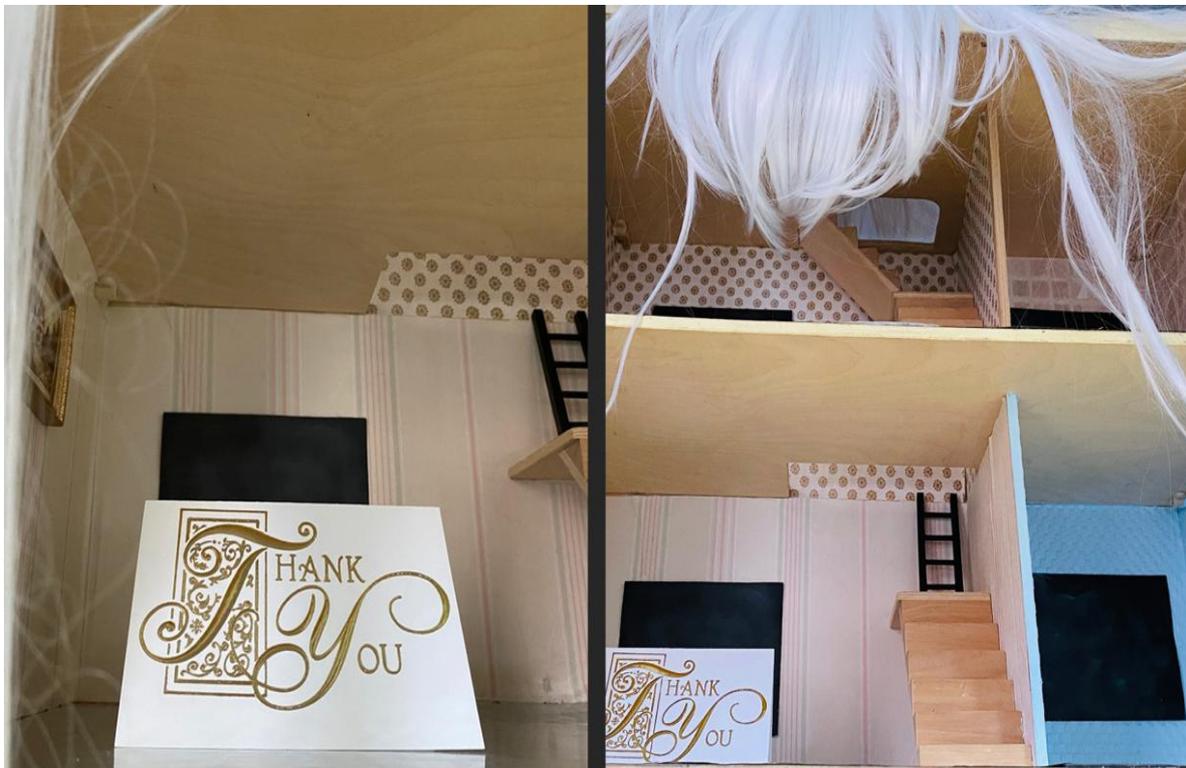
demonstrated a failure of progress as we know it in the affirmation of the nonsensical or the counterproductive in playing with a child's toy. The collection of re-collection as a practice of temporal resistance to forget – and be forgotten, suggested crucial questions about who we are before and after care. It suggested care as another performance event that ultimately actualises a future not because of hope but because of a strong caring present.

As I am turning to look at my reflection on the shiny material that I use for the renovation of the doll's house, I seem blurry, unclear, like a distant memory (Figure 2). If I am becoming a memory, how do I perform memory, what will be left of me and what will endure in time? How can I enclose myself in this dollhouse, and freeze all the care it carries?

My students' presents, the 'thank you' cards, their countless notes and drawings promise they will always remember me - and my care (Figure 3). A privilege to endure, to remain as a figure perhaps beyond human, a figure idealised, indeed everlasting, timeless. Yet, I know that I will still be fragmented in the relentless fragmentation of institutional time and space, but also fragmented in the relentless, merciless workings of time upon memory. The place where only fragments of the caring teacher remain in the memory of others, and gradually slip away, and a name or a trace of affect, or not even any of that, remain at the end.

Figure 3

Doll's House (PaR 2021.Ongoing) Performative installation (30 X 50 X 120 cm). Image by Christina Vasileiou.



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