

## Staging Participation: Cultural Productions With, and About, Refugees

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### *Introduction*

The aim of this paper is to analyze two selected pieces of performance art about and including refugees – *Charges (The Suppliants)* by Elfriede Jelinek (hereafter referred to as *The Suppliants*) and *Homohalal* by Ibrahim Amir – in terms of their content, process, and the question of representation. These pieces were created and performed over a five-year period (2013–2018), and their shared intention was to make refugees visible and audible through art. Both *The Suppliants* and *Homohalal* emerge from a political phenomenon that has risen to prominence over the last fifteen years, at least in the German-speaking countries: the “social turn” in the performing arts, in which artists take on a form of political responsibility (Michaels 123–124). Projects in this tradition engage with topical, socially relevant issues, either by including those directly affected or by using original research and artistic approaches to bring the issues to the stage.

We begin by describing socially engaged arts projects as committed both to the arts scene itself and to the communities with, and for which, they set out to work. This entails problems of representation: the very problems that were supposed to be addressed by the participation of those directly concerned. This participation presents new challenges, because it reproduces precisely those differences that are invoked in the discourse of social exclusion. Moreover, it is liable to create an image of (false) authenticity within an artistic (and therefore, by nature, artificial) set-up. In view of these dilemmas, we develop a conceptual framework for understanding how refugees perform and are performed in the context of art, both in terms of the production process(es) and of their representation on stage. Our focus here is the “figure of the third”, which plays a split, ambiguous role both in production and in representation. We also consider the rhetorical strategies of irony and cynicism and how they relate to solidarity, on one hand, and paternalism on the other.

We will then use this conceptual framework to examine different performances of (1) *The Suppliants* and (2) *Homohalal*. These plays are only two of many potential examples. However, although they differ in many ways – including, but not limited to, the status of their respective authors – both are representative for our purpose. Each caused a sensation at major theaters, and each gave rise to controversial debates in Vienna and elsewhere. Above all, each play has been staged in very different ways and contexts, sometimes with the participation of refugees and sometimes without. This approach will allow us to understand what refugee participation has achieved for each of these productions, and to what degree this participation was an element in an artistic pretense. We will also try to draw some conclusions about the impact of participation on the idea of art as an independent, “autonomous” domain of its own. The challenge is to arrive at a conceptual framework that is capable of understanding the organizational and thematic implications of projects such as these, and of bringing the two into relation.

### *Representation, Participation, and Dual Commitment*

Arts projects that identify with the “social turn” position themselves in a two-fold way: in the arts scene, and in the community for which they work. They pursue a “dual commitment”. This term is borrowed from a symposium organized by the artists Beatrix Zobl and Wolfgang Schneider in 2005 to describe the problem of “art projects that communicate simultaneously on two levels: with persons and groups mostly without connection to the arts, and with those participating within the art context” (Zobl and Schneider, “Dual Commitment”).

These two distinct frameworks define, establish and impose different rules and normative expectations. The frequent aim of projects involving refugees is to give those refugees a voice and

make them visible. But visibility can be a double-edged sword, especially if it involves displaying differences that are already a focal point in mainstream discourse, and in which that discourse is heavily invested. “Every way of making the invisible visible, every public presentation of socially disadvantaged people as ‘cultural others’ [can] tip over into an ‘exposition at the threshold’ (Agamben) or pandering to curiosity.”<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps especially problematic when it concerns groups, such as refugees, whose shared identity is constructed from the outside (Dambon et al. 541). As a side effect of this identification-by-projection, individual refugees (and members of other marginalized groups) who appear on stage are often received as representative of “their” respective community: “We hear the story of a single refugee. But for whom does that refugee speak? Of course, one might ask why this person, or theatrical persona, should stand for anyone other than themselves in the first place. But precisely when the ‘refugee feature’ is so present, so important, there is often an expectation that the person and their story should have a representative character.”<sup>2</sup>

Marginal groups can be represented whether they participate directly or not. Participation in the arts can be viewed as one particular case out of a variety of forms of participation, such as political participation or participation in volunteer work. And yet participation in the arts is charged with specific expectations arising from general assumptions about political or social relevance. Participative artforms aim to bring reality, the harshness and tragedy of life, onto stage – that is, into play. Arguably, it is precisely by incorporating “serious matters” or “real life” that the play becomes a play in the first place. At the same time, problems and dilemmas that cannot really be articulated or fully developed in “real life” can be acted out within the play. The aesthetic framework of these works of art creates a situation in which, for example, hidden conflicts that are necessary to understanding developments outside of the framework itself can be brought to the fore.

However, the mere fact of participation does not mean that participants have full control over the meanings and images the artworks actually convey. In the worst case, participation even reproduces the same differences it claims to overcome. The participation of those concerned then creates an image of (false) authenticity: “an alleged authenticity of the participants, who are presented as representative of a specific culture or milieu [ ... ] in order to lend the play a touch of exoticism or a dose of legitimacy”<sup>3</sup>, a form of “forced authentication” (Armin Nassebi, cited in Klös 187), or even some kind of ‘emotional porn’.

In such cases, participants on the stage are exposed to the voyeuristic gaze of the educated middle-class high-culture audience. Their lives serve as “raw material for refreshment”.<sup>4</sup> Performances are mostly understood as an authentic view into a “parallel society”.<sup>5</sup> This highlights a problem of representation (Kışlal et al. 27). Arguably, it is not the job of the arts to mirror a supposed reality. In this context, Frank Raddatz argues: “In order to escape the trap of representation, [the

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<sup>1</sup> „[J]ede Sichtbarmachung des Unsichtbaren, jede öffentliche Präsentation sozial Benachteiligter als “kulturell Andere” [kann] in ein “Ausstellen auf der Schwelle” (Agamben) oder eine Begünstigung der Schaulust kippen. Benjamin Wihstutz, cited in Klös 187).

<sup>2</sup> „Wir hören die Geschichte eines einzelnen Geflüchteten, aber für wen spricht er? Natürlich ließe sich fragen, warum der Mensch oder die verkörperte Figur überhaupt für jemanden anderes stehen sollte als für sich selbst. Aber gerade wenn das Merkmal Geflüchteter so präsent, so bedeutend ist, wird oft erwartet, dass die gesehene Person mit ihrer Geschichte repräsentativen Charakter hat“ (Danner 510).

<sup>3</sup> „...eine vermeintliche Authentizität der Teilnehmenden, die hier zu RepräsentantInnen einer bestimmten Kultur oder eines bestimmten Milieus werden ... um dem Theaterstück einen Hauch Exotik oder eine Portion Legitimität zu verabreichen“ (Juraschek 14–16).

<sup>4</sup> „Beteiligte ... [sind] auf der Bühne dem voyeuristischen Blick eines bildungsbürgerlichen Hochkultur-Publikums ausgeliefert und ihr Leben ... [dient] als Rohstoff zur Erfrischung des Theaters“ (Siavash 85).

<sup>5</sup> „Aufführungen [werden] vorwiegend als authentischer Einblick in die ‘Parallelgesellschaft’ wahrgenommen“ (Mark Terkessidis cited in Czerwonka 78).

theatre of authenticity] abandons aesthetic resistance and settles for poetic harmlessness.”<sup>6</sup> The solution to this problem of representation thus seems to lie in putting more, not less, stress on the specifics of art: “The political becomes effective in theatre if, and only if, it cannot be translated or re-translated into the logics, syntax, and terminology of the political discourse of societal reality.”<sup>7</sup> “Art is not a form of deduction from societal conditions.”<sup>8</sup>

While these are valid arguments, we maintain that participation in the artistic realm can have emancipatory effects. Participation at least claims to involve disadvantaged groups in political and cultural institutions, thus encouraging them to think about and articulate their interests. Art projects can give the powerless and subaltern a voice and so develop a solidary “we”. Participation is not only a means of facilitating integration among others. It is also a purpose, a value in itself, a form of empowerment.

An emphasis on the emancipatory effect of participation in general, however, does not answer specific questions. What does participation mean in practical terms? What influence do participants have on the development of the project? Are the voices of refugees really heard, or are they just amateur actors repeating words put in their mouth by others? (Pioch 156) Weighing these questions, participation neither seems to be the silver bullet for solving problems of representation in socially committed art, nor does it automatically empower the participants. In this vein, Tania Canas from Rise Art formulated a ten-point program for artists working with the refugee and migrant community. Point 4 of this document is of special relevance here:

Participation is not always progressive or empowering: Your project may have elements of participation but know how this can just as easily be limiting, tokenistic and condescending. Your demands on our community sharing our stories may be just as easily disempowering. What frameworks have you already imposed on participation? What power dynamics are you reinforcing with such a framework? What relationships are you creating (e.g. informant vs. expert, enunciated vs enunciator)? (Canas, “Kunstprojekt”)

### ***Paternalism/Solidarity***

One vital question here concerns the roles of and benefits for artists who develop and carry out participatory projects, on the one hand, and refugee participants on the other. It is clear that projects such as these are a way for artists to earn money. But they also increase the artists’ cultural capital in a specific way, allowing them the chance of success in the political as well as the artistic field – although, it should be noted, success in one of these two domains can potentially limit success in the other. The artist who produces this kind of project becomes a figure in cultural life, enabling the participation of others due to their knowledge of the arts scene, funding possibilities and so on, and developing the structure of participation. Obviously, we do not presume that participatory projects are necessarily driven by considerations of personal success. Quite the opposite: It seems plausible

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<sup>6</sup> „...dass es [das Theater der Authentizität], um der Falle der Repräsentation zu entkommen, seinen Anspruch auf ästhetische Widerständigkeit aufgegeben hat und sich mit poetischer Harmlosigkeit zufrieden gibt“ (cited in Lang 180).

<sup>7</sup> „Das Politische kommt im Theater zum Tragen, wenn und nur wenn es gerade auf keine Weise übersetzbar oder rückübersetzbar ist in die Logik, Syntax und Begrifflichkeit des politischen Diskurses der gesellschaftlichen Wirklichkeit“ (Hans-Thies Lehmann cited in Mortazavi 75).

<sup>8</sup> „Kunst ist keine Ableitungsform gesellschaftlicher Zustände“ (Aenne Quiñones and Tom Mustroph cited in Lang 180).

to assume that support for art projects of this kind is based on solidarity. In the case of those involving refugees and migrants, this is often solidarity between recognized artists with a migrant background and newly arrived migrants.

Peter Waterman defines six forms of solidarity summarized by the acronym ISCRAR: identity (based on a strong feeling of community); substitution (standing up for the weak); complementarity (a form of exchange understood to be of equal value for all partners); reciprocity (equal exchange); affinity (a close relationship based on respect and support); and restitution (recognition of historical responsibility or guilt). With regard to solidarity as substitution, Waterman warns against representing and speaking for “the other”, as this is a form of paternalism.

In the context of projects featuring refugees, this type of paternalism is clearly connected to the colonial attitude of insiders who are in a position to arbitrate and control the space in which outsiders act. Machold (379–396) identifies a particular thread of paternalism within anti-racist solidarity, because this form of solidarity, in constructing the other, often still fails to dismantle the criteria of racism. This “other” – in our case, the refugee – is frequently defined as a victim; in contrast to racist discourse, which defines the refugee as a perpetrator. This definition reproduces a version of the colonial understanding of the “other” – the refugee as helpless, childlike and passive – enabling the anti-racist solidarity activist to perform themselves as the “victim’s” benefactor.

Criteria by which to assess the degree of paternalism in a given project might include: how participants are recruited; control over the project (and the willingness or otherwise to share this control); adaptation to the needs and interests of the refugees versus adaptation to the arts market (dual commitment). Criteria by which to assess the participatory potential for refugees might include: participation in the play itself; participation in structuring the framework of the play, its rules and its location. Arguably, reflecting on these and other dimensions within the play and on the stage is not only analytically useful, but also adds aesthetic value.

### ***The Concept of the "Figure of the Third"***

Performance art that involves refugee participation is dually committed: to art, and to representing a group with a fractured identity and without an established voice of its own. This “representation” aims both to depict the group and to promote its interests. Both piece and artists must bridge the gap between very different demands. All this only heightens the suspicion that the element of participation will give rise to consequences that will be impossible to manage using the conventional artistic means at the director’s disposal. Rather than go into all the empirical pitfalls of such a task in detail, we want to point out that, whatever the case, those who see the play will continue to imagine that there is some defined authority in control of the integration of artistic meaning.

This imagination is that of a “figure of the third”. Any argument communicated by a first person (I) to a second person (you) is understood to address a real or imaginary third person at the same time (they). We propose that this imagination of a “figure of the third” emerges in the plays themselves as a central point of reference for the production, and it can be used as a means of analyzing the element of participation.

The concept of a “figure of the third” was first used by Georg Simmel in his *Soziologie* (1907). According to Simmel, this figure of the third may keep an impartial distance from the first and second person, but it need not necessarily do so. “The figure of the third reflects the fundamental ambivalence of the social realm: On one side, the figure of the third appears as a potential source of

irritation and conflict; on the other, the figure of the third is a possible mediator of integration and reconciliation.”<sup>9</sup>

“The figure of the third has a 'revelatory' function: it brings to light what is possible between the other two so that their relationship becomes more 'objective' while at the same time being questioned. Accordingly, the third party may act as intermediary or as arbitrator, as a beneficiary or a third party that has been harmed, as a witness or as an observer, as a scapegoat or as an intriguer, as a translator or as an advocate, as an intruder or as a parasite.”<sup>10</sup>

Simmel suggests that this figure has independent agency in every social interaction, and distinguishes between a mediating (the arbitrator), a laughing and a dominant figure of the third (the politician in the “divide et impera!”) (Bedorf 128; Fischer 200; Hessinger 66) Simmel's analysis schematically outlines the various alliances speakers can forge within a constellation of three.

Figures of the third also accompany the organization of political and artistic participation. They represent the rules and claim to guarantee them. These figures are present not only in the cultural-institutional framework within which works of art are staged in a participatory manner (mediators, translators, directors, decision-makers) but also in the artistic imagination itself (narrators, gods, messengers ...). The concept of the figure of the third provides us with a model for analyzing how an independent authority – one apparently unaffected by partisanship and the conflict between the other protagonists – is constructed and personified, both implicitly and explicitly, on and off the stage. It also enables the theoretical analysis of political attitudes and rhetorical stances. With regard to political attitudes, the emergence of the figure of the third appears an especially useful vantage point for thinking about the relationship between solidarity and paternalism.

Sometimes “benefactors” provide help for the very selfish benefit of getting to inhabit the role of a “figure of the third”. If the performance of solidarity is deployed in order to stabilize a position of superiority, this figure behaves paternalistically: they act as a director, but not really as a part of the play. From this authoritative stance, participation degenerates into a means of ascribing certain interests and desires to those who are being represented. Usurping the position of “figure of the third” thus allows the “benefactor” to enact solidarity without the undesirable corollary of personal risk. Renouncing this third position, on the other hand, entails reflecting on the similarities and differences between one's own position and those of the refugees (Messerschmidt, “Solidarität”).

### *Irony / Cynicism*

The “figure of the third” can also be, and has been, used as a way to explain irony. Empirical linguistic studies have associated irony with the effort to save face in situations that defy control (Groeben and Scheele). Speech-act theories have described how irony introduces the very idea of a figure of the third: The ironic speech act is a display of feigned solidarity with a person, real or imaginary, who believes the literal meaning of what is being said. This “victim” of irony is the target of an act of deception that is performed and then revealed before the eyes of a figure of the third. This figure is the true addressee of the ironic speech act, who gangs up in shared laughter with the speaker against the victim (Stempel 205–235; Stierle 237–268; Warning 416–423).

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<sup>9</sup> „Die Figur des Dritten spiegelt dabei die grundlegende Ambivalenz des Sozialen: Zum einen erscheint der Dritte als potentielle Quelle von Irritation und Konflikt, zum anderen als möglicher Mittler von Integration und Versöhnung“ (Hessinger 79).

<sup>10</sup> „Der Dritte hat ... sozusagen eine 'revelatorische' Funktion: Er bringt ans Licht, was zwischen den beiden anderen möglich ist – er 'objektiviert' ihre Beziehung und stellt sie zugleich infrage. Entsprechend kann der Dritte als Vermittler oder als Schiedsrichter auftreten, als begünstigter oder geschädigter Dritter, als Zeuge oder als Beobachter, als Sündenbock oder als Intrigant, als Übersetzer oder als Fürsprecher, als Eindringling oder als Parasit“ (Lüdemann 85).

Here, we must stress that these are only imaginary positions constructed within the triangle model of the ironic speech act. When ironic utterances are actually made, it is difficult to find straightforward empirical personifications of these positions: not just the “figure of the third”, but also the naïve victim who is clueless about the irony. It is also possible for the person who speaks in a real situation to embody any of the three positions proposed in this model, deploying irony in three very distinct ways. The first is exactly as described in the model above, where the speaker simply humiliates an interlocutor who tends to take irony at face value, cynically undermining the appearance of solidarity with the “victim”. An outside observer would then perceive this lack of compassion. In other words, from this perspective, cynicism is irony without compassion.

The speaker can also identify with the “figure of the third”, bearing witness to the ironic communicative play without becoming truly involved. In uttering a detached observation, the ironic speaker takes on an air of superiority. Their attitude to the “victim” in this scenario is one of plain and simple paternalism.

The final possible role for the speaker within the triangle of the ironic speech act is to identify with the victim of irony, turning their own ironic utterance against themselves. According to Walser, these ironic speakers “incorporate everything that power holds against them. They say yes to the very no that circumstances express against them.”<sup>11</sup>

It is precisely in this position that the ironic speaker’s self-identification stops being paternalistic and displays solidarity with the victim. Solidarity can make use of irony by taking on the victim’s situation, but not all irony is solidary; a paternalistic attitude will turn irony into cynicism. Cynicism is irony that defies the expectation of compassion; it is undisguised paternalism.

Therefore, when interpreting the real staging of refugee participation using the speech-act model, the empirical setting of the speech act must be considered. An ironic statement by a director may well be intended to detach participants from the constraints of circumstances and encourage them to act more freely within the framework of “autonomous art”. That same statement can also display cynicism, rather than solidarity, the moment this framework is questioned.

## **Charges (The Suppliants) by Elfriede Jelinek**

### *6.1. The Text*

There could hardly be a more outstanding example of refugee participation in performance art in a German-speaking context since 2015 than the various performances of Elfriede Jelinek’s *Charges (The Suppliants)*. The play was written in 2013, when refugees from the largest Austrian refugee camp, in Traiskirchen, [occupied the Votiv Church in Vienna in an attempt to call public attention to their situation](#). In *The Suppliants*, Jelinek transforms the voices of these “suppliants” into something like a classical Greek chorus.

The central question of the play is how the conditions of postmodernity can allow for solidarity and community in the first place. This, in turn, calls into question the requirements of participation in general. The speeches of the chorus depict individuals forced to set themselves apart as “us” from “them” – the members of a community who are, and feel, at home – and imagine how it might be to return to the solidarity of a common “we”. From the very first lines, the chorus reflects the problem of stabilizing clear roles of “I”, “they” and “we”; that is, it exposes the problem of speaking together in a common language.

We are alive. We are alive. The main thing is we live and it hardly is more than that after leaving the sacred homeland. No one looks down with mercy at our caravan, but everyone looks down on us. We fled, not convicted by any court in

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<sup>11</sup> Walser 178.

the world, convicted by all, there and here. All things knowable about our lives are gone, choked beneath a layer of appearances, nothing is an object of knowledge anymore, there is no more. No more need to try to grasp anything. We try to read foreign laws. They tell us nothing, we find out nothing. We are summoned but not seen, we must appear here, then there; but which land that’s lovelier than this – and we don’t know of any –, which land can we set foot on? (Jelinek 1)<sup>12</sup>

“No one looks down with mercy.”<sup>13</sup> On this point, Jelinek’s text directly contradicts its ancient model: Aeschylus’s *The Suppliants*. In his text, Aeschylus invokes “the gods” as witnesses and judges; in other words, as instances of figures of the third. The authority of the gods is recognized both by the chorus and by the king, who speaks on behalf of his people. The chorus of women seeking refuge can invoke the divine to insist on its right to participate; it can claim its sacred right to hospitality even if this goes against the king’s earthly obligation to represent the will of his people. Jelinek’s play radically questions the existence of such an authority, beginning with its secular representation of fundamental “human rights”. Her “suppliants” present their case for participation to an authority, but their appeal is always dependent on claims made in a language for which the assertion of any common ground is precarious. This does not mean that the idea of a figure of the third is completely beyond their imagining. But that which is guaranteed by divine authority in Aeschylus becomes a sliding point of reference in Jelinek: “(...) we don’t speak your language, where is the interpreter? Where did he go? You promised us one, so where is he? Where is the man who tells us we should not talk too slowly or too fast?” (Jelinek 8)<sup>14</sup>

Here, irony is forced upon the chorus when its appeal to the authority of a figure of the third begins to fail. This same irony, in the case of Jelinek’s play, counteracts the paternalism of “speaking for the subaltern”. Since they have no common point of reference with those who are in charge of granting asylum, the “suppliants” have to adopt the very language that “power holds against them”:

... we can see that, folks like us must be barred, put in bars no, behind them, we don’t drink, so that we won’t flood you, no, no, that must not be, that goes to show the importance of assistance, of solidarity collaborations against us, especially in times of crises, that is when the floods of us must be prevented, when you must be in solidarity with yourself, that’s a must, with whom else first, first of all with yourself, yes and this is when you help your neighbors, so we won’t overrun you like water, that’s solidarity for you ... (Jelinek 50)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> „Wir leben. Wir leben. Hauptsache, wir leben, und viel mehr ist es auch nicht als Leben nach Verlassen der heiligen Heimat. Keiner schaut gnädig herab auf unseren Zug, aber auf uns herabschauen tun sie schon. Wir flohen, von keinem Gericht des Volkes verurteilt, von allen verurteilt dort und hier. Das Wißbare aus unserem Leben ist vergangen, es ist unter einer Schicht von Erscheinungen erstickt worden, nichts ist Gegenstand des Wissens mehr, es ist gar nichts mehr. Es ist auch nicht mehr nötig, etwas in Begriff zu nehmen. Wir versuchen, fremde Gesetze zu lesen. Man sagt uns nichts, wir erfahren nichts, wir werden bestellt und nicht abgeholt, wir müssen erscheinen, wir müssen hier erscheinen und dann dort, doch welches Land wohl, liebevoller als dieses, und ein solches kennen wir nicht, welches Land können betreten wir?“ (Jelinek, *Schutzbefohlenen*)

<sup>13</sup> Keiner schaut gnädig herab.

<sup>14</sup> „...wir sprechen Ihre Sprache leider nicht, wo ist der Dolmetsch? Wo ist er hin?, Sie haben uns einen versprochen, wo ist er, wo ist der Mann, der Ihnen sagt, daß wir weder zu schleppend, zu langsam, noch zu schnell reden sollen?...“ (Jelinek, *Schutzbefohlene*)

<sup>15</sup> „... das sehen wir ein, Menschen wie wir gehören eingezäumt, nein eingezäumt, Entschuldigung, gezähmt gehören wir Wilden, damit wir Sie nicht überschwemmen, nein, nein, das darf nicht sein, das zeigt, wie wichtig Hilfe ist und solidarische Zusammenarbeit gegen uns, in Krisen besonders, ja, auch im Alltag, ja, aber in

Jelinek’s play has often been accused of shifting a political problem into the realm of the artistic and the esoteric. However, her irony also tips over into cynicism, and this runs through her text. These instances of cynicism clearly show that she does not see art as an autonomous and self-contained realm, one in which all problems of participation appear easy to solve. This does not make her representation of the asylum-seeking process and its meaning any less abstract, and the use of the chorus is precisely the theatrical means of this abstraction, interweaving the authorial voice with the voices of those who are individually excluded. This approach avoids both the trap of paternalistic surrogacy and that of false authenticity:

This land is you, no, that’s a bit too much, the land allows you to introduce your ideas any time, but only you, well, not quite the only one, but you as well, and especially you, the land allows us nothing, we are nothing and it allows us nothing, even though we would like to participate, it’s better than watching, no?, so that the law also comes from us, so that the law also goes for the people, which we will be then too, but the law does not come and go, and when it goes out, it dresses up, it gets all decked out, but we may not come along, we can’t even get into the restaurant, that’s not justice, even though justice would also come to us, at least it would if it could get some time off for once, and out dream act, unfortunately, passed far away, no, its been shot here, the dream pass, by a soccer hero, local off-shoot of foreign parentage, he passed with flying colors, but now it’s no longer here, I mean the dream-pass, it’s been shot ... (Jelinek 41-42)<sup>16</sup>

## 6.2. *Stagings of the Play*

The different ways in which the play has been staged very clearly demonstrate the opportunities, institutional pitfalls, and conflicts involved in refugee representation and participation. The first high-profile productions of *The Suppliants* – at the [Thalia Theater](#), Hamburg, in Mannheim and in Amsterdam – were directed by Nicolas Stemann, a veteran of Jelinek’s plays. In contrast to later productions, [Stemann chose to bring a chorus of refugees onto the stage](#). [“When we staged the play, it was important to me not again to exclude those the play is about but to make them visible](#). To give them the possibility to participate and to raise their voice. As this is their political demand: to become visible” (cited in Pillgrab, “Jelinek”).

In Mannheim, Stemann not only involved a group of asylum seekers in the production, but also experimented with using German professional and amateur actors, with different techniques and

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Krisen besonders, da müssen wir Menschenfluten verhindert werden, da sind Sie solidarisch mit sich selbst, das müssen Sie sein, mit wem denn sonst, in erster Linie mit sich selbst, ja, und da helfen Sie mit der Nachbarschaft zusammen, daß wir Sie nicht überrennen wie Wasser, da sind Sie solidarisch ...“ (Jelinek, Schutzbefohlenen)

<sup>16</sup> „Das Land ist du, nein, das denn doch nicht, das Land erlaubt, deine Vorstellungen jederzeit einzubringen, aber das erlaubt es nur dir, nicht nur dir, aber auch dir, vor allem dir, uns erlaubt es gar nichts, wir sind nichts, und uns wird nichts erlaubt, obwohl wir gern mitmachen würden, ist besser als zuschauen, nicht wahr, damit das Recht auch von uns ausgeht, damit das Recht auch vom Volk ausgeht, das dann auch wir sein werden, aber das Recht geht nicht, und wenn es ausgeht, macht es sich fein, dann brezelt es sich auf, aber wir dürfen nicht mit, man läßt uns nicht mal ins Lokal hinein, das ist nicht gerecht, obwohl das Recht auch von uns ausginge, zumindest ausgehen könnte, wenn es mal Freizeit hätte und wir unseren Traumpaß, den gern leider der Herr Alaba verwandelt hat, oder hat er ihn vorbereitet?“ (Jelinek, Schutzbefohlenen).



configurations in reciting the text, and with the use of masks. [The way in which the refugees were involved subsequently attracted accusations from theatre critics of exoticism and a voyeuristic attitude on the part of the director](#); they also accused Stemann of racism for putting white actors in blackface. These challenges are in line with the critique we outline above around reinforcing bipolar images of “us” and “others” and showcasing false authenticity. But they can also be interpreted as a kind of latent unease with Stemann’s self-representation as a theatre director as figure of the third. Here was a director who exposed, rather than concealed, the problems he faced; who rejected the pretense of being a neutral broker of opportunities for participation.

Participation undermines the certainty that artistic “intention” is in control of fiction within an autonomous work of art. Consequently, a given director’s staging concept can hardly be solely responsible for the production of artistic meaning. What the critics failed to acknowledge, according to Stemann, was his “intention” to give up his personal “intention” and surrender his authority to control and determine every detail of the events on stage. In his opinion, the critics failed to make a key distinction: He set out purposefully to stage the problems of participation, but the blurring of the demarcations between art and reality led audiences to believe that these same problems simply reflected the director’s own failures. Regarding the criticism of the use of blackface, he stated: “This is a fundamental misunderstanding. We do not ‘do’ blackface – we show it. This might seem like a negligible difference, but it is crucial, comparable to the difference between a real murder and a murder on stage. (...) We perform blackface. Blackface holds a black person up to ridicule – we hold blackface up to ridicule.”<sup>17</sup>

Looking back at his attempt in Mannheim, Stemann regretted that he had not been able to communicate to the audience that the loss of control was, in fact, due to the implicit workings of a director’s plan: “Evidently, at the premiere in Mannheim, it still did not appear obvious that the intention of the staging was to present the theatre setting as embarrassing and inappropriate for a conflict situation.”<sup>18</sup> Irony arises from the (intentional) failure fully to control artistic meaning. If this irony teamed up with the audience against the refugee participants on stage, whether intentionally or unintentionally, it would turn into cynicism. In a phrase meant to express the difficulties of maintaining the position of figure of the third, Stemann summed up this cynicism in a pungent phrase: “We cannot help you, we have to play you!”

In order to avoid these complications around refugee participation, some directors – including Stemann himself – have also experimented with using amateur actors to perform Jelinek’s chorus of “suppliants”. One such production took place in Leipzig (Engler Alonso 179). Sometimes these actors were cast with an eye to making use of their ethnic and migratory backgrounds – a highly problematic type of profiling. For the Austrian premiere of *The Suppliants*, at the Burgtheater in Vienna, director Michael Thalheimer cast professional actors in the “suppliants” chorus. He was subsequently accused of hiding the plight of real refugees in the “shadow of aesthetics and the artistic” (Briegler 12) in order to live up to a bourgeois artistic ideal. He argued against this interpretation from the detached standpoint of a director fully aware of his authoritative role as a figure of the third, voicing solidarity with refugees while, at the same time, explaining their exclusion. In his opinion,

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<sup>17</sup> „Es gibt hier ein fundamentales Missverständnis. Denn: wir 'machen' nicht Blackfacing, wir zeigen es. Das mag wie ein lässlicher Unterschied wirken, ist aber doch wesentlich, vergleichbar dem Unterschied zwischen einem realen Mord und einem, der auf einer Bühne nur gespielt wird. ... Wir führen damit das Blackfacing vor. Beim Blackfacing wird ein Schwarzer der Lächerlichkeit preisgegeben – bei uns wird das Blackfacing der Lächerlichkeit preisgegeben“ (Stemann, Auf dem Rücken der Flüchtlinge).

<sup>18</sup> Offenbar wirkte es bei der Mannheimer Premiere noch so, als sei es nicht zwingend die Intention der Inszenierung, dass die Theatersituation so als sehr peinlich und der Konfliktlage unangemessen herausgestellt wird“ (Laudenbach 32).

their plight simply could not be reconciled with the workings of the Viennese theatre. Although this position allowed him to smooth over the ironic fault lines within an all-professional performance of Jelinek’s play, the explanation was itself not devoid of cynicism: “A refugee on the stage is no longer a refugee. (...) The refugees already did their suffering. Why should they tell us ‘occidentals’ how shitty their life is? The refugee on the stage is not a refugee – he is no longer authentic. I hate this kind of ill-conceived posing. I reject this exhibitionist porn. The stage is not a zoo.”<sup>19</sup>

Another Viennese production, in contrast, pushed the concept of participation to its limits. [The artists’ collective Die Schweigende Mehrheit](#) (The Silent Majority), directed by Tina Leisch and Bernhard Dechant, cast refugees from Traiskirchen in a version of Jelinek’s play called [Schutzbefohlene performen Jelineks Schutzbefohlene](#) (Suppliants perform Jelinek’s Suppliants). The aim was to combine an artistic event with a real call for help, thus releasing “the play out of a fictional world into a real one”. If we compare the various productions, we see a differentiated picture. Stemann self-ironized his role as figure of the third, and exposed himself to criticism; Thalheimer identified with the role wholeheartedly and so kept the play firmly in the realm of autonomous art. Leisch and Dechant developed a version that was essentially based on refugee participation; but they, again, took on the role of the figure of the third without restrictions, [even expanding this role to include social support for the refugee actors](#). “ ‘We feel responsible’, says director Tina Leisch. When you make art with refugees, the theatre maker says, you also have to take an interest in their living conditions outside of rehearsal times. So Die Schweigende Mehrheit sees itself explicitly as both an arts project and a humanitarian project, offering bicycle and Kung Fu courses and organizing accommodation and medical assistance.”<sup>20</sup>

The first performances of *Suppliants perform Jelinek’s Suppliants* were held at venues dedicated to social and project art, such as Dschungel Wien, Werk X and Schauspielhaus. The collective self-ironically reflected on this choice: “We have shown model refugees to a theatre world celebrating itself” (KünstlerInnenkollektiv 11). In doing this, the artists once again tried to undermine their own air of superiority – the superiority of a figure of the third – by overemphasizing and thus ironizing it. Like any form of solidarity between people with radically different prospects in life and who face radically different risks, there was a persistent danger that this position might shift towards paternalism. The only way to assess the effectiveness of the artists’ efforts to counteract this danger would have been to analyze concrete interactions between the project’s participants. In hindsight, the self-ironizing statements of a group that set out to deconstruct its own authority as a figure of the third do, once again, appear cynical when a more general, and very real, political confrontation exceeds the boundaries of the theatrical frame.

[The piece’s “integration into the real world” was unexpectedly put to the test during a performance at the Audimax of the University of Vienna at which the Identitarians, a far-right group, attempted to violently disrupt the action.](#) This situation highlighted the ambiguities of refugee participation in art. Faced with the right-wing extremists, some of the participating refugees were terrified – they had no way to assess how violent the intruders might really be. The audience, however, initially believed the disruption to be part of the play (Checchin, “Aktion”). Looking at the reaction

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<sup>19</sup> „Ein Flüchtling auf der Bühne ist kein Flüchtling mehr. ... Die Flüchtlinge hatten ihr Leid schon. Wieso sollten sie uns 'Abendländern' auf der Bühne noch einmal erzählen, wie scheiße ihr Leben ist. Der Flüchtling auf der Bühne ist kein Flüchtling, er ist nicht mehr authentisch. Diese Art von missratener Pose hasse ich, ich lehne solch exhibitionistischen Porno ab. Die Bühne ist kein Zoo“ (cited in Pillgrab, Jelinek).

<sup>20</sup> „Wir fühlen uns verantwortlich,‘ sagt Regisseurin Tina Leisch. Wer mit Flüchtlingen Kunst mache, habe sich, sagt die Theaternacherin, auch für deren Lebensumstände außerhalb der Probenzeiten zu interessieren. 'Die Schweigende Mehrheit' versteht sich deshalb ausdrücklich als Kunst- und humanitäres Projekt, das Fahrrad- wie Kung-Fu-Kurse anbietet, Wohnungen und medizinische Hilfe organisiert“ (Paterno, Wann).

of the refugees (both on stage and in the audience), we can see that this sudden merging of political and aesthetic frames touched on a highly sensitive point: the idea of participation as a “value in itself”. At the boundary of art and politics, participation – the means by which directors give the “subalterns” a voice – clearly emerges as double-edged.

### *Homohalal*

Some years before *Suppliants perform Jelinek’s Suppliants*, Tina Leisch worked on another play together with refugees. *Homohalal* was written in 2013 by the Syrian-Kurdish author Ibrahim Amir, who came to Austria as a refugee in 2002. [According to him, the idea originated in conversation with activists at the refugee protest camp at Votiv Church: the same camp that inspired Jelinek’s play.](#) “We were thinking – we almost wanted to speculate about the future in order to depict the present. And there was a suggestion from a refugee and another activist, who were artists themselves – they said: ‘What happens if, in twenty years’ time, my son falls in love with your son?’ Then a huge debate blew up, amongst the refugees as well as the activists. And that was real raw material for me.”<sup>21</sup>

Amir’s text is a satire, depicting (refugee and Austrian) activists of the movement in 2033: twenty years in the future. The play paints a dire picture both of the development of the movement and of the political situation in Austria. The main story is about a Muslim refugee activist who once married an Austrian lesbian activist to obtain residency in Austria. The couple, no longer married, meet again by chance when their respective sons fall in love; the Muslim father is outraged by this homosexual love affair. This story is at the center of a number of other episodes showing cultural conflict, love, disappointment, and betrayal within the movement. By shifting the plot twenty years into the future and maintaining an ironical distance from his characters, Amir actually assumes something like the role of a figure of the third (cf. Mokre).

Amir and Leisch subsequently attempted to develop the text further in collaboration with refugee activists. For various reasons, this endeavor essentially failed. Some of the reasons were practical. Most of the refugees had limited German and were not professional actors; they could not manage to learn long passages in German. But the refugees also could not identify with the text. Amir’s vision of their future and that of their friends made them feel embarrassed and angry. Besides, they wanted to talk about their own experiences. So Leisch completely rearranged the play, leaving out large parts of the plot and combining the remaining scenes with contributions from the participating refugees.

This new arrangement of *Homohalal* was successfully performed in two settings: [a dinner in a historic building in Vienna](#), and [a walking excursion along a lake in Carinthia](#). In contrast to her later work in *Suppliants Perform Jelinek’s Suppliants*, in her *Homohalal* project Leisch largely renounced the position of figure of the third and allowed the participants to present their own version of the play, often in unmediated form. As a consequence, the performance lost the heavily ironic stance of the original play and sometimes lacked artistic distance from the refugees’ experiences. Nonetheless, since it was impossible to distinguish the scenes from the original play from the new, often biographical parts subsequently added, this version of the play did not invite the expectation of strict “authenticity”.

A little after these performances, in 2015, Anna Badora took over as the new director of the Volkstheater in Vienna and announced that the original version of *Homohalal* would be performed

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<sup>21</sup> „Wir haben uns Gedanken gemacht, wir wollten quasi über die Zukunft uns Gedanken machen, um die Gegenwart darzustellen. Und ein Vorschlag von einem Flüchtling und auch einer Aktivistin, die sind auch selber Künstler, sie haben gesagt: Was passiert, wenn mein Sohn in 20 Jahren sich in deinen Sohn verliebt? Dann war eine Riesendiskussion da und auch zwischen den Flüchtlingen, auch den Aktivisten. Und für mich war das wirklich ein Stoff“ (Amir and Billerbeck, Uraufführung).

there for the first time in spring 2016. However, two months before the scheduled premiere, the play was cancelled. Badora justified her decision as follows: “Since the large refugee movement from Syria and Iraq reached Central Europe, the conditions for a production of *Homohalal* have changed. Public discourse about refugees is strongly characterized by fear and hatred. In this situation, dystopia is not an apt means to deal with the future of those who seek shelter in Austria – even a dystopia as multi-layered and funny as *Homohalal*.”<sup>22</sup> According to Badora, the text was critical and inspiring at the time of its writing, but had become less so with the passage of time (Presse, “Homohalal”).

Amir’s play has been praised for the ironic distance it takes from its characters, avoiding both false authenticity and the stereotyping of refugees. “Ibrahim Amir liberates the characters from their role as victims and shows them to us as the same kind of people that we are ourselves: stupid, jealous, tactless, homophobic, aggressive, easily offended, etc.”<sup>23</sup> In a situation of increasing xenophobia and anti-refugee prejudice, Badora feared that the combination of ironic-satirical comedy and political explosiveness would be prone to misunderstanding. In her eyes, there was a danger that, in the new political circumstances, Amir’s irony could shift into cynicism. Unlike Stemann, she decided not to bring these contradictions and tensions onto the stage, but to avoid the potential conflict entirely.

[After a year of adaptations, \*Homohalal\* finally had its premiere at the Staatstheater Dresden.](#) Here, the ironic stance of the play was seen as an asset. In the words of head dramaturg Beate Heine: “We absolutely have to show this play so that we are allowed to laugh about these issues. In theater, it is legitimate to be entertained first in order to start a conversation afterwards. (...) We’re not making right-wing fodder if we openly show the stereotypes and prejudices of everyone involved.”<sup>24</sup>

[The Vienna premiere took place in 2018 at Werk X,](#) directed by Ali M. Abdullah, who presented an abridged version including references to recent developments in Austria. Abdullah received the Nestroy Prize for the best fringe production (Cerny, “Jurybegründung”). This version constitutes a grotesque reappraisal of the conflicts within the movement. Solidarity, as depicted in Abdullah’s version, is not a value that can be invoked. As the characters see it in hindsight, solidarity was a repeated promise made by the movement that would not – or could not – be kept. There is no emphasis on any solidarity among the protagonists that might create common ground. Gestures of solidarity on the part of one group (like the Austrians learning Arabic) are rejected by the other. For all these reasons, Abdullah’s interpretation also calls into question the presence of compensatory figures of the third within the play itself.

In Jelinek’s *The Suppliants*, the lack of a neutral figure of the third is decisive for the situation she describes, which is ultimately a desperate one. The refugees can find no commonly agreed mediator or regulator to address in their futile negotiations with the asylum system. Figures of the third are staged in *Homohalal*, but they cannot fulfil their role since they are never accepted by the opponents in the play. This is true not only of minor characters, like the priestess, but also of Abdullah’s on-stage depiction of a migrant author. The structure around this character is especially complex. In the author, the figure of an “authentic”, “unbroken” refugee takes center stage in a kind

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<sup>22</sup> „Seitdem die große Fluchtbewegung aus Syrien und dem Irak Mitteleuropa unüberschbar erreicht hat, haben sich die Vorzeichen für eine Inszenierung von 'Homohalal' verändert. Der öffentliche Diskurs über Geflüchtete ist zur Zeit stark von Angst und Hass geprägt. In dieser Situation ist eine Dystopie – so vielschichtig und komisch sie im Fall von 'Homohalal' sein mag – kein geeignetes Mittel zur Auseinandersetzung über die Zukunft schutzsuchender Menschen in Österreich“ (APA, Volkstheater).

<sup>23</sup> „Ibrahim Amir befreit die Figuren aus den Opferrollen und zeigt sie uns als jene Menschen, die wir selber sind: blöd, eifersüchtig, undiplomatisch, homophob, aggressiv, beleidigt usw“ (Affenzeller, Homohalal).

<sup>24</sup> „Im Theater darf man sich schließlich auch erst unterhalten fühlen, um dann in den Dialog einzusteigen. ... (W)ir produzieren kein Futter für rechts, wenn wir die Klischees und Vorurteile aller Beteiligten offen auf den Tisch legen“ (Innerhofer, Futter).

of commentator role. As a revived memory, he watches his former supporters and fellow refugees and observes how the latter have adapted to their new surroundings twenty years on. In this way, the constellation of characters represents the author twice over: as someone about to assimilate to his new Austrian surroundings, and as one who has already gone through this process.

This constellation, with the author at the center, shows a tendency to paternalism; it places emphasis on the representation of the author and the director, and on the ability to maintain a detached stance. This tendency is principally undermined, not by the emphasis on participation and the “victim status” of the participants, but by the various means of ironic self-relativization entrenched in the timeline of the play. The irony of the piece may still carry a trace of paternalism, in the diagnosis of a lack of alternatives and in the ways in which the contradictions of the refugee movement are absorbed and neutralized by the Austrian mainstream. However, the irony of *Homohalal* also deconstructs paternalism: for example, in the way in which the homophobia articulated by certain characters is distributed across the Austrian and refugee groups. But where this irony is associated with a paternalistic attitude, it also turns to cynicism: for instance, when the Mediterranean Sea is shown on stage as a giant swimming pool.

### *Conclusions*

The objective of this paper was to develop the first stages of an analytical framework for analyzing arts projects about and involving refugees, and to apply this framework to the two cases studies of (1) *Charges (The Suppliants)* by Elfriede Jelinek and (2) *Homohalal* by Ibrahim Amir. We began by discussing the dilemma of a dual commitment to the arts scene, on one hand, and the represented and/or participating community on the other; then, we moved on to consider problems of representation and the ambiguities of the concept of participation, which is generally understood as positive. Refugee participation unsettles the demarcations that separate supposedly autonomous art from the constraints of its institutional framework, as well as from a more general political reality. This is why participation can be used either as a strategy in opposition to the self-preservation of an essentially conservative, bourgeois theater establishment, or as a means of adapting this same establishment to contemporary conditions without really unsettling it at all.

The framework we proposed sets out to understand refugee participation both with regard to their representation on the stage and to their involvement in the creation of artistic production. Here we focused on the concept of a “figure of the third”, who plays a split, ambiguous role in artistic production and the representation it creates. We demonstrated that figures of the third were important in the production and staging processes of both projects, but also that they were already present within the texts themselves, playing different and, to some extent, adjacent roles. With regard to the political and aesthetic aspects of participation, we aimed to show how highlighting the role of this figure of the third helps us to establish a distinction between solidarity and paternalism in terms of the political implications, as well as to make a rhetorical distinction between irony and cynicism.

Applying this analytical framework to our case studies allowed us to gain some insight into what participation achieved for each of these two pieces, and to what degree that participation was part of a mere artistic pretense. Equally, we have tried to draw some conclusions about how participation impacts the concept of art as an independent, “autonomous”, self-contained realm. Arguably, through this lens, the idea of participation in the arts turns out to be weighed down with meaning and expectation. More than that, it gives rise to the hope of general social participation: a hope that most often goes unmet. This burden of expectation can pose serious challenges to participatory projects, but it can also be understood as an opportunity to create diverse, sometimes unexpected outcomes. The value of these outcomes depends to a great degree on the willingness of

everyone involved to engage in (self-)reflection. Perhaps academic research of the kind presented here can offer a framework of reference for this process.

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