INTERSECTING DISABILITY AND ART:

AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS AT WERD:ART GALLERY-CAFÉ

By

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Eliška Holá, candidate for the BA degree in Culture, Politics and Society, declare herewith that the present thesis titled "Intersecting Disability and Art: Audience Perceptions at Werd:Art Gallery-Café" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

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Vienna, 26 May 2025

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores audiences' perceptions of the intersection of art and disability, defined as a moment of artistic production by an individual with a disability. Drawing on the discourse of the intersection referencing, both explicitly and implicitly, the medical, social and affirmation models of disability from the perspectives of the artists or art institutions, a perspective that seems to be notably absent is the reception of the intersection by art audiences. Addressing the gap, the main research question is: How do audiences perceive the intersection of disability and art? The thesis hypothesizes that audiences' perceptions will be inconsistent and unevenly distributed across the theoretical frameworks of the medical, social and affirmation models of disability, similarly to existing literature. The research, exploratory in nature, is conducted through qualitative case study methodology, specifically through a focus group at Werd:Art in Vienna, a gallery-café exhibiting works of artists with intellectual disabilities. Its findings suggest that the hypothesis was correct. Focus group participants try to map the intersection through understanding its disability dimension, however, employ a critical perspective on their perceptions, while simultaneously extending their critical analysis onto the gallery-café. The artists seem to be perceived through disability art and the social model of disability; the art seems to be perceived mostly through the affirmation model of disability and disability aesthetics; lastly, Werd:Art seems to be perceived through the social model of disability.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1   INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores audiences' perceptions of the intersection of art and disability. I define the intersection of disability and art as a moment of artistic production by an individual with a disability and approach this intersection from a sociological perspective. People with disabilities are the largest minority and continue to face persistent discrimination in variety dimensions of life (United Nations, n.d.). I assume an occurrence of a spill-over effect of the societal attitudes onto the intersection of disability and art. Existing research too explores the intersection of disability and art within the context of the ongoing discrimination of people with disabilities and, both implicitly and explicitly, connects it to the theoretical models of disability, mainly from the perspectives of the artists or art institutions (e.g., Stober & García Iriarte, 2022; Sulewski, Boeltzig, & Hasnain, 2012). A perspective that seems to be notably absent is the reception of the intersection by art audiences. Addressing the gap, the main research question I pursue here is: How do audiences perceive the intersection of disability and art?

The first chapter presents the theoretical framework– following a historical narrative, it introduces three models of disability, I found to be referenced in existing literature on the intersection of disability and art, and, drawing primarily on Solvang (2017), connects them to relevant theoretical frameworks through which this intersection is expressed. These frameworks are the medical model of disability and art therapy, the social model of disability and disability art, and the affirmation model of disability and disability aesthetics. The second chapter presents the thesis's qualitative case study methodology. The research is conducted through a focus group at Werd:Art in Vienna, a gallery-café exhibiting works of artists with intellectual disabilities. Hence, the results are specific to the intersection of intellectual

disability and visual art. In the findings and discussion, the focus group interview is interpreted through the three models of disability and the respective frameworks representing the intersection of disability and art.

Considering several frameworks are used to interpret the intersection of disability and art, I hypothesize that, mirroring the state of the discourse, audiences' perceptions will be inconsistent and unevenly distributed across the theoretical frameworks of the medical, social and affirmation models of disability and their respective discourses of disability and art. Findings suggest that the hypothesis is valid. Organized into thematic categories: artists, art and Werd:Art, the results indicate audiences 'perceptions of the intersection of disability and art vary and partially align with all three models, most prominently with the social and affirmation models. By including audiences' perspectives on the intersections of disability, the research utilizes visual art as a tool to contribute to socio-cultural mapping of attitudes towards disability and its position within the artworld. Due to the research's exploratory nature, its findings are preliminary and larger-scale study is needed for a comprehensive understanding.

2 FRAMING OF THE INTERSECTION OF DISABILITY AND ART

This thesis defines the intersection of disability and art in simple terms, as a moment of artistic production by an individual with a disability. Rather than exploring the definition from an epistemological perspective, the thesis utilizes existing narratives and aims to connect them with the audiences' perceptions. In this sense, it replicates the organic nature of encounters between the society and the notion of disability. Recognizing the existing narratives, directly or indirectly, related to theoretical models of disability, this chapter intends to connect discourses on the intersection of disability and art within to the existing models of disability. Following a chronological narrative, it introduces three models of disability– the medical model, the social model and the affirmation model. These models are selected based on their presence within the existing literature on the intersection of disability and art. Drawing primarily on Solvang (2017), the chapter further connects the models to art-relevant theoretical frameworks which derive from the disability models and reflect the intersection more directly. These are art therapy, disability art and disability aesthetics. Connecting the disability models and the corresponding art-relevant frameworks prepares the stage for potential audience perceptions of the intersection of disability and art. It is, however, important to acknowledge that the chapter engages in an artificial categorization for the purposes of data analysis, where such categorization serves as a scaffolding in navigating the perceptions. However, the thesis recognizes that, in real-world contexts, the models build upon each other and are organically intertwined.

2.1 Medical model of disability and art therapy

The medical model of disability limits the intersection of disability and art to a tool for normalization, for instance through art therapy (Solvang, 2017). The medical model emerged after a historical neglect of disability, at the time of the colonial preoccupation with difference

(Connor & Ferri, 2013). Dominant as a frame of reference during the first half of the 20th century, it embedded fear and sense of moral wrongness towards disability (Connor & Ferri, 2013). Connor & Ferri (2013) note that this perception translated into visual culture as well, for example in the form of human zoos and travelling freakshows. Therefore, individuals with disabilities were treated as objects of visual expression. Stigma surrounding disability is noticeable to this day (Hossen & Reed, 2023). Similarly, in academic discourse, the model holds a certain extent of relevance, often serving as the framework against which other disability models critically position themselves (Siebers, 2008). It perceives disability as a defect that it ought to cure and ultimately eliminate with medical interventions to give a full human capacity back to the "disabled" individual (Siebers, 2008; Connor & Ferri, 2013). By viewing disability as a medical diagnosis, it roots it within the individual (Siebers, 2008; Berghs, Atkin, Graham, Hatton, & Thomas, 2016). It can be deduced that this individualization of disability reinforces the binary understanding of abnormality versus normality, disability versus ability. Siebers (2008, p. 4-7) coined the term "ideology of ability", defining it as "the preference for ablebodiness", to critique the binarity and point to abled-bodied and abled-minded as the qualities of human-beingness. It can be derived that ability seems to be a prerequisite for acquiring other identities. Indeed, Siebers (2008) sees it as a factor when judging aspirations and desires. The lens of the medical model therefore confine identities of people with disabilities. Following this logic, in the case of the intersection of disability and art, it can be theorized that the dominance of the disability identity limits or prevents the development of artistic identity.

Within the medical model, artistic expressions of people with disabilities are understood as medical interventions, best described by the term art therapy (Solvang, 2017). Art therapy creates a link between art and health in order to improve a medical condition or general

wellbeing (Solvang, 2017). Therefore, when disability is perceived through the lens of the medical model, art created by people with disabilities is reduced to a singular purpose: the individual benefit. Solvang (2012, 2017) too notes that the role of individuals with disabilities as art practitioners is limited to using art as an intervention for individual and social development. The use of art practice as an intervention tool is characteristic of art therapy (Solvang, 2017). The value of the practice does not seem to be found in the final product and does not aim to interact with possible audiences. In other words, the practice of art therapy seems to be individualized, aligning with the individualization aspect of the medical model. As indicated by Solvang (2017), art therapy does not connect to the art discourse and remains within the medical setting. For practitioners with disabilities who aspire to recognition within the art world, the association with art therapy often means being placed in a role of a patient and thus being discriminated (Solvang, 2017). It follows that the medical model limits the perceptions of the intersection of disability and art with art therapy as the corresponding framework.

2.2   Social model of disability and disability art

Both the social model of disability and disability art advocate for systemic change in societal approach to disability (Siebers, 2008). The mid-20th century saw a turning point as the social model moved disability outside of the strictly medical framing (Bogdan & Biklen, 2013). Scaffolded by the Civil Rights Movement, Disability Rights Movement brought attention to disability-based discrimination as well as the issues of accessibility (Connor & Ferri, 2013). The notion of disability became politicized and legitimized through the professionalization of the field of disability study (Connor & Ferri, 2013; Siebers, 2008). In academia, an important milestone was Oliver's "Politics of Disablement: A Sociological Approach" (1990), where he coined the social model of disability. Defined within the emerging field of disability studies,

the social model of disability shifted the perspective from individualized impairment to a conceptual product of social injustice and theorized disability as a minority identity (Siebers, 2008). The model critiques the systemic discrimination of disability through the societal design which favors ablebodiness (Siebers, 2008). Its vision is of society that doesn't produce disabled individuals (Siebers, 2008). The social model, therefore, aims to locate the notion of disability within the society, as opposed to the individual impairment, with the goal to remove the societal barriers that create disability.

Disability art seems to apply the advocacy of the social model though the cultural sphere. Disability art is grounded in both disability rights activism and the social model (Stober & García Iriarte, 2022). Its first phase evolved from the UK and US social movements of early 1980s with their goal of gaining unity and pride through the cultural expression (Solvang, 2017). For instance, the disability art movement in the UK was rooted in celebration of difference and rejection of the ideology of normality (Swain & French, 2000, as cited in Sulewski, Boeltzig, & Hasnain, 2012), therefore rejection of the labelling of people with disabilities as 'abnormal'. It logically follows that disability art focuses on articulating a more complex image of the disability identity. Disability art can be defined as art production informed by the experience of disability and created by individuals with disabilities (Solvang, 2017). For the artists, engaging in disability art often means self-realization and further development of disability identities (Sulewski, Boeltzig, & Hasnain, 2012). For instance, the art can be used to channel emotions arising from disability identity through societal discriminations (Siebers, 2008). Disability art can therefore be understood a tool to address the systematic oppression of people with disabilities and advocate for change in societal perceptions of it. Its basis in shared experience of oppression and intention to advocate for disability rights seems to result in social cohesion which can contribute to collective disability

identity (Swain & French, 2000, as cited in Solvang, 2017). Contemporary disability art may be seen as its second phase; it is characterized by the desire to exhibit for mainstream audiences combining disability and non-disability issues (Solvang, 2012). Recognized artists actively institutionalize disability art as a minority art form (Solvang, 2017). However, not all artists with disabilities are creators of disability art, the key factor is their intention to share the experience of living with disability through to an artistic expression (Solvang, 2017, as cited in Stober & García Iriarte, 2022). Engaging with experience of disability, consequently, for the audiences, disability art might facilitate the possibility of better understanding of the disability experience. When contextualized within the social model, it can be inferred that disability art also challenges the societal concept of disability centered around the individual.

2.3 Affirmation model of disability and disability aesthetics

The affirmation model of disability aims to normalize disability identity and establish it as a positive asset, for example through disability aesthetics (Solvang, 2017; Swain & French, 2000). It builds upon the social model of disability, while critiquing it for its ambiguity regarding the labelling of disability as a negative identity (Cameron, 2013). It is a product of the development of disability studies, particularly the disability art movement (Cameron, 2013). Formally introduced by Swain and French (2000), the model is characterized by a non-tragic view on disability and positive identity formation through lived experience of disability. It highlights the precariousness of the human condition, thus ability as a temporary identity (Siebers, 2008). It aims to establish a view of disability as parallel to other identities and a positive asset to individuals (Swain & French, 2000). Hence, the affirmation model seems to perceive disability as the essence of human existence.

7

Relating to the affiliation model, disability aesthetics reframes the understanding and value of disability within the artworld (Solvang, 2017). Similarly to disability art it stems from the disability-related social movements (Gill, 1995, as cited in Sulewski, Boeltzig, & Hasnain, 2012). First, disability aesthetics is *"a framework [...] for giving value to disability in the aesthetic qualities assigned to works of art"* (Solvang, 2017, Chapter 1). Second, it also critically reconsiders art historical narratives and allows for interpretation of artworks as disability relevant (Solvang, 2017, Siebers, 2010). Through such lens, works by artists like Kahlo or van Gogh serve as references and inspirations to the disability community, and by reframing the interpretations of canonical art, the concept of disability aesthetics gives space for disability in the mainstream art world (Solvang, 2017). The aesthetic value of disability references the human condition, as such it reminds the audiences of the precariousness of human ablebodiness and aims to evoke reactions to it (Solvang, 2017, Siebers, 2010). It questions idealist aesthetics that dissociate the body from the art (Siebers, 2010), meaning the inherent disability of the body. Therefore, by creating space for disability within the art world, it recognizes the significance of the disability experience and its contributions to the broader society. Additionally, disability aesthetics embody the affirmation model of disability through perceiving disability as an asset as opposed to a cause of devaluation of the artistic expression.

3   METHODOLOGY

3.1   Research design

The thesis adopts a qualitative case study approach. It studies audiences' perceptions of the intersection of disability and art through organizing a focus group at Werd:Art in Vienna. The complexity of each empirical intersection between disability and art, as well as the relatively underexplored character of this area of study, justifies the choice of a case study approach (Crowe et al., 2011; Yin, 2015). Werd:Art labels itself as a gallery-café. Opened in 2018, the gallery-café intends to be a cultural space for people with and without disabilities (Fonds Soziales Wien, 2018). Its purpose lies in creating local encounters between people with and without disabilities in the areas of art and culture (Fonds Soziales Wien, 2018). Werd:Art evolved from a closed workshop that occasionally interacted with its local neighborhood to a gallery opened to public (Fonds Soziales Wien, 2018). From the research's perspective, this organic transformation is interpreted as a mutual desire, shared by the organization's members and the potential audiences, for establishment of a public intersection of disability and art. The relative novelty of the presence of audiences makes Werd:Art a significant case for exploring the impact of such reconceptualization, and its contribution to the broader discourse on the intersection of disability and art. As a multifunctional space (a gallery, a café, a workshop, a meeting point, an art shop), it has a low threshold entry point, which possibly invites a variety of audiences and allows non-expert audiences to get involved with the concept. Additional reason for selecting Werd:Art as a case study is its theoretical significance considering the lack of previous research on the intersection between intellectual disability and art from the audiences' perspective. In line with the goal of a case study, the research question aims to provide better understanding of the audiences' perceptions, and in doing so create an initial

probe analyzing a space where the intersection of intellectual disability and art also meets the public (Ragin, 2015).

Case-study approach allows for a multitude of appropriate data collection methods, I opted for and limited myself to facilitating a focus group (Yin, 2015). Focus group interviews provide a suitable method for understanding audiences' perceptions by gaining knowledge of a phenomenon through exploring opinions (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021). The seemingly informal discussion expects and encourages interactions between participants, frequently leading to dialogic narratives, which result in socially shared knowledge (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021). Its high degree of freedom for interpretations and answers promotes creativity and serendipity, allowing for spontaneous emergence of themes and topics through the mutual prompts of the conversations (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021). All of this might help participants in navigating the discussion. Moreover, the choice of a focus group is informed by the study's limited scope, its probing character, and my positionality. Considering my positionality (being part of Werd:Art's audiences myself) and skillset (e.g., limited German proficiency), I aimed for an unobtrusive research design. I concluded that designing a focus group does not require direct interaction with the artists and the Werd:Art team as one of the subjects of the study, while it can potentially render benefits to the gallery-café in the form of new audiences as well as outsider feedback. The main limitation of using focus groups is the potential of some participants dominating the discussion and therefore shaping others' perceptions (Ning, Liu, & Li, 2024). A certain degree of bias was observed in the focus group participants, some of whom expressed opposing opinions over the course of the discussion. While it limits the reliability of the results, it simultaneously confirms the suitability of focus group for open-ended research. The research design therefore reflects the exploratory nature of the study.

3.2   Data collection and analysis

The focus group was conducted at Werd:Art on May 9, 2025, after obtaining consent from the management of Werd:Art, and lasted around 2 hours in total. The participants were introduced to the ethical rules of the research, including handing of the collected data, confidentiality of their personal data and their rights. They spent around 30 minutes viewing the exhibition as well as observing the dynamics of the space, which added another layer to the artificiality of focus groups, but unified participants' frames of reference (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021). The discussion itself lasted about an hour. At the beginning, participants were introduced to the discussion rules. The rules included: validity of diverse responses (no right or wrong answers), respectful interactions, one person at a time speaking, closed-group confidentiality, right to refrain from answering questions and the possibility to diverge from the questions. Participants were given a total of nine questions. The last question directly asked participants to reflect on possible changes of their perceptions after visiting Werd:Art and led to some of the most interesting and honest insights.

A total of seven people participated in the focus group. The ideal number of participants in one focus group should be between six and ten (Morgan, 2001, Newlyn, 2012, Swartling, 2007). Due to initially unsuccessful data collection and subsequent time constraints, I opted for a combination of convenience, purposive and snowball sampling. Selection characteristics mirrored the purpose of the research and included one or a combination of the following: affiliation with disability, affiliation with art and affiliation with Werd:Art (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021). The final group consisted of two regular visitors of Werd:Art, three either academically or empirically disability affiliated individuals, one art affiliated individual and one individual affiliated to both disability and art. Interviewees relative-expertise from different fields aligned with the cross-disciplinary nature of the research, and rendered valuable production of

11

interdisciplinary knowledge (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021). None of the participants identified as disabled rendering the research specific to ablebodied-identifying audiences. All participants had a minimum of one preexisting relationship with another participant - beneficial in fostering a comfortable environment, it risks regarding confidentiality, power dynamics and vulnerability had to be acknowledged to prevent social desirability and conformity to the maximum degree (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021). The research would benefit both from higher diversity in participants' backgrounds and homogeneity with regard to the frames of reference of the participants.

As a focus group moderator, it was crucial to set a confidential and friendly atmosphere. The discussion addressed a polarized, presumably stigmatized issue, required real-time understanding of complex notions and construction of opinions, and could possibly lead to opening sensitive or personal topics. Recognizing the close connection between identity and interaction characteristic for focus group dynamic, I used several techniques to create confidential and friendly atmosphere, for instance the freedom to diverge from questions or withdraw from responding (Morgan, 2001; 2012). During the discussion, I balanced between a less structured focus group and moderator-led discussion and adopted the order of the questions when suitable, still following the sequence of thematic clusters (Morgan, 2012). I encouraged participants to answer by follow up questions or by silence, leaving space for thought and non-immediate answers. My positionality of an insider within the group could both further facilitate confidential and friendly atmosphere and influence the discussion outcomes (Acocella & Cataldi, 2021). To mitigate this effect, I put special emphasis on neutral facilitation and crucially reflected on my bias, including affiliation to disability through a family member (Ning, Liu, & Li, 2024).

I used a hybrid approach and combined deductive coding derived from information in the literature review with inductive open coding. The focus group interview was transcribed verbatim. Filler words were removed for clarity when meaning was not altered. Doing several rounds of coding, I was careful to utilize the constant comparative method throughout. I focused on thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006). Two sets of descriptive codes were utilized – first, following the theoretical frames of the intersection of disability and art, second following the thematic frames of the focus group questions (the artists, the art, and Werd:Art). Considering my positionality, I approached the data analysis conscious of my potential bias derived from knowing the participants.

4   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and its discussion are organized into three chapters. The first two present and discuss findings derived inductively through open coding. Chapter three contextualizes the results within the existing frameworks of the intersection of disability and art. Utilizing two-phased deductive coding, it links perceptions of the artists, the art and Werd:Art to the three models of disability and their respective disability-art frameworks.

4.1   Mapping the intersection

The understanding of the intersection of disability and art was constructed by the participants parallel to its analysis (personal communication, May 2025). The concept of the intersection of disability and art seemed unfamiliar to the focus group participants (personal communication, May 2025). They noted the perceived uncommonness of the combination by describing Werd:Art as "unique" and pointing to the frequent separation of people with and without disabilities in society (personal communication, May 2025). The openness, both literal and metaphorical, of the space possibly helped the audiences understand the intersection. One participant commented on the importance of seeing the artists' working, while others engaged in causal interactions with the artists (personal communication, May 2025). They compared the gallery to other art spaces in its alignment to professional norms, focusing on financial compensation or art education (personal communication, May 2025). Navigating the rarity of places like Werd:Art might have created an environment where distinguishing between art and non-art was deemed appropriate. One interviewee mentioned it explicitly, defining non-art as sketches, applied art, and by a feeling of drawing "for the sake of it" (Participant 1, personal communication, May 2025). Other participants were selective concerning artworks they could imagine exhibited elsewhere (personal communication, May 2025). By creating an

14

understanding of the character of the place through conversational exchange, it is demonstrated that participants viewed the intersection of disability and art as a novel concept.

Interviewees sought to understand the intersection primarily through navigating the disability dimension (personal communication, May 2025). The general narrative indicates that the participants assumed that intellectual disability influences individual's artistic expression. Despite the lack of agreement over whether the disability did manifest in the artworks (personal communication, May 2025), the sole consideration of it indicates such assumption. When asked about the importance of knowing the artist's identity, several of them noted paying additional attention to artists' identities due to being aware of their disability (personal communication, May 2025). The participants considered the possibility of intellectual disability influencing the process of art production and focused on creating an understanding of it (personal communication, May 2025). Their discussion examined specific factors such as a visible presence of some process, its duration or its seriality (personal communication, May 2025). Perceived independence was highlighted by several interviewees and seemed to be a key factor of evaluation of the intersection of disability and the artistic process (personal communication, May 2025). Others wondered about the extent of the artists' independence (personal communication, May 2025). These criteria seems to be specifically tailored to the disability experience, therefore assuming disability shaping individual's artistic expression. Furthermore, participants were theorizing the limits of the creative process conditioned by disability (personal communication, May 2025). Several of them imagined that artists could have different levels of comfort with certain motifs or media - media like colorful pencils or clay were considered appropriate, while the use of sewing machine was not expected and prompted surprise (personal communication, May 2025). This demonstrates their assumption of the link between disability and artistic expression, specifically disability limiting capabilities of artists.

Some participants acknowledged the premise of intellectual disability influencing individual's artistic expression directly: "I do think that they see things different" (Participant 5, personal communication, May 2025) or "You cannot ignore or neglect the living reality that it's [having an intellectual disability is] different." (Participant 3, personal communication, May 2025) Participants' need for mapping the intersection of disability and art demonstrates the lack of familiarity or visibility of the frameworks within public discourse, which was addressed though engaging in discussion about the character of the gallery-café and navigating its disability dimension.

4.2 Critical perspective

The focus group participants were aware of the complexity of the intersection of disability and art and adopted a critical perspective when reflecting their perceptions as well as the shortcomings of their understanding (personal communication, May 2025). Hence, ongoing discrimination of disability and marginalization of artists with disabilities becomes a premise for the discussion. Nearly all the interviewees mentioned the presence of stigma surrounding disability and its ongoing separation from the "abled" society, looking at it both from a societal and a personal perspective (personal communication, May 2025). Therefore, it can be assumed that they seem to be aware of their mapping being navigated primarily through the disability dimension. One person reflected about their positionality in the discussion as someone who does not identify as disabled (personal communication, May 2025). Other interviewees acknowledged their doubtful attitudes towards the artists capabilities and the artistic process (personal communication, May 2025). Such reflections indicate participants' awareness of the juxtaposition of their social location and the social location of disability.

The focus group recognized that the interaction with Werd:Art challenged their views on the intersection of disability and art (personal communication, May 2025). The expectations of many interviewees were lower prior to the exhibition viewing, and some further reevaluated the assumption that disability would be visible in the art (personal communication, May 2025). The intersection also caused two separate trends of change in perceptions. A change in perception towards normalization occurred in a participant – prejudice was exchanged with perceiving disability as equal to ability (personal communication, May 2025). A change in perception of art occurred in another, who described Werd:Art changed the way they look at artworks in mainstream galleries and sparked their interest in art (personal communication, May 2025). The general reflection was accompanied by voicing a wish for the marginalization to disappear and the discourse on the intersection of disability and art to change towards being more inclusive and less focused on the disability dimension (personal communication, May 2025). The fact that they were able to reflect on their bias with the other participants shows their openness to having their perceptions challenged. This demonstrates that the interviewees approached their perceptions of the intersection of disability and art critically.

The focus group recognized the role of Werd:Art in the process of inclusion and extended their critical analysis to evaluation of the gallery-café (personal communication, May 2025). They held expectations on how the artists identities should be presented – one participant anticipated that Werd:Art would present the artists through their disabilities, thus later appreciated that the artist identity was in focus instead (personal communication, May 2025). Others were attentive to the presentation of the art and how that reflected the treatment of the artists (personal communication, May 2025). Several of them doubted the dynamics and noted possible hierarchies within the organization, both amongst the artists and between the artists and the management (personal communication, May 2025). Some theorized that certain artists could

17

be unfairly prioritized over others, but a participant affiliated to Werd:Art stepped in to balance the critical tone by ensuring them that the exhibitions are temporary and regularly changed (personal communication, May 2025). Although with less emphasis, the interviewees also mentioned some aspects that they valued about Werd:Art's presentation of the intersection, such as the properties of a usual exhibition (personal communication, May 2025). Similarly to the disability discourse needing to reach a point of acknowledgement of discrimination to evolve further (Bogdan & Biklen, 2013; Connor & Ferri, 2013), the participants critical reflections mirror such evolution in the discourse on the perception of disability and art. They extend their reflections beyond themselves and evaluated Werd:Art by the same standards, applying their wish for change in the perceptions of the intersection of disability and art.

4.3   The relation between audiences' perception and theoretical frameworks

Audience's perceptions can be understood as located within the theoretical models of disability and the corresponding frames for their intersections with art. The overall perceptions remain ambiguous - participants often blend the theoretical frameworks in their answers. To identify several tendencies within the ambivalent landscape of audiences' perceptions of the intersection of disability and art, the thesis utilizes the organizational structure of the focus group questions, which were thematically clustered around the artists, the art and Werd:Art. The analysis focuses on both perceptions through the disability models and the frames for intersection of disability and art, because at times, possibly due to the participants' lack of familiarity with the intersection per se, the focus on the intersection was put aside by the focus group participants. The artists seem to be perceived through the lens of disability art, the social and affirmation model. The art seems to be perceived through the affirmation model of disability and disability aesthetics. Werd:Art seems to be perceived through a combination of the social model of disability.

4.3.1   Artists through the lens of disability art, the social and affirmation model

The artists seem to be perceived through disability art and the social model of disability. Disability art is a minority art form characterized by self-expression of disability identity by artists with disabilities (Solvang, 2017; Sulewski, Boeltzig, & Hasnain, 2012). Although none of the participants referred to the term disability art, they seemed to be aware of the concept and acknowledged the importance and presence of expression of disability identity through art (personal communication, May 2025). Few participants kept referencing to the artists as "doing their thing" (Participants 3 and 5, personal communication, May 2025). However, indicating the perceived authenticity does not seem to emphasize the individual benefits of artmaking, rather it underlines an importance of self-expression of their minority identity (Solvang, 2017). Applying the lens of the social model of disability, participants attributed to the artists an intention to advocate for disability issues (personal communication, May 2025; Swain & French, 2000, as cited in Solvang, 2017). By resisting pressures for normalcy and remaining authentic, the artists were understood to be creating space for disability within society, which aligns with the social model (personal communication, Siebers, 2008). The perceived advocacy for disability influenced the participants. They recognized that they themselves understand the nuances of disability identity and experience better through the artists' self-expression (personal communication, May 2025). "There's one artist […] he has also problem speaking or I have problem understanding him, but there's like this connection […] I like him as a person now because I like the art" (Participant 7, personal communication, May 2025) However, none of the interviewees elaborated with specificity on their new perceptions of disability linked to the artists identities (personal communication, May 2025). By acknowledging the authenticity of self-expression and its role in advocacy of disability issues, the audience's perceptions of the artists can be linked to disability and the social model.

Furthermore, some perceptions grounded in the social model and disability art seem to translate into viewing the artists through lens of the affirmation model. Seeing the artists as advocates of disability issues and acquiring a feeling of better understanding of the disability experience possibly reinforced their appreciations of disability identity (personal communication, May 2025; Swain & French, 2000). This movement of perception mirrors the development the social and affirmation models, where the affirmation model emerged in part as a response to the social model (Cameron, 2013). Affirmation model of disability views disability identity as an asset (Swain & French, 2000), similarly, the participants appreciated artists' disability identities (personal communication, May 2025). However, the interviewees did not mention their favorable attitudes towards disability identity directly, rather merited the artists with positive characteristics (personal communication, May 2025), which can be interpreted as positively connotating their disability identity. Hence, social model and disability art influences the perception of artists towards understanding it through the affirmation model of disability.

4.3.2 Art through the lens of the affirmation model and disability aesthetics

The art seems to be perceived mostly through the affirmation model of disability and disability aesthetics. Perceiving art objects through the affirmation model may seem paradoxical in the light of artists being mostly perceived through the lens of the social model. Possible explanation can be found in audience's wish for the elimination of marginalization of people with disabilities identified in the previous chapter, which can, however, when combined with the innate preference for ablebodiness (Siebers, 2008), be limited to objects, as opposed to people. When talking about the art, participants used the terminology of the art discourse such as "exhibition" or "painting" (personal communication, May 2025), which implies the rejection of specialness, or, using the terminology of the affirmation model, rejection of abnormality (Siebers, 2008; Swain & French, 2000). Focus group participants seemed to enjoy or mentioned

20

that they enjoyed the exhibited art (personal communication, May 2025). This suggests they were able to move past navigating the intersection primarily through the disability dimension in the case of the artworks. They saw the pieces as complex works and focused on specific aspects of the art, such as motifs, materials, colors or composition (personal communication, May 2025). Attending to specific aspects of the artworks means assigning value to or appreciating the art beyond its role in the disability discourse, therefore approaching disability as just another feature of the work in contrast to highlighting it as deficit or limitation, which aligns with the affirmation model of disability (Swain & French, 2000).

Furthermore, participants were able to derive complex interpretations. "It also seemed as if most of her paintings were rather reflecting women or feminine […] maybe the theme of family or femininity and different connection was also present." (Participant 3, personal communication, May 2025) "In just one painting […] there was […] the whole story together." (Participant 6, personal communication, May 2025) Following the same logic, that of lack of attention to disability equals rejection of its abnormality, these interpretations connect to the affirmation model (Siebers, 2008; Swain & French, 2000). Moreover, the themes, interpreted by the audience, could be visually represented by any artists regardless of disabilities, therefore they narrow the gap between artists with and without disabilities suggesting, as does the affirmation model, that disability is a natural part of humanness, not a defining feature of individuals (Siebers, 2008; Swain & French, 2000). Another instance of perceiving disability as the human condition according to the affirmation model was observed in participants who were able to critique the art, thus seemed to be judging it by standards applicable to mainstream art (personal communication, May 2025; Siebers, 2008). One commented that it seemed unrealistic to create only positively connotated pieces and not include any negative experiences in the artworks, while another could imagine some of the artworks in mainstream galleries

21

(personal communication, May 2025). This shows that they perceived the displayed pieces as elaborate and relevant to the mainstream artworld (Solvang, 2012; 2017). Given that the presence of disability dimension cannot be fully omitted from the artworks, it also integrates it in the mainstream artworld – a purpose of disability aesthetics (Solvang, 2017, Siebers, 2010).

Another aim of disability aesthetics is presenting the positive components of disability identity through art (Solvang, 2017, Siebers, 2010). Although the participants did not reference the artworks to any specific components of disability identity, they valued the complexity and thoughtfulness of the pieces and had high expectations about their meaning (personal communication, May 2025). "If I would talk to the person or if it would take a long time to think about it, there would be much more that can be seen." (Participant 3, personal communication, May 2025) This suggests perceiving disability as multidimensional identity, thus also seeing its positive components. Interviewees highly valued consistency, uniqueness and authenticity in themes and styles (personal communication, May 2025). They perceived the works to be meaningful visual expressions with distinct aesthetics, valuing its beauty, honesty and novelty (personal communication, May 2025). Viewing their distinctness as an asset rendered disability relevant in the mainstream artworld, which exemplifies disability aesthetics (Solvang, 2017, Siebers, 2010).

Additionally, in certain instances, complex descriptions could be interpreted through the lens of disability art, as communicating something about the disability experience (Solvang, 2017). For instance, one participant described the difference in portraying similar animals interacting with each other versus being placed separately (personal communication, May 2025). Although the parallel to the separation of people with disabilities from people without disabilities was

not explicitly made, it could be argued that it was recognized subconsciously and evidenced by the attention to this detail.

4.3.3   Werd:Art through the lens of the social model

Werd:Art seems to be perceived through the social model of disability. Interviewees characterized it as a meeting point and the interactions between artists and audiences were perceived as an important asset of the place (personal communication, May 2025). The possibility of meeting the artists was highly valued (personal communication, May 2025). Focusing on the contact between artists and audiences, interpreted as people with and mostly without disabilities, the purpose of the place was understood as bridging social barriers between them (personal communication, May 2025). The social model views disability as a societal construct and aims for the restructuring of socially constructed barriers (Siebers, 2008). Therefore, by perceiving Werd:Art as a meeting point, the audience applies the social model of disability.

Participants also valued the atmosphere of the place which facilitated further connection between them and the intersection of disability and art (personal communication, May 2025). They mentioned that the atmosphere of Werd:Art felt warm and made them feel comfortable and welcome, therefore perceived it as link between disability and ability, opposing the disabling structure of society (personal communication, May 2025). Indeed, Werd:Art is organized so that it allows for possibilities of building closeness between the artist and audiences (Fonds Soziales Wien, 2018), which was positively recognized by the focus group audience (personal communication, May 2025). For instance, the regular visitors of Werd:Art developed relationships with the artists and commented on their mutual appreciation of each other, viewing it as an essential asset to the gallery-café (personal communication, May 2025).

Another participant agreed with the importance of meeting the artists for their perception of the intersection. "I feel like they were really proud of having us here, so I feel like it blends with at least what I see, or project to the art, the warmth and the connection to them." (Participant 3, personal communication, May 2025) As noted in the section on artists, meeting or knowing the artists may have deepened participants understanding of the experience of disability, therefore classifies under the social model by promoting awareness about disability (Connor & Ferri, 2013; Siebers, 2008).

Participants expressed genuine interest in spaces facilitating exchange between people with and without disabilities and challenging the disabling nature of society. One reflected that given the inclusive atmosphere of the gallery-café, they, the audience, had greater tendency to deconstruct their perception of typical behavior and expressed the wish for this deconstruction to be applied to other settings and groups of people (personal communication, May 2025). Observing the social model, this can be understood as a form of advocacy for deconstructing the systemic discrimination of disability (Siebers, 2008).

One participant projected their own experience with the gallery-café into explanations of its beginnings. "In my mind the process went like this is really cool, everybody should see it." (Participant 2, personal communication, May 2025) The sentence expresses expectations and wish for Werd:Art to engage in disability advocacy, therefore aligning with the social model of disability (Siebers, 2008). Others located the purpose of Werd:Art in disability advocacy as well. They emphasized the visibility of the gallery-café in public space (personal communication, May 2025). One appreciated Werd:Art's participation in the city life as giving something to the public (personal communication, May 2025). Another elaborated and commented on the importance of the visibility in light of the persistent discrimination of people

24

with disabilities - they perceived Werd:Art's value in its potential to challenge public opinions of disability through meaningful interactions (personal communication, May 2025).

Next to the purpose of bridging the gap created by discrimination, interviewees saw the value of Werd:Art in the individual benefits for the artists, which relates to the medical model of disability (Siebers, 2008; Berghs, Atkin, Graham, Hatton, & Thomas, 2016). However, it seems that perceiving the place though the medical model did not imply wishing for elimination of disability but rather meant focusing on the aspect of the model that enters around individuality. Concurrently, Werd:Art seems to be perceived through the affirmation model of disability. Participant's appreciation of the place was derived from the perceived affirmation of the intersection of disability and art by the artists (personal communication, May 2025; Swain & French, 2000). "It seems like they really like this space" (Participant 6, personal communication, May 2025). "It's just they do the thing; they love the thing and that's why they show it" (Participant 5, personal communication, May 2025). Identifying additional purposes of the place reflects diverse viewpoints. Nonetheless, the overall perception indicates that participants saw the value of Werd:Art as advocating for disability by connecting it to the public, therefore they primarily perceive the place through the social model of disability.

5 CONCLUSION

This thesis aims to create a preliminary mapping of audiences' perceptions of the intersection of disability and art. Exploratory in nature, it poses the question: How do audiences perceive the intersection of disability and art? It formulates a general hypothesis, expecting the audiences' perceptions to be inconsistent and unevenly distributed across the theoretical frameworks: the medical model of disability and art therapy, the social model of disability and disability art, and the affirmation model of disability and disability aesthetics. The findings of the thesis suggest that the hypothesis was correct. The audience tries to map the intersection through understanding its disability dimension, parallel to creating perceptions shaped by opinions corresponding to the theoretical framings. They adopt a critical perspective on their reflections, identifying them as marked by the stigmatized position of disability in society. They are, however, open to having their perceptions challenged by Werd:Art, and simultaneously extend their critical analysis onto the gallery-café, articulating questions about Werd:Art's treatment of the artists. Returning to the theoretical frameworks, the artists seem to be perceived through disability art and the social model of disability; the art seems to be perceived mostly through the affirmation model of disability and disability aesthetics; lastly, Werd:Art seems to be perceived through the social model of disability. The thesis intends to contribute to the discourse on the intersection of disability and art by exploring an underrepresented perspective, that of the audiences. This perspective plays an important role in positioning disability within the art world, as well as shaping socio-cultural attitudes towards disability. However, the scope of the study remains limited. The case study of intersection of intellectual disability and visual arts does not provide a comprehensive understanding, and it would be necessary to conduct multiple focus groups across a variety of places. Additionally, the study would benefit from a wider range focus group participants, ideally including experts on the intersection of disability and art. Further research could then investigate trends in opinions

26

amongst audiences depending on their affiliation. Although the thesis does not provide an answer to how the intersection of disability and art should be treated, it seeks to stimulate thought about it amongst the audiences: "For me it somehow brought up the question to what extent I should view the art […] through the lens of knowing that it was created by people with disabilities […] what is the normative, right approach to deal with it" (Participant 3, personal communication, May 2025).

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