

PERFORMING ARTS AS SHARING HERE AND NOW

**An Ethnography of Performing Arts Program of Brunnenpassage in
Vienna**

By
Marianna Wicha

Submitted to Central European University - Private University
Department of Undergraduate Studies, Culture, Politics and Society Program

*In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Culture, Politics
and Society*

Supervisor: Professor Vlad Naumescu

Vienna, Austria
2024

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

I declare that this thesis is my independent work. All sources and literature are properly cited and included in the bibliography. I hereby declare that no portion of text in this thesis has been submitted in support of another degree, or qualification thereof, for any other university or institute of learning.

ABSTRACT

This thesis inquires into the social aspects of contemporary performing arts. Taking ArtSocialSpace Brunnenpassage in Vienna, an institution operating on the crossroad of artistic practice and social work, it sheds light on how curators and artists reflect upon potential socio-political efficacy of performing arts. It also studies how people experience participating in performing arts events. My main argument is that the critical dimension of performing arts is their ability to facilitate a collective, embodied experience of sharing here and now. The gathering of various people in one space and in one moment of time is experienced as a special kind of encounter and ascribed social and political meanings. The argument is based primarily upon my ethnographic research on Brunnenpassage conducted through fieldwork and interviews with artists, curators and participants of performing arts events. It is supported by the literature on performance and socially engaged art.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all those who dedicated time to talk with me during my research for sharing with me their experience and knowledge, and especially Nigar Hasib, Michikazu Matsune and Zuzana Ernst for sharing inspiring insights into their practice.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Methodology	5
Chapter 1. Brunnenpassage: The Art/ Social Space.....	7
1.1 The story of Brunnenpassage: between social work and artistic practice	7
1.2 The space of Brunnenpassage: openness and extra-ordinarity	9
1.3 Ethnographic examples of space construction	13
Chapter 2. Performing Arts As Sharing Here And Now	15
2.1 Outline of the theories on socially engaged performing arts	15
2.2 Case study of the performing arts program of Brunnenpassage	18
Chapter 3. Discussion on the Socio-Political Efficacy of Performing Arts.....	25
3.1 Potential socio-political efficacy of performing arts	25
3.2 Limitations of the socio-political efficacy of performing arts	30
Conclusion	32
Reference List.....	34

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 The Entrance of Brunnenpassage	11
Figure 2 The Hall of Brunnenpassage. Saturdance Dance Workshop	11
Figure 3 Nowruz Fest at Brunnenpassage.....	14

INTRODUCTION

I can think of few moments when I would feel so closely connected to a group as when taking part in collective performances. The feeling of togetherness is something that many people working with theater experience. This observation has made me wonder why performing arts tend to give rise to such a strong feeling of community and what might be social and political implications thereof.

This interest has brought me to study an institution which, working for the realization of its social goals of inclusion and equality, makes an extensive use of performing arts. ArtSocialSpace Brunnenpassage, located on the Yppenplatz in Vienna, was founded in 2007 as part of Caritas der Erzdiözese Wien, one of the biggest social work and humanitarian aid organizations in Austria. Today, Brunnenpassage, co-directed by Zuzana Ernst and Anne Wiederhold-Daryanavard, is an institution well established in the city, operating on the crossroads of experimental art practice and social work. It is committed to making art accessible to everyone, actively reaching out to marginalized communities Brunnenpassage is situated within the cultural sector Vienna where the social demand for democratization reflected in the motto “Art for All” has been addressed by artists and curators since the late 20th century. Despite the growing importance ascribed to the socio-political engagement of art and transformations occurring in the cultural sector in recent years, the exclusionary structures of the art world have still not been dismantled completely (Pilić and Wiederhold-Daryanavard 2021). Thus, one of the central goals of Brunnenpassage is bringing new audiences into public cultural institutions and opening their stages to people from marginalized social groups. This is achieved primarily through collaborations with theaters and museums located in the city center.

Besides the collaborative projects, Brunnenpassage works locally in the district of Ottakring, implementing a diverse program. The institution situates itself within the concept of socially engaged art addressing the needs of the postmigrant society of Vienna (Pilić and Wiederhold-Daryanavard 2021). While blending of various genres of arts is an important principle of its curatorial practice, performing arts remain the focus of the program of Brunnenpassage. Singing, dancing, and theater workshops as well as various performances regularly take place at the ArtSocialSpace. Brunnenpassage is also home to a choir and a few dance groups.

This thesis inquires into what makes performing arts an exceptionally good format for socially engaged institutions such as Brunnenpassage. In what ways and why are performing arts used as means of fostering social inclusion and preventing fragmentation of the society? How do artists and curators reflect upon the abilities and roles of performing arts in contemporary society and what kind of social and political meanings do they ascribe to their practice? How do people participating in their events experience engaging with performing arts? My main argument, based primarily on my ethnographic research on the performing arts program of Brunnenpassage, is that the critical dimension of performing arts is their ability to facilitate a collective, embodied experience of sharing here and now. It is the aspect of gathering various people in one space and in one moment of time which is believed to be essential for their potential socio-political efficacy.

This argument is supported by the existing literature on socially engaged performance, encompassing fields such as performance studies, applied theater and community dance. The performative space generated through artistic practice has come to be widely understood as a space of alternatives and potentialities, a “temporary milieu, a non-normative space, that

encourages new experience, the making of new connections” (Sloan 2018, 584). Contemporary conceptualisations of performing arts experiences are embedded in the theory of *liminality* introduced by anthropologist Victor Turner (1977) and further developed in theater studies by Richard Schechner. Their theories have provided a framework for understanding the ways in which performing arts can foster transformation of communities and individuals (Sloan 2018). In my thesis I use this paradigm and its 21st century reconceptualisations to understand the experiences of people taking part in and shaping the performing arts program of Brunnenpassage.

An important context for my inquiry into the transformative potential of performing arts is the current political and social situation in Vienna and in Austria. While Vienna is becoming an increasingly diverse postmigrant city, with over 44% of its residents originally coming from abroad (Stadt Wien 2023), the far-right sentiments in the country have been rising over the past few years. Since 2022, FPÖ - Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria) has been receiving the highest score in the election polls (Hoare 2024). The far right party is currently polling at around 30% (POLITICO 2024). One of the FPÖ’s main instruments for mobilizing its supporters is the anti-migration discourse in which migrants are portrayed as an external threat. As this discourse’s prominence in the public debate and in culture is growing, it is becoming “more perversive, more naturalized and seemingly less political than ever before” (Rheindorf and Wodak 2019, 320).

These political and social tensions largely shape the environment in which Austrian socially engaged art institutions, such as Brunnenpassage, are currently operating. They also add significance to the questions guiding my research. To ask about the socio-political role of performing arts today is to ask whether there is anything they can do in the time of rising far-

right sentiments, polarization and fragmentation of the society. I believe these considerations to constitute an important rationale for my inquiry.

The thesis begins with a section on methodology and then proceeds to discuss the findings of my research. In Chapter 1, I introduce Brunnenpassage through discussing the history of the institution and its position in between artistic practice and social work as well as through considerations on its space. Chapter 2 explores the quality of sharing the space and the moment in time as the critical dimension of performing arts. Chapter 3 builds on the previous section to discuss the political potential ascribed to performing arts by people working at and collaborating with Brunnenpassage.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis is based on a case study of the ArtSocialSpace Brunnenpassage located in Vienna and on the review of the existing literature related to the topic of socially engaged art and performance. The research on Brunnenpassage was conducted with the use of qualitative methods and fieldwork. These included participant observation during the selected events organized at Brunnenpassage from late January 2024 till the end of April 2024, talks with numerous participants of the performing arts workshops and with audience members of performances staged at Brunnenpassage during that time, and four in-depth, semi-structured interviews with artists and curators affiliated with the ArtSocialSpace, conducted from February 2024 till March 2024. The latter included an interview with the artistic co-director of Brunnenpassage – Zuzana Ernst, with a high position worker of Tanz die Toleranz (a sister organization of Brunnenpassage), and performance artists – Michikazu Matsune, who facilitated a theater workshop at Brunnenpassage in February 2024, and Nigar Hasib, who facilitated a theater workshop there in March 2024. Additional interviews were conducted between March 2024 and May 2024 – with a worker from the Brunnenmarkt and one with Werner Bachstein who, working at Caritas at the time, initiated the foundation of Brunnenpassage in 2007. Interviews were conducted in English and in German.

While conducting fieldwork at Brunnenpassage, I attended eleven events as a participant. These included theater workshops (Theaterworkshops), voice workshops (Stimmworkshops), dance workshops (Saturdance), theater plays (Theater am Markt), performance evenings (Raw Matters, Voices and Visions), and a celebration concert (Nowruz Fest). After most of these events, I talked with fellow participants about their experiences. These conversations had a form of informal, rather than structured, interviews.

While conducting the fieldwork I have been guided by the principles of the performance studies methodology. I embraced a “performance paradigm” which, in the words of Dwight Conquergood “insists upon immediacy, involvement, and intimacy as modes of understanding” (as cited in MacDonald 2018, 283). Taking part in Brunnenpassage events allowed me for a direct involvement with the space and its community. The embodied experiences I gathered this way were of vital importance for developing an in-depth understanding of the social dynamics present at the site. Additionally, my prior experiences of working with activist theater have made me engage with the topic of the research not only on academic but also on a personal level. Throughout my research I was also attentive to the immediate surroundings of the Brunnenpassage and the interactions between the inside and the outside.

CHAPTER 1. BRUNNENPASSAGE: THE ART/ SOCIAL SPACE

This thesis focuses on the performing arts program of Brunnenpassage. However, in order to fully understand the meanings ascribed to this part of its practice, it is necessary to begin with a general discussion of Brunnenpassage. I begin with outlining its history and then move to describe its space and location. Throughout the chapter, drawing from the reflections of my interlocutors and my own observations, I look into different aspects of the institution's in-betweenness – the quality of being both an artistic and ordinary space, both separated from and integrated in its immediate surroundings. As its full name – ArtSocialSpace (KunstSozialRaum) Brunnenpassage implies, the organization understands itself as maintaining a space of both artistic and social nature. In what follows I introduce it as situated on the crossroads of social work and artistic practice.

1.1 The story of Brunnenpassage: between social work and artistic practice

In 2007, Viennese Caritas initiated a community dance project Tanz die Toleranz. Organization's first ever arts based project brought together children and teenagers of different social backgrounds who prepared a performance for the Wiener Festwochen. An empty market hall at the Brunnenmarkt was rented out as a rehearsal space. After the initial project ended, following Werner Bachstein's proposal, Caritas decided to keep working in the space. Brunnenpassage was established and Tanz die Toleranz became a long term project organizing regular open dance workshops and running a few adult and children dance groups.

At the time when Brunnenpassage was established, the topic of integration, understood in terms of finding new ways of living together in a society composed of people of different origins,

was widely discussed at Caritas. The idea of incorporating arts into the community work (*Gemeinwesenarbeit*) emerged out of the sense that words are not enough for the social inclusion project to be successful. “To build communities we need more than words. We need to actually do something together, produce something, stand on stage and be proud together” says Werner Bachstein when he explains to me the original idea behind Brunnenpassage.¹

Within the structure of Caritas Brunnenpassage falls into the rubric of the projects for living together (*Zusammenleben*). It is envisioned as bringing in the artistic dimension into the question of “how do we live together peacefully?” It recognises having community spaces as an important need of each person and access to art as a human right (Caritas 2024). Brunnenpassage works locally in Ottakring as an open space which actively reaches out to people who are underrepresented in the cultural sector of Vienna – to social groups such as people with a migrant background, people of color and poor people. Promoting the broad public’s participation in arts is Brunnenpassage’s central focus (Pilić and Wiederhold 2015).

Brunnenpassage and Tanz die Toleranz can be conceptualized as situated on the crossroads of artistic practice and social work. The artistic as well as social aspects are of vital importance for the curatorial practice of both institutions. When I ask Zuzana Ernst, who has been working at Brunnenpassage for years and since 2017 is its artistic co-director, where she would place the institution on the spectrum of organizations from those purely artistic to those focused entirely on social work, she immediately says “Exactly in between.” She thinks it is important, however, that Brunnenpassage is primarily an art space – a space which uses art for social engagement.²

¹ Interview with Werner Bachstein conducted on May 13, 2024 in Vienna.

² Interview with Zuzana Ernst conducted on March 19, 2024 in Vienna.

As a hybrid space, Brunnenpassage obtains municipal funding from both arts and social departments and employs people with expertise in different fields. Having evolved out of the need for alternative social work strategies, over the years it has been shifting the weight to artistic quality, as Werner Bachstein tells me. Its current social impact emerges as a byproduct of its artistic projects. Social effects of the organization's work stem from who is invited to perform and to participate, who is listened to, who stands on stage.³ An understanding of social effects as a byproduct of artistic practice resonates with a statement of a Tanz die Toleranz worker I interviewed: "We do art and art does everything."⁴ While they ascribe great significance to the social impact of dance, the organization's workers are choreographers, not social workers. However, although they use methods different from the other parts of Caritas, their goal is the same: to bring people together.

When Brunnenpassage was envisioned in 2007, the idea to use arts as a methodology for social work was relatively new. In recent years it has been met with a growing interest of practitioners and theorists in the field. Scholars such as Ephart Huss (2019) claim that, when used in social work practice, art can offer alternative, non-verbal forms of communication with self and the others as well as embodied methods of resilience and empowerment.

1.2 The space of Brunnenpassage: openness and extra-ordinarity

Brunnenpassage is located in the Brunnenviertel in Vienna's 16th district Ottakring - a neighborhood significantly influenced by migration. In the beginning of 2023, 49,6% of the residents of the district were people originally coming from countries other than Austria (Stadt Wien 2023). Historically a working-class district, Ottakring has been subject to upgrading

³ Interview with Werner Bachstein conducted on May 13, 2024 in Vienna.

⁴ Interview with a Tanz die Toleranz worker conducted on March 19, 2024 in Vienna; my own translation from German.

measures since the 1990s. The drawback of this process has been gentrification. Being aware of this, Brunnenpassage is committed to keeping a non-commercial character. (Pilić and Wiederhold-Daryanavard 2021). Events are not ticketed. Visitors are encouraged to make pay-as-you-can donations.

In spite of signs of gentrification, Brunnenviertel remains a neighborhood with a diverse population structure. This is clearly visible in the marketplace, stretching from Brunnengasse to the Yppenplatz. Brunnenmarkt is a workplace of people originally coming from Eastern Europe, Balkans, Turkey, Middle East, and other regions. The surrounding Yppenplatz, with numerous cafes and restaurants, tends to be filled with people speaking various languages. Recognising the diversity of its neighborhood, Brunnenpassage sees itself as “the space of the many” in the words of Zuzana Ernst – a space open to everyone and aiming at building relationships with diverse communities, while centering marginalized perspectives and narratives in their program.⁵ This commitment has a resonance in the architecture of the building, the glass facade of which is covered with a multilingual design. The building is an adapted market hall. The 230 square-meter performance space can be entered directly from the street from two opposite sides of the building through glass doors. There is no stage inside – everything happens on the street level.

⁵ Interview with Zuzana Ernst conducted on March 19, 2024 in Vienna.



Figure 1 The Entrance of Brunnenpassage. Source: Author



Figure 2 The Hall of Brunnenpassage. Saturdance Dance Workshop. Source: Author

Almost all people with whom I talked about Brunnenpassage reflected on the transparent doors of the building, saying that it makes the space open. Passers-by can always look inside and join. During most of the events the doors are never locked. Anytime the door is opened, the sounds from the street – people laughing, talking, shouting, enter the hall. The atmosphere of the inside of Brunnenpassage is very much influenced by the outside atmosphere of the market and, conversely, the sounds of what is happening inside often come out. This suggests that Brunnenpassage is an integral part of Yppenplatz, surrounded and influenced by other spaces of social life.

At the same time, being a site of artistic practice renders the space extra-ordinary. Moments of artistic creation tend to be seen as different from ordinary activities. They are “marked as other [...] or set-aside” (Tinius 2023, 6). They fall into the rubric of the cultural performance as differentiated from the social performance. Being framed by cultural conventions, reflexive and contained, cultural performances take place, to some extent, outside of the flow of daily life (Madison 2020).

The architectural structure of Brunnenpassage makes its artistic space not as clearly separated from the surroundings as it is in case of most of the other cultural institutions. The principle of openness together with a practice of serving drinks after the end of performances allows for blending of the extra-ordinary and ordinary character of the space of Brunnenpassage.

Nonetheless, during performances and workshops, the space clearly retains an extra-ordinary character. It is partly because it allows for other types of behaviors than the outside would allow. Within the performative space, a special configuration of social relations emerges. Another factor is that despite the efforts for making the space open to everyone, some still

associate it with a sphere separated from the daily lives of most people. In the following chapters I will discuss these considerations in detail.

1.3 Ethnographic examples of space construction

If we approach it with the use of Doreen Massey's (1994) theory on space as constructed of social relations and histories, the site of Brunnenpassage can be described as consisting of multiplicity of meanings. The space which Brunnenpassage co-creates and within which it is situated should be approached with special attention given to "the existence in the lived world of a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces: cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism [as] the social relations of space are experienced differently, and variously interpreted by those holding different positions as part of it" (Massey 1994, 3). Consequently, the identity of a place is always heterogenous and never fixed.

The space of Brunnenpassage hosts a great variety of events, each of which alters its character and relation to the immediate neighborhood. This is especially so because different events gather different kinds of audiences. This point can be illustrated by the comparison between the Nowruz concert and celebration (Nowruz Fest - Konzert und Feier) which took place on March 22, 2024 and the Raw Matters performance evening (Ungeschliffener Tanz- und Performance Abend) organized 3 days later, on March 25, 2024.

Nowruz is celebrated as the beginning of a new year in many Middle Eastern countries. The concert organized on the occasion turned Brunnenpassage into a celebration space with people spontaneously leaving their seats to dance together and children running around the musicians. The event was attended by some Ottakring residents and by many families. The crowd of

people speaking various languages filled the hall. Some had to stand in the open door. Thus, the space of Brunnenpassage would merge with the outside.

Raw Matters performance evenings take place regularly at Brunnenpassage and provide a platform for young artists to show their work. Compared with Nowruz celebration, the March Raw Matters evening was a much more explicitly artistic event attended by members of the Viannese dancers and performers community. During the performances the hall turned into a theatrical space with a demarcated audience and a stage. Throughout the evening, however, free food and drinks were being served. After the end of the performances, people would stay inside and chat while eating. The hall would once again become a primary social space.

These examples resonate with the theory of space, developed by Massey and scholars such as Henri Lefebvre, as produced by interactions between the “built structures, symbolic and discursive articulations, and live flows of bodies and social practices” (Lefebvre, as quoted in MacDonald 2018, 277). The space of Brunnenpassage and its relation to the neighborhood is negotiated and altered by the practices happening inside.



Figure 3 Nowruz Fest at Brunnenpassage. Source: Author

CHAPTER 2. PERFORMING ARTS AS SHARING HERE AND NOW

“Modern society needs modern rituals” Nigar Hasib tells me as we are talking in the Lalish Theaterlabor which she founded together with her husband Shamal Amin, after immigrating to Vienna from Kurdistan. In a society in which everyone is more or less on their own, the moments of unity in which one feels that one is no longer alone are of great significance. “How can we create unity with people with whom we don’t have common culture, language or history? I can bring us together through art” explains Nigar. “That’s what Brunnenpassage does. People of various cultures and languages come there. And the atmosphere created makes them all feel like they belong here.”⁶

2.1 Outline of the theories on socially engaged performing arts

The ability to bring people together and make them feel connected with each other is central for the employment of performing arts in the socially engaged practice. Literature on the topic encompasses disciplines such as community dance and applied theater which can be referred to with an umbrella term of socially engaged performance. I begin this chapter with a review of the dominant theories from these fields. I then relate them to my own research on the experiences and reflections of practitioners and participants of Brunnenpassage performing arts events.

Applied theater and community dance are both based upon the intention of using art practice for social change (Abraham 2021, Thompson 2017). Their practitioners are interested in taking art beyond its conventional realm and making it responsive to the needs of ordinary people, whose well-being they aim to enhance. Their projects are often community based and

⁶ Interview with Nigar Hasib conducted on March 27, 2024 in Vienna; my own translation from German.

encourage active participation. They treat theater as a means for creating a communal experience which breaks physical and social barriers between participants. It is in this sense that performing arts are often believed to be capable of countering individualisation and fragmentation of communities, thus overcoming isolation (Abraham 2021). For this reason, engaged performance projects are often seen not only as social activity but also as communal work.

Victor Turner's and Richard Schechner's theories on the *liminality* of performative space, though criticized by some scholars, have long defined the ways in which applied theater's socio-political efficacy has been conceptualized (Dwyer 2016).

Turner (1977) introduced the term *liminality* to talk about the moment during rites of passage in which participants are on the threshold, in between two social statuses. The *liminal* space exists outside of the established structures of the society. It is a locus of an unstructured community of individuals who, for this brief moment, are not kept apart by social hierarchies and norms. Turner refers to this community of equal individuals as *communitas*, characterized by the strong feeling of connection and unity among the participants. Turner suggests that in technologically advanced, complex societies, the *liminalinality* is no longer necessarily located in rituals, which are declining, but rather becomes associated with the leisure activities, such as arts and sports. The reminiscence of ritual thus survives in these *liminoid* (*liminal-like*) activities performed outside of the rigid social structures (Graham 2008). Turner, in his late works, as well as Schechner focused on studying the liminality within performance art and in theater (Bigger 2009).

Some contemporary scholars of applied theater agree that socially engaged art, because of its communal nature, has functions of ritual (Cohen-Cruz 2010). Others have challenged and reframed the liminality paradigm, proposing alternative or supplementing concepts for understanding the collective experience of performance art. Cathy Sloan (2018) proposes to conceptualize theater making as a space of potentiality within which participants are free to make choices and experiment with new ways of being. She writes that “as bodies-in-process respond to co-constellation with each other in performance [...] this generates a temporary milieu that may well be different to the external one, dominated by the hegemonic values and power structures, that impact the lives of the group outside of the liminal space” (Sloan 2018, 593).

James Thompson (2011) puts emphasis on beauty as the powerful aspect of artistic practice. He suggests replacing the concept of liminality with that of an “affective encounter that is shared, where individual embodied experience is connected with others during the inter-relation of the creation or sharing of a performance” (Sloan 2018, 592). The shift to focus on the affective aspect of performing arts is also exemplified by Helen Nicholson (2014) who conceptualizes applied theater-making as joyful encounters understood as bodies brought together in agreement. She refers to them as life-affirming and challenging the established power structures. The embodied sensation of connection is also grasped by Eve Kosofsky Sedwick’s (2003) concept of a position of *alongsideness* in which people are committed to co-initiative and to taking part in “a dynamic process of exchange, recognition of difference, acceptance of disagreement and mutual presence through listening and attending held together through a desire to connect” (Sloan 2018, 590).

Scholars have also proposed to describe the affective experience of theater workshop with the use of the concept of flow defined by psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi as a “holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement” (Csíkszentmihályi as quoted in Sloan 2018, 592-593). The shared enthusiasm of dancing, singing, playing together creates a space where something transformative might happen.

J Lowell Lewis (2008) redefines *communitas* as the embodied experience of participants sharing sights, smells, sounds, taste, and touch. He emphasizes the *intercorporeality* and intersubjectivity of performing arts. He also argues that many cultural performances can be successfully explained through analogy to play, rather than to ritual, as Turner would suggest.

What is evident in all these theories is their emphasis on the embodied experience of participants of performing arts events. They all attempt to grasp the meaning of the act of sharing space and time. Performance practice is often viewed as making people feel totally involved in the presence (as they enter the flow) and attached to the place. (Mackey 2016). As the following section will demonstrate, the quality of immediacy of performing arts has been emphasized by many of my interlocutors facilitating and participating in the events at the Brunnenpassage.

2.2 Case study of the performing arts program of Brunnenpassage

In the following section, I will focus on a few events in which I took part during my research on Brunnenpassage – a theater workshop *Shared Acts* facilitated by Michikazu Matsune, a

theater workshop with a focus on voice *Entdecke Stimme und Körper neu*⁷ facilitated by Nigar Hasib and a Peruvian dance workshop led by Katty Anyela Bengoa. I will compare these three events, incorporating the experiences of participants and reflections of the facilitators and curators of the events into my discussion.

Theater workshops usually take place at Brunnenpassage once a month. They serve as an occasion for different practitioners to share their methods with whoever might be interested. The February 2024 theater workshop, facilitated by a Vienna based artist originally coming from Japan, Michikazu Matsune, was called *Shared Acts*. It consisted of storytelling elements and movement exercises. The session ended with preparation of short group performances. Around 15 people, mostly young adults, participated. At least half of them were originally from outside of Austria and thus the workshop was held in English. For some it was the first theater workshop they had ever attended. Many of them did not know any other people from the group. In spite of that, participants seemed to begin to feel comfortable in the group quite quickly and the atmosphere of the workshop was joyful. Many of them stayed together to talk after the workshop had ended.

A few of the participants of the workshop shared with me that they were surprised by how connected they felt to the group. They reflected on the workshop as a bonding experience. Sharing stories, moving together and a creative collaboration in a relatively small group created a temporary milieu within which a feeling of community arised.⁸

⁷ *Discover voice and body anew* (my own translation).

⁸ Group interview with participants of *Shared Acts* workshop conducted on February 19, 2024 in Vienna.

I met with Michikazu Matsune later to talk about his workshop at Brunnenpassage and his broader artistic practice.⁹ “For me theater or performance as an event is actually a gathering of people. And this gathering is very unique, because everyone can meet in this exact situation only right now” he told me. Enabling the real meeting and exchange of emotions and thoughts is central for his artistic practice which mainly revolves around performance. He ascribes significance to the act of being together in one space and sharing stories as this is what allows people to get to know each other even if they do not fully understand or agree with each other. Listening to other people’s stories and getting to know them brings joy. For these reasons, Michikazu Matsune locates the strength of performing arts in the live moment.

Brunnenpassage recognises singing as one of the most suitable art forms for its program. Open voice workshops (Stimm Workshops) as well as rehearsals of the choir (Brunnenchor) take place at the ArtSocialSpace every week. Singing, as a language universally understandable, is believed to create a sense of togetherness in spite of potential language barriers. It is both a means of communication and of individual expression (Pilić and Wiederhold 2015).

Voice was a central focus of the March 2024 workshop *Entdecke Stimme und Körper neu* facilitated by Nigar Hasib. The session consisted of various exercises of improvised singing as well as repeating sounds and simple melodies. Participants were invited to sing together as a group while discovering their individual voices. The group was twice as big as at Michikazu Matsune’s workshop. It was also more diverse with respect to age as it included both young adults and elderly people.

⁹ Interview with Michikazu Matsune conducted on February 29, 2024 in Vienna.

There were moments during the workshop when the synchronized voices of the group were especially beautiful and powerful. During long sequences of improvised singing a feeling of flow would arise. These felt like moments of being entirely focused on the presence experienced through bodily sensations. They also created a sense of unity in the group.

However, perhaps because of the size of the group or a different structure of the workshop, a sense of community was not as strong as in the previous theater workshop. People with whom I talked at the end reflected on the workshop mainly as a liberating experience which gave them an opportunity to overcome shyness and barriers related to singing or being loud.¹⁰

Reflecting on the workshop later, Nigar Hasib shared that the size of the group and the limited time of only two hours made it challenging to create a space of focus and strong collectivity during the Brunnenpassage workshop. She said that a moment in which she felt that we came closer as a group was when we were singing one song altogether. At that moment, a ritualistic atmosphere began to be felt. But actually establishing it would have required more time and more intimacy among participants. Only then would people have been able to fully trust each other and learn to react to each other's impulses.¹¹

Creating a feeling of being together is a central element of Nigar Hasib's performance practice. She emphasizes the need to focus entirely on the here and now during the performance, of clearing one's head and focusing on feeling. It is the attentive sharing of space that has a potential of giving rise to new groups and collective memories. Nigar Hasib describes her performances as *performative meetings*. The space of her theater is "the space for what occurs

¹⁰ Group interview with participants of *Entdecke Stimme und Körper neu* workshop conducted on March 11, 2024 in Vienna.

¹¹ Interview with Nigar Hasib conducted on March 27, 2024 in Vienna.

and is happening right now. [...] This space is one of meeting and encounter in which something is happening” (Amin and Hasib 2018, 367).

The Peruvian dance workshop led by Katty Anyela Bengoa was organized as part of the Saturdance workshops series of Tanz die Toleranz. It was one of the biggest events I have attended at Brunnenpassage as it involved around 40 participants of various ages and origins. During the two hour long session, the group learned some basic step sequences of Peruvian dance. As the facilitator did not know German, she gave instructions in Spanish and one person translated. The lack of a common language did pose a barrier as the workshop was based upon repeating the movements. Participants visibly enjoyed the session.

A young woman who came to the workshop alone said that she does not feel like it is uncomfortable to not know anyone. Dancing is another type of communication, it does not require talking. She reflected that as long as the workshop continues she has a sense of being part of a community here.¹² Another person, who moved to Vienna from Ukraine, shared with me that what she appreciated about the workshop was that it allowed her to clear her mind. For these two hours she could be entirely focused on the presence and forget all the troubles. She also enjoyed that she could be surrounded with people whom she did not know but with whom she felt connected through exchanging smiles. These small joyful encounters calmed her and made her feel happy.¹³

In 2015 Tanz die Toleranz organized dance workshops for refugees arriving in Vienna. The aim of the project was creating spaces of being together and enjoying the present moment of

¹² Interview with Participant A of Saturdance workshop conducted on April 13, 2024 in Vienna.

¹³ Interview with Participant B of Staurdance workshop conducted on April 13, 2024 in Vienna.

dancing. They were hoped to serve as spaces of a little hope in uncertain and stressful moments in the lives of the participants, as their organizer told me. Meeting and moving together in a specific moment and space makes one happy. Moving bodies to one rhythm gives people a feeling of being together at eye level. Therefore dancing is beneficial for everyone, from children to elderly people.¹⁴

In the reflections of participants and practitioners of performing arts, the experience of being fully present in the moment and of sharing the space with others is ascribed a great significance. My research thus supports the idea that the aspect of sharing here and now is of fundamental importance for understanding the experience of taking part in performing arts projects. It is common for participants and artists to think of performing arts events as encounters which bring them joy. The experiences of my interlocutors can be successfully conceptualized as joyful encounters taking place within a temporary milieu which differs from the environment outside of the liminal space.

¹⁴ Interview with a Tanz die Toleranz worker conducted on March 19, 2024 in Vienna.

CHAPTER 3. DISCUSSION ON THE SOCIO-POLITICAL EFFICACY OF PERFORMING ARTS

The sharing here and now remains the critical dimension of the socially engaged performing arts when it comes to the questions concerning their political efficacy. In this chapter I discuss the meanings which practitioners collaborating with Brunnenpassage ascribe to their practice in order to outline the potential effects of performing arts projects. In the last section of the chapter I look into their limitations and challenges faced by organizations such as Brunnenpassage.

3.1 Potential socio-political efficacy of performing arts

Scholars such as Jonas Tinius suggest that art can be regarded as an extra-ordinary, ethical field as it is often regarded as “a public profession with moral tasks and requirements” (Tinius 2023, 21). Consequently, artistic practice is often understood as an “alternative way of acting politically” (Tinius 2023, 24).

That art has always a political dimension, even if it does not show political engagement directly, is a belief widely shared by contemporary artists. It also resonates with people whom I interviewed during my research. Socio-political efficacy of performance is believed to largely stem from what it does rather than from what it says. As the following discussion will demonstrate, formal aspects of artistic practice play a central role in the artists’ reflections on the political implications of their work. The fact that performing arts can create open spaces of encounter, joy or collaboration is believed to bear political significance in itself.

Both Michikazu Matsune and Nigar Hasib put an emphasis on the ability of performing arts to create special spaces for being together. Michikazu Matsune's practice is based upon the principle of gathering people in one space and sharing stories. Its purpose is a real meeting, exchange of thoughts and emotions. Simply being together in one space "is a very strong statement and practice. It's political and poetical" he tells me when we meet in his studio. "I think all of my works have this political dimension" he adds, "but it's different to say I'm making political art. I don't need to say that. Because for me art is political already. To take this craft seriously makes it into a political act."¹⁵ Similarly, Nigar Hasib believes that art is in principle political but not in the sense of necessarily supporting any particular ideology. Rather, what makes it political is that it addresses specific issues, asks specific questions, looks for specific answers, shows specific problems, even if it does not do it in a direct or obvious way.¹⁶

Nigar Hasib understands her theatrical practice as a practice of democratizing the space through its ritualization. Her performances and workshops take place in a circle – a shape within which each participant holds an equal position. Using ritualistic elements helps her to create a feeling of unity within a group. In contemporary European culture ritualism has been widely rejected. Ritual has come to be associated with something restrictive and limiting for an individual. As Mary Douglas writes, "ritual has become a bad word signifying empty conformity" (Douglas 1997, 1). Coming from the Kurdish culture which values collectivity much more, Nigar Hasib's understanding of ritual is radically different. She sees it as something democratic and strengthening. She explains that the strength of an individual is always within a group. It is within a group that individuals can fully express themselves. Thus, ritual does not diminish but rather enhances the power of an individual.¹⁷

¹⁵ Interview with Michikazu Matsune conducted on February 19, 2024 in Vienna.

¹⁶ Interview with Nigar Hasib conducted on March 27, 2024 in Vienna.

¹⁷ Ibid.

When reflecting on the political impact of her artistic practice, Nigar Hasib says: “Through the democratization of my space, through relationship towards my audience, I show to the strangers who I am, as a foreigner. How they should accept and respect me, because I accept and respect. I do it with the use of art, not with big words.”¹⁸

The idea that art can communicate more than big words resonates with the approach of creators of a participatory dance performance *MozgásTér/ HABITAT* choreographed by Kata Juhász. The piece was performed at Brunnenpassage in the beginning of March. It consisted of the audience members dancing together with the dancers who led the flow in such subtle that almost unnoticeable way. At the end of the performance artists explained the ideas behind the piece which was meant to have a political message. It was envisioned as giving participants an experience of freedom and a space within which cooperation is easy. As people dance together they form groups, synchronize movements, and connect. They are freed from oppressive structures which normally keep them apart. The piece is designed to show democracy and autonomy through movement and convince people that social cooperation on a larger scale is possible.

The idea to connect dance with democratic values is present in the community dance literature (Wise et al. 2020). Moving together has a potential of fostering empathy among participants and creating spaces where meanings and strength can be generated collectively. As Wise et al suggest, cooperation which is crucial in a community dance space is also needed in democracy. The values of empowerment, inclusivity and participation are vital for both community dance

¹⁸ Interview with Nigar Hasib conducted on March 27, 2024 in Vienna.; my own translation from German.

and democratic practice. Thus, community dance can be thought of as a space for learning democracy (Wise et al. 2020).

There is a sense that what happens in the performative space might trigger changes in the “real” world. Performance is able to present alternative worlds which participants might decide to carry back to the socio-political reality. Baz Kershaw (1992) argues that socio-political efficacy of performance rests upon theatrical duality of being both real and not real. Upon entering the theatrical space, audience members take on a role of a ludic nature, which allows them to “participate in playing around with the norms, customs, regulations, laws which govern [their lives] in society” (Kershaw 1992, 24). The ludic character of the participant’s role is that she can treat the experience as having no consequences for her further life. This allows performance to shake the audience's beliefs without triggering immediate rejection.

While Kershaw’s analysis is related primarily to the community theater which is much more discursive, it can also be applied to thinking of Brunnenpassage performing arts events. Most of them do not address specific political or social topics but they do construct an alternative world. They hope to create a space of *communitas*, of unity in diversity, experienced in ludic ways. The shared hope of artists and curators is that this feeling of connection with strangers will be transported outside and influence the ways in which participants relate to people from other social groups.

An important aspect of performing arts is its immediacy. It is this dimension that Zuzana Ernst identifies as making performing arts into an especially suitable format for socially and engaged practice.¹⁹ The live aspect of this artistic practice allows for immediate exchange of thoughts

¹⁹ Interview with Zuzana Ernst conducted on March 19, 2024 in Vienna.

and emotions between performers and the audience or among the participants. While political content and stories can be conveyed in different art genres, performing arts' special ability is creating spaces for immediate exchange.

This is what happens in practice at Brunnenpassage where, as one elderly visitor pointed out, there is little separation between the audience members and artists – they can easily talk with each other after the performance. We were talking after watching Raw Matters performances and she was planning to approach two young dancers whose performance she did not particularly like but found intriguing. “I want to ask them what was on their minds,” she said.²⁰

Another dimension of the potential political efficacy of performing arts is related to shifting power dynamics. It oscillates around the question of who is allowed to stand on stage, in other words, who is allowed to visibly take up public space. Within Tanz die Toleranz, there is a sense that bringing people who are not professional dancers on stage is in itself a political statement.²¹

These considerations are important for curators of both Tanz die Toleranz and Brunnenpassage. As Pilić and Wiederhold (2015) write “the motivation behind Brunnenpassage’s work is to enable universal participation in arts and culture and make visible the population’s multilingualism and diverse backgrounds as an acknowledged reality in Vienna, and most of all, to tangibly show the benefits of this” (33). Following this line of thinking, performing arts can be conceptualized as providing the tangible, embodied experience of diversity and as making a statement by taking up the public space.

²⁰ Interview with a spectator at Raw Matters conducted on March 25, 2024 in Vienna; my own translation from German.

²¹ Interview with a Tanz die Toleranz worker conducted on March 19, 2024 in Vienna.

3.2 Limitations of the socio-political efficacy of performing arts

As this discussion demonstrates, performing arts' ability to create spaces of encounters, playfulness, freedom, and collectivity is ascribed social and political meanings. The transformative potential of performing arts practice is however limited in so far as it concerns only those who have decided to participate in the first place.

Probably the biggest challenge for organizations such as Brunnenpassage is ensuring that they actually reach people who are less likely to regularly participate in the public cultural life of the city. There is always a danger of falling into the arts world bubble. While Brunnenpassage is committed to the idea "of not producing another self-referential art space, which, in turn, addresses and is used by a small segment of society" (Pilić & Wiederhold 2015, 21) and has accomplished a lot in fostering participation of broad public in art, the challenge remains.

The legacy of "high culture" persists in both social reality and collective imaginations concerning art. Data suggests that the access to institutionalized cultural life is still dependent on social class (defined according to the education level). Majority of theater and museum goers has at least secondary education (Pilić & Wiederhold 2015). Despite the many efforts to change it, the idea that institutional art is an entertainment for only a few persists.

While the space of Brunnenpassage is open to everyone, people who come there are often those who are already interested in art. I talked with an owner of a food truck from the Brunnenmarkt who, while speaking quite positively about Brunnenpassage, mentioned that art is still mostly for educated people. While he occasionally goes for music events there, he said he has never met any other workers from the Brunnenmarkt at Brunnenpassage. He underlined that

Brunnenpassage does not filter its audience and that the glass door has an inviting effect. Yet, he asserted that to come in you would already have to be interested in art.²²

This remark points to the fact that even an organization which attempts to free art from its “high culture” associations and bring it back to the sphere of the daily life, has to face the questions such as who is in the position to be interested in these alternative art formats, who can spend time taking part in them. One of the strategies for breaking out of the art world bubble is to go out of the closed spaces and engage with people directly on the streets. This is implemented in some of Brunnenpassage projects, such as the annual StreetArtFestival (StraßenKunstFest). At the same time, as I discussed in the previous sections, the social meanings of performing arts are very much based upon gathering within the space, the liminal character of which allows for special kinds of interactions. Paradoxically, the sharing of the specific space and the moment in time constitutes both the potential and the limitation for the socio-political efficacy of performing arts. .

²² Interview with a Brunnenmarkt worker conducted on April 9, 2024 in Vienna.

CONCLUSION

Taking ArtSocialSpace Brunnenpassage in Vienna as its case study, this thesis sheds light on how artists and curators reflect upon potential socio-political efficacy of performing arts. It also discusses ways in which people experience engaging with performing arts, especially with their participatory formats. The argument which I developed in the thesis is that the embodied, collective experience of sharing space and a moment in time is the critical dimension of performing arts. Theater, singing and dance workshops allow for special kinds of encounters imagined as occurring on eye level and often described as joyful.

The immediacy of performing arts and their ability to create a communal feeling among strangers is the locus of the socio-political efficacy of fostering social inclusion and preventing fragmentation of the society ascribed to them. Performing arts can create liminal spaces within which people connect with those from different social groups and live through an embodied, joyful experience of diversity. This bears political significance especially in the times when the far-right sentiments are rising and the discourse dividing postmigrant society into antagonistic groups of ‘us, Austrians’ and the threatening ‘them, migrants’ is becoming increasingly normalized. The socio-political efficacy of performing arts is however limited to the people who have decided to participate in the first place.

My case study on Brunnenpassage contributes to the scholarship on socially engaged arts and on performance by providing specific examples of how contemporary practitioners and participants experience and understand engagement with performing arts. An interesting continuation of this project would be going beyond the sphere of visions, reflections and immediate experiences to study the long-term social effects of taking part in performing arts

events. Further research could attempt to determine the extent to which taking part in a collective performance functions as a transformative experience.

I hope that in its present form my discussion will trigger interest in socio-political aspects of performing arts and serve as an inspiration for those interested in combining artistic practice with social engagement.

REFERENCE LIST

1. Abraham, Nicola. 2021. "Applied Theatre. An Introduction." In *The Applied Theatre Reader. Second Edition*, edited by Tim Prentki and Nicola Abraham, 3-9. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
2. Amin, Shamal and Nigar Hasib. 2018. "Performative Meeting for Peace. The Way of the Energetic Voice and Vocal Action." In *Transrational Reasonances. Echoes to the Many Peaces*, edited by J. Echavarría Alvarez, D. Ingruber and N. Koppensteiner, 363-376. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
3. Bigger, Stephen. 2009. "Victor Turner, Liminality, and Cultural Performance." *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 30, no. 2 (2009): 209–12.
doi:10.1080/13617670903175238.
4. Caritas Wien & NÖ-Ost. n.d. "Brunnenpassage." Accessed May 20, 2024.
<https://www.caritas-wien.at/hilfe-angebote/zusammenleben/kunst-fuer-alle/brunnenpassage>
5. Cohen-Cruz Jan. 2010. "Engaged Performance. Theatre as Call and Response." Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
6. Douglas, Mary. 1997. "Natural Symbols." London: Routledge.
7. Dwyer, Paul. 2016. "Chapter 7: Peacebuilding performances in the aftermath of war: lessons from Bougainville" in *Critical Perspectives on Applied Theatre*, edited by Jenny Hughes and Helen Nicholson, 127-149. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
8. Graham, St John. 2008. "Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance: An Introduction." In *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*, edited by St John Graham, 1-37. New York: Berghahn Books.
9. Hoare, Liam. 2024. "Austria is sleepwalking toward a far-right victory." *POLITICO*, February 7, 2024. <https://www.politico.eu/article/austria-sleepwalking-far-right-victory-european-election-freedom-party-fpo-nazis-herbert-kickl/>
10. Huss, Ephrat. 2019. "Introduction. Arts in social work practice: from theory to practice, an introductory chapter." in *Art in Social Work Practice. Theory and Practice: International Perspectives*, edited by Eltje Bos and Ephrat Huss. London and New York: Routledge.
11. Kershaw, Baz. 1992. "The Politics of Performance. Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention." London, New York: Routledge.

12. Lewis, J Lowell. 2008. "Chapter 1. Toward a Unified Theory of Cultural Performance. A Reconstructive Introduction to Victor Turner." in *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance*, edited by St John Graham, 41-58. New York: Berghahn Books.
13. MacDonald, Shana. 2018. "The city (as) place. Performative remappings of urban space through artistic research." In *Performance as Research. Knowledge, Methods, Impact*, edited by Annette Arlander, Bruce Barton, Melanie Dreyer-Lude, and Ben Spatz, 275-296. London, New York: Routledge.
14. Mackey, Sally. 2016. "Chapter 6: Performing location. Place and applied theatre." in *Critical Perspectives on Applied Theatre*, edited by Jenny Hughes and Helen Nicholson, 107-126. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
15. Madison, D. Soyini. 2020. "Chapter 6. Performance and Performed Ethnography." In *Critical Ethnography. Method, Ethics, and Performance*. Third Edition. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
16. Massey, Doreen. 1994. "Space, Place and Gender." Cambridge: Polity Press.
17. Nicholson, Helen. 2014. "Theatre and Joyful Encounters." *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 19, no. 4 (2014): 337–39. doi:10.1080/13569783.2014.954810.
18. Pilić, Ivana and Anne Wiederhold. 2015. "Art Practices in the Migration Society. Transcultural Strategies in Action at Brunnenpassage in Vienna." Vienna: transcript Verlag.
19. Pilić, Ivana and Anne Wiederhold-Daryanavard. 2021. "Art Practices in the Migration Society: Transcultural Strategies in Action at Brunnenpassage in Vienna. 2 Edition." Vienna: transcript Verlag.
20. Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Adam Frank. 2003. "Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity." Durham, London: Duke University Press.
21. Sloan, Cathy. 2018. "Understanding Spaces of Potentiality in Applied Theatre." *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 23, no. 4 (2018): 582–97. doi:10.1080/13569783.2018.1508991.
22. POLITICO. 2024. "Austria - National parliament voting intention." *Poll of Polls. Polling from across Europe. Updated daily*. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/austria/>

23. Rheindorf, Markus and Ruth Wodak. 2019. "Austria First' revisited: a diachronic cross-sectional analysis of the gender and body politics of the extreme right." *Patterns of Prejudice* 53, no. 3 (2019), 302-320.
24. Stadt Wien. 2023. "Wiener Integrationsmonitor 2023." *Integrationsmonitor 2023*. Accessed May 20, 2024.
<https://www.wien.gv.at/spezial/integrationsmonitor/#demografie-and-einwanderungsrecht>
25. Tinius, Jonas. 2023. "State of the Arts. An Ethnography of German Theatre and Migration." Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
26. Thompson, Christopher. 2017. "Foreword to the First Edition" in *An Introduction to Community Dance Practice*, edited by Diane Amans. London: Palgrave.
27. Thompson, James. 2011. "Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the End of Effect." Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan
28. Turner, Victor. 1977. "The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure." Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
29. Wise, Serenity, Ralph Buck, Rose Martin, and Longqi Yu. 2020. "Community dance as a democratic dialogue." *Policy Futures in Education* 18, no. 3 (April 2020): 375-390. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/1478210319866290>