

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

(2026)

PERFORMANCE & SPACE III. PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2025 CONFERENCE

PS

PERFORMANCE & SPACE III

PROCEEDINGS OF THE
PERFORMING SPACE 2025 CONFERENCE



Performing Space Association University of the Peloponnese

2026

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doi: [10.12681/ps2023.9968](https://doi.org/10.12681/ps2023.9968)

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Lipstick Liberation
**A Feminist Performance Mapping the Femicides in the
Public Performing Space**

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of the performer's body as a critical and expressive tool in contemporary performance art, focusing on site-specific interventions in public space. It examines *Lipstick Liberation*, a performance executed by the authors of the paper, which addresses gender-based violence and the rise of femicides during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this work, the two performers walk through various Athenian neighbourhoods, using personal red lipsticks to trace their paths and denounce both violence against femininities and women and institutional indifference. The lipstick, reappropriated as a political device, functions as a medium of resistance and embodied expression. The analysis emphasises the performance's mobility and adaptability (encouraging everybody to partake), which expose the failures of public structures to protect feminised identities. A site-specific iteration in Glyka Nera brings into focus the spatial politics of gender and memory, contrasting the urban density of Exarchia with the suburban emptiness of Glyka Nera. Through ephemeral, immaterial mapping and symbolic action at the intersection of public private spheres, *Lipstick Liberation* challenges spatial and social inequalities. The paper argues that such performances activate urban space as a site of resistance and remembrance, highlighting the transformative potential of art to provoke awareness and foster coexistence.

Keywords: intervention, public space, red lipstick, mapping, femicides

Lipstick Liberation: A Feminist Performance Mapping the Femicides in the Public Performing Space

In the performing arts, the human body functions as the primary medium of expression and representation. What is more, within the framework of contemporary performance, contemporary art allows artists to highlight issues of social and artistic freedom. Within the framework of contemporary performance, artists increasingly use this medium to foreground issues of social and artistic freedom. Contemporary art practices, in this sense, enable the artistic act to move beyond institutionalised cultural spaces and into the public sphere (Chondros, 2021), making the public an active witness to the creative process. From complete artistic introversion, as well as confinement within strictly indoor spaces, there has been a turn toward the liberation of art on both an artistic and a social level.

At the same time, in periods of social crisis, art often takes on a character of protest, functioning as a means of denouncing phenomena of violence and transgression. The issue of femicides constitute a characteristic example, a phenomenon which became particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, with 115 recorded murders of women from 2020 until today (femicides.gr, 2025), incidents mainly linked to gender-based violence and misogyny. Despite the evident inertia of the state apparatus and the responsible institutions, social and artistic collectives attempt to resist through creative interventions in public discourse and space.

The performance *Lipstick Liberation*¹, which was carried out in Athens in 2024 as part of the postgraduate course “History and Theory of Performance,” taught by Maria Konomi and curated and supervised by performance artist Mary Zygouri, constitutes an example of an artistic intervention in the public space. Its score is simple: the performer holds a red lipstick, preferably a personal item rather than one purchased specifically for the performance, and in a bent-over position, as “imposed” by the small “writing” object, traces her path on the street from her home to the local police station. If/when she manages to reach the station before the lipstick runs out, she will stand at the entrance and recite/report a short text of her choice. In the case of Koukoulekidou and Ntoufa that text was the following:

It is the ordinary and rather undramatic practice of standing, rather than a miraculously extraordinary disruption, that actualizes here the living register of the event. The very practice of stasis creates both a space of reflection and a space for revolt, but also an affective component of standing and standpoint. It is such a corporeal and affective disposition of stasis that derails, if only temporarily,

¹ Koukoulekidou, M. & Ntoufa, A. (2024) *Lipstick Liberation*. [Athens, Greece]. The full performance is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WRsbRt-M1c&t=2s>.

normative presuppositions about what may come into being as publicly intelligible and sensible in existing polities (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, pp. 150-151).

However, it becomes clear from the outset that, due to its soft texture, the lipstick will most likely be used up before she arrives at her final destination. Furthermore, the two performers chose two very different starting locations: the first, the home of a domestic violence victim, located two kilometres from the local police station; the second, a friend's home, situated only 500 meters from the respective station. Equally important was the stark contrast between the urban fabrics of the two areas. A vast and remote urban landscape in Glyka Nera, marked by rough asphalt roads and the tall fences of lower-middle-class single-family homes, stood in opposition to the densely populated public space of Exarchia, with apartment buildings pressed tightly against one another. A performance that may seem like a failure at first glance could, in fact, be the most powerful affirmation of reality.

The action focuses on denouncing systemic indifference toward violence against women. The two performers traverse the urban landscape, leaving behind red traces made with lipstick, here used as a symbol of femininity and empowerment, but also of a victim's mark, while at the same time projecting messages of protest and demand. The aim of the action is to mobilise the urban population and to make visible the negligence of the state, demonstrating that lipstick, beyond being a symbol of beauty, can function as a political tool of resistance and a means of reappropriation by women themselves, as well as by anyone who expresses femininity.

The case of Glyka Nera serves as a tribute to Caroline Crouch, who was murdered by her husband in May 2021, during the COVID-19 lockdown. The performance begins at the victim's former home and symbolically, as well as functionally, highlights Caroline's inability to escape an abusive relationship. This inability is not confined to the private sphere but is exacerbated by urban planning, the lack of public protection structures, and the inadequate response of the responsible institutions. Through her spatial intervention, the performer sheds light on the systemic conditions that reinforce gender-based violence and makes institutional accountability visible. As a result, the performer soon found herself pausing alone in the middle of a poorly maintained road, far from the Police Department in the neighbouring area, and without a single spectator.

The case of Exarchia clearly highlights the ongoing precarity of femininities in public space. Although the performance took place in broad daylight on a busy street, with spectators and a cameraman present, a police officer interrupted it without any substantiated reason, even after the performer presented her academic ID. The action was disturbing no one and was occurring near the police station. The failure of this second attempt at completion revealed that public safety structures often act as deterrents to freedom of

expression. Two months later Kyriaki Griva was murdered outside the Agioi Anargyroi Police Station, despite her repeated pleas for protection.

This problematic situation raises the question of whether performance, as both an artistic and political act, can be considered successful or unsuccessful in relation to its ability to bring about meaningful social change. It is this very question that we will now attempt to address. The performance is grounded in two fundamental principles: the blurring of boundaries between art and everyday life, and the redefinition of the limits of visual arts, with the aim of making a political statement through art in public space. The use of everyday materials and the relocation of the work outside the studio underscore the performers' intention to engage with social and gender-related issues (Gerogianni, 2019). Gender and public space are approached as interconnected and fluid fields that shape identities and communities. The boundaries between these concepts remain fluid and constantly negotiable. Through performance, it is possible to address issues such as gender, memory, body, and identity in a multilayered and interdisciplinary way, as the complex conditions of contemporary reality dictate (Tsiara, 2021).

In the case of *Lipstick Liberation* in Glyka Nera, a charged location was deliberately chosen in order to activate the memory of the place, functioning both as a tribute to victims of gender-based violence and as a political act (Tsiara, 2021). Through writing with lipstick, an "intangible" map is created — one that records lived experiences and emotions rather than objective features. This "analytical and perceptual mapping" (Tsakiri, 2021, pp.43-44) constitutes yet another claim to the presence of women in public space. As Stavridis notes, "society itself is projected onto its space ... space is also produced through interpretation, through the selection of focal points...." (1990, p.18). Thus, in the attempt to pay tribute to this unfortunate woman and to emphasise the broader denunciation expressed by the performers, particular attention was given to the choice of this specific location. This choice was transformed into a political stance, while at the same time the performers' intention equally reflects "their subjective disposition to embody the outside world", because of their emotional connection with this place (Stavridis, 1990, pp. 70). The red line emphasises the "intangible" and personal characteristics of the urban fabric (qualitative elements, lived but in some sense invisible), thus defining the place from a different perspective. As Konomi stresses, such artistic practices constitute yet another attempt by women to claim their place in the public sphere (2021).

As she continues, performance art, due to its relative youth and radical nature, creates space for gendered expressions, free from patriarchal burdens (2021). According to Amelia Jones, performance art embodies a belief in the power of art to transform human life and bring about social change (2021). Although it belongs to the field of art, performance art incorporates elements of social protest and contributes to the creation of "new spaces",

shifting the site of the political from the urban environment to the body itself. This specific action, with the bent-over body and the red line, intervenes momentarily in the city's flow, highlighting the social exclusion of women from public space (Avgitidou, 2020).

If we consider space as “relational” (De Certeau, 2010)², such interventions propose alternative ways of coexistence and expression, outside the dominant models of capitalist urban planning. The human body becomes a bearer of meaning, while public space gains its value not from centres of power or consumption, but from the people who experience it. *Lipstick Liberation* highlights this dynamic by proposing a multipolar and heterogeneous way of meaning-making within urban space. Although such actions often go unnoticed, in the case of Exarchia, the performer's unusual posture managed to capture the attention of passersby, showing that even amidst the noise of consumption, there is space for attention, questioning, and social rewriting of the space (Tzirtzilaki – Sinopoulou, 2018). It activated the public's gaze, while in the case of Glyka Nera, the performer stood exactly where the perpetrator first made his false statements to the media. With lipstick, symbol of voice and speech, she silently inscribed, through bodily action, the words left unspoken or unheard. This gesture turned the performance into an “equalizing experience” (Stavridis, 2018, p. 21), reflecting the sharing of space in everyday life. Both streets were temporarily transformed into a site of shared memory and collective reference.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the need for a critical re-examination of the reliability of state protection mechanisms becomes clear. Official data show increased incidents of gender-based and domestic violence after 2020, peaking during 2021–2022, with a new rise in 2024 (European Training Platform on Domestic Violence, n.d. et al.). Despite the positive increase in reports, especially from underage girls, the act of reporting itself does not guarantee safety or survival. The phenomenon of gender-based violence remains without substantial, systemic intervention. The state must abandon its punitive, reactive approach and invest in prevention, education, and the strengthening of support structures such as medical care, shelters, and sanctions against sexist coverage in the media. At the same time, it is critical to recognise the term “femicide” and to consider gender-based murder as an aggravating circumstance. Furthermore, according to the European Observatory, there is no official body in Greece that collects data on femicides, while fragmented media reporting hinders a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Only feminist volunteer groups work on

² De Certeau defines space as an ‘act of the present,’ that is, as the result of the practices that activate it and render it a dynamic unity. Space is not a static container, but a relational experience in constant evolution, differentiated — as Harvey also points out — from mechanistic conceptions of absolute or relative space (Harvey, 2005).

collecting data specifically on femicides. Simultaneously, the newly established Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family face serious organisational challenges, limiting the effectiveness of its actions (olympia.gr, 2024 et al.). Art can raise awareness but does not replace the state's responsibility to protect its citizens. Their safety must be a state priority above all else, beyond artistic critique and contribution. Preventing gender-based violence, not a private matter but rather a sociopolitical one, requires ongoing effort. Help lines are available, such as the 24-hour line 197 and SOS 15900. Gender equality is an achievement that requires continuous advocacy.

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