"When will we be somebody again?" *The refugee movement and artistic projects in Austria*

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1. Introduction

In November 2012, a group of asylum seekers joined together with supporting activists in Austria to start a protest march from the refugee camp Traiskirchen[1] to Vienna. In the very center of Vienna, Sigmund-Freud-Park, they organized a protest camp. This Refugee Camp Protest lasted from autumn 2012 until summer 2015. The protest did not only focus its attention on the need to improve living conditions, but it also raised awareness for the perilous situation endured by refugees in Austria (Mokre, 2015). The movement contested the image of the 'asylum seeker' as a passive person who depends upon the good will of the citizens and the government of Austria, and therefore 'has no right to complain'. With their demands, they identified themselves as people who have a right to live with dignity and respect, instead of just merely surviving from one day to the next. Moreover, the protestors

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[1] Unfortunately, since the Refugee Camp Protest, the conditions in Traiskirchen and in other parts of Austria have worsened, especially after 2015. For example, Traiskirchen, the camp where the protesters started their march in November 2012, is the biggest refugee reception center camp in Austria. The camp, close to Vienna, is managed by ORS, a Swiss private company that runs many refugee camps in Austria, Switzerland and Germany. ORS has often been accused of overcrowding, food shortages and poor hygienic conditions. Amnesty International even described Traiskirchen as "shameful". See "How private companies are exploiting the refugee crisis for profit", http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/how-companies-have-been-exploiting-the-refugee-crisis-for-profit-a6706587.html.

raised the question of the European Union's responsibility towards migrants. The manner in which Europe has been handling the refugee crisis shows that the idealized European model, in which separate states ascribe to a shared ethical code, does not often correspond to reality. Therefore, the way in which refugees are treated as 'Others', shows the cracks in the projected image of modern Europe. There are many examples proving that refugees are treated like criminals in Europe,[2] but maybe one of the most problematic issues is the detention of refugees. European states often justify immigration detention by a threat to national security, as a part of a process of establishing identity and nationality, or as a part of a process of deportation. By questioning the legality of immigration detention, Cathryn Castello argues that, as a product of immigration and asylum law, the detention of refugees represents one of the "most disturbing contemporary practices from the point of view of the rule of law and human rights" (Costello, 2015, online).

The Refugee Protest Camp became an inspiration for artistic interventions. Thereby it served as a motion point for questioning the existing narratives within Austria in regards to the refugee crisis. Moreover, it offered a rearticulation of the question what a human being means, not only in Austria, but around Europe in general. As a result, the Refugee Protest Camp encoureged refugees and their supporters across Europe to organize themsleves on transnational level (Mokre, 2015).

In this article I will focus on two artistic projects motivated by the Refugee Protest Camp: Elfride Jelinek's text *Die Schutzbefohlenen* (Jelinek, 2013), translated into English by Gitta Honegger as *Charges (The Supplicants)*, and the multilingual artistic-political intervention collective *Die Schweigende Mehrheit sagt JA (The Silent Majority says YES).*[3] Focusing on these two examples, I examine the task of translation as a powerful means of solidarity (Mokre, 2015) that plays an

[2] See "The four ways Europe is treating refugees like convicted criminals", http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-crisis-four-ways-european-countries-treat-asylum-seekers-like-convicted-criminals-10483185.html).

[3] Jelinek wrote her text motivated by the *Refugee Protest Camp* movement. Moreover, the founders of the collective Silent Majority says Yes were already activists and supporters of the protest movement. In the Summer of 2015, together with asylum seekers, they started putting on performances that explored the precarious status of refugees within Austrian society. Their provocative project, for which they received in 2015 a special Nestroy prize, is a performance of Jelinek's text Charges (*The Supplicants*).

essential role in creating the counter-narrative of the European refugee experience. I investigate these two projects in relation to Agamben's notion of *homo sacer* (as a person excluded from society and deprived of his/her citizen and political rights), and Butler's concept of frame as a social construction that controls the visual field of reality. Therefore, I argue that artistic interventions have a significant role in recognizing that lives of refugees have an equal value to our own.

2. Refugee Protest Camp in Vienna

Two events are considered the beginning of the Refugee movement in Austria. The first is the demonstration of Somali refugees in front of the Austrian Parliament in October 2012. The second is the march of the refugees and their supporters from Traiskirchen (the largest Austrian refugee camp) to the Votiv Park, located in the very centre of Vienna, in November 2013, which resulted in setting up a camp in the Votiv Park (Mokre, 2015). The movement thus represents the first political movement of the refugees in Austria. Its importance, among other aspects lies in fact that the movement has problematized the position of refugees as victims of forces within Austrian political scene (Mokre, 2015). In that sense, the list of their demands presented at the press conference on 26th November 2012, does not only represent an important document of their struggle, but it reveals the conditions in which refugees live. For this reason, I consider it important to fully cite their statement of demands here:

> We are refugees who have arrived in Austria to seek asylum to build a new life here. Our countries are devastated with war, military aggression, social backwardness and poverty because of the colonialist politics. We have come from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Nigeria, Gambia, Syria, Kurdistan, Iran, Chechnya etc. and now we are stuck here in the refugee camp Traiskirchen. In this camp, we have expected to get help and support from Austria, but what we have seen here, was, that the Austrian state didn't show us that we are welcome here. We are staying in refugee camps facing bad conditions. We the refugees from Traiskirchen now raise our voices and demand our rights. We demand from the authorities following improvements:
> 1. The translators which are being used during the asylum cases must all be replaced with new ones. These translators have been working here for a very long time, and they are making jokes about people. They translate deliberately wrong and because of that many people got bad court procedures, negative verdicts and interviews.
> 2. After getting two negatives from the court, the court asks us to pay court and lawyer fees that amount 220- [euro] and in case someone does not pay this amount, he is taken to prison. This is unacceptable because we are not

criminals, we are just not allowed to work as asylum seekers. We demand that we don't have to pay for court or lawyer fees anymore.
3. Deportations must all be stopped. People must be able to stay here or go to another country.
4. We demand more translators for doctor visits, especially translators of the Urdu language.
5. Generally, we demand more doctors for refugees.
6. There are many transfers to backward areas in Austria's countryside. This must stop. Because these are small areas where is no legal advice, shopping possibility, which practically means isolation where refugees cannot get help when they need.
7. Inside the camp, German language courses and practical work courses must be opened. And for the German language school, we need translators.
8. Children of the families staying in the camp must attend an ordinary school with local children.
9. Food must be much healthier and nutritious. The refugees have to be able to cook for themselves or to take the food to their rooms.
10. There must be proper and good clothes and shoes available for all seasons.
11. The working conditions and the amount that is paid for cleaning and cooking is not enough and must be improved.
12. Travel tickets for 3 times a week must be provided, so that everyone can get to know the country, the people and their living, and their own legal situation and asylum process.
13. We need a barber in the camp for men and women.
14. Pocket money in the amount of 40,- per month is absolutely not enough and must be increased.
15. We need real and proper sanitary articles. We need also such articles as nail cutters or mirrors, because there are no mirrors in bathrooms (!).
16. In the refugee camp, we are isolated from the rest of the world because there is no Internet access and no television. We need both to stay in contact with our families and friends. We live in the 21st century but we don't have access to modern media and forms of communication. We demand free Internet access in the camps and satellite tv receivers to get information about the world.
We demand these basic rights from the Austrian government, the European union and for all refugees worldwide.
We call on the Austrian government to fulfil its responsibilities towards the refugees.
We will continue our actions until our voices are being heard and our demands fulfilled.
Freedom of movement for all refugees!
We will rise! (Refugee Camp Vienna).[4]

The Refugee Protest Camp demands listed above is a document that

[4] See *Refugee Camp Vienna*, https://refugeecampvienna.noblogs.org/post/2012/11/26/refugee-demands-24th-nov-2012/.

attests to a group of people, not only whose political life has been taken away, but also who, living in camps under the surveillance of private companies that have a contract with the state, do not have any control over their private lives. Ataç and Steinhilper confirm this fact:

> The detention of asylum seekers for administrative purposes is widespread; asylum seekers are almost routinely concentrated and encamped in facilities with ideal circumstances for surveillance and policing. Access to Internet and other communication facilities is usually strongly limited or absent. So-called reception centres are usually located in remote areas, distant from populated inner-city areas and public services. In Austria, with the exception of Vienna, asylum seekers are widely dispersed to the rural periphery with its eroding socio-economic structures, which produce further social and spatial separation and exclusion from the receiving society (Ataç and Steinhilper, 2016 https://opendemocracy.net/ilker-ata-elias-steinhilper/escaping-from-asylum-to-act-as-citizens-political-mobilization-of-refuge).

Furthermore, since they do not yet speak German, these refugees are isolated not only physically from the local population, but also linguistically. The lack of sufficient financial resources in the refugee sector also means that there is not an inadequate number of translators and interpreters. Those who are employed are grossly underpaid for their services:

> The Republic of Austria pays a dumping price for interpreters at asylum procedures and police statements; therefore, it is likely that the companies that engage at this price level do not attach much importance to the qualification of their employees (Mokre, 2015: 30. My translation).

Both low wages and lacking competence contribute to isolating refugees from the local population and societal institutions. Due to the fact, that translation and interpreters' salaries are paid by the state, the latter uses translation, or the lack thereof, as a means of controlling both the refugees and the public opinion of them. By occupying one of the central spaces in Vienna, refugees used the only tool they have: their bodies. With the support of many activists, they managed to overcome the language barrier, and to raise a voice in many different European languages. Oftentimes activists acted voluntarily as translators and interpreters and thereby translation became not only a powerful mean of solidarity, but also a mean of their common political struggle. This action was an attempt to reclaim their rights as human beings, a struggle for their *bios*, for their political lives. Ataç and Steinhilper understand the Refugee movement as an "escape from asylum" (Ataç

and Steinhilper, 2016, online) by arguing that "Asylum is a safe space only in an abstract sense – the asylum procedures in reality supress the creation of voluntary relations, mutual support and trust" (*ibid.*).

According to Agamben, *bios* means a political life in a community. Therefore, the refugee movement represents the struggle of getting out of the unlawful position they are in, and will stay in, until their legal status is determined.

> In carrying out the metaphysical task that has led it more and more to assume the form of biopolitics, Western politics has not succeeded in constructing the link between zoē and bios, between voice and language, that would have healed the fracture. Bare life remains included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion (Agamben, 1998: 11).

Agamben asks how a natural life, a bare life, turns into a political life, and *vice versa*. He found the answer in *homo sacer*, the ancient Roman law that defines a person who may not be sacrificed, but may be killed (Agamben, 1998). The concept of the sacred men is important as it defines the position of a person who is excluded from law. This exclusion, in turn, creates the conditional norms that demarcate sovereign states, meaning national states. This is why Agamben refers to the refugees as *homo sacer*: they are excluded from the system of a nation-state on which they depend, and they do not have any political rights in the country where they seek asylum. This kind of state of exclusion is defined by the International Migration Law where asylum seeker is descibed as

> a person who seeks safety from persecution or serious harm in a country other than his or her own and awaits a decision on the application for refugee status under relevant international and national instruments. In case of negative decision, the person must leave the country and may be expelled, as may any non-national in an irregular or unlawful situation, unless permission to stay is provided on humanitarian or other related grounds.[5]

This kind of definition proposes that, until asylum is granted, the asylum seeker is a passive subject waiting for a decision from the Federal Agency for Immigration and Asylum in Austria. During this waiting time, the asylum seeker's life is completely controlled by the Federal Agency and regulated by the authorities in refugee camps. In

[5] See International Migration Law, http://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml25_1.pdf.

this situation, the Federal Agency acts as a "sovereign", that is the one who has a power to declare the state of exception:

> The sovereign decides not the licit and illicit, but the originary inclusion of the living in the sphere of law or, in the words of Schmidt, "the normal structuring of life relations", which the law needs (Agamben, 1998: 26).

Waiting for a case verdict can last several years, in which the asylum seeker is reduced to a 'bare life,' waiting for the day when (s)he will become "somebody" again.

As discussed above, migration law defines an asylum seeker as a non-national person in an unlawful situation. This definition means that the civil rights of the asylum seekers are determined and controlled by the International law. The same court of law then decides which refugees deserve to reacquire their legal and civic rights the most. For this reason, Agamben thinks of refugees as the *homo sacer* of Europe: "When the rights of man are no longer the rights of the citizen, then he is truly sacred" (Agamben, 1995: 117).

3. Die Schutzbefohlenen. *Charges ("The Supplicants")*

Although the *Refugee Protest Camp Vienna* managed to negotiate with the Ministry of Interior Affairs, this exchange failed to bring any concrete results. In despair, they tried to draw public attention to their problems. When a group of protestors started a hunger strike, eight of them were deported, and there where attempts to criminalize the remaining protesting refugees and their supporters with an accusation that they cooperate with migrant smugglers.[6] While refugees were fighting for their rights in the very heart of Vienna, Nobel laureate Elfride Jelinek, a relentless critic of Austrian society, was writing a text about the condition(s) of the people who fled to Europe, entitled *Die Schutzbefohlenen* (In English translation *Charges (The Supplicants).* The work was a reaction to the behavior of politicians, the media portrayal, and the public opinion towards refugees. At the same time, hundreds of refugees were dying in Lampedusa trying to reach European land, and FRONTEX boats were patrolling the Mediterranean Sea in order to "protect" the European borders.

[6] See "Prozessbegin im Schleperei-verfahren / Human Smuggling/Schplepperei – Trial Starting on March 17!", https://refugeecampvienna.noblogs.org/post/2014/03/05/prozessbeginn-im-schlepperei-verfahren-human-smugglingschlepperei-trial-starting-on-march-17/.

Charges (The Supplicants) is a text which is performed as a play, although it lacks dramatic elements. There are no characters in the text, so it is hard to say whether the text should be understood as a dialogue or various monologues occurring simultaneously. In this way, Jelinek creates an atmosphere of misunderstanding: Who speaks to whom? Is the other side willing to listen? Who is the other side…? *Charges* expresses Jelinek's view of European society whose hypocrisy is exposed through the arrival of people in need of safety and shelter. She builds her text on the image of the refugees created in the media.

In her text, Jelinek criticizes the system that the refugees are confronted with, not only in Austria, but in Europe at large, whereas their problems such as exclusion and isolation are systemic (Ataç and Steinhilper, 2016). She brings an example of "two daughters", one of them is Boris Yeltsin's daughter Tatyana Yumasheva, who received Austrian citizenship due to her investment in Austria's automobile industry:[7]

> Our existence is our currency, it's all we have, in other words, we have nothing, we have our existence as payment, but we are no cash cow, not by any means, that is Mrs. Yumashewa, her name is written right here, spelled correctly I hope, daughter of Yeltsin, yes, a daughter, instantly naturalized, she made it, she could make all and any payments, she did and if not she, then someone else for her, the recognition and acceptance of the uniqueness of a human being has been paid for… (Jelinek, 2016: 19).

The other "daughter" is Anna Netrebko, the Russian opera singer who was granted Austrian citizenship, although she failed to meet several legal conditions required for full naturalization:[8]

> The daughter has a voice to speak for her, she isn't here, but a voice speaks for her and she also gets a vote; it comes with her voice. She can't be seen but she's got a voice that make her an instant citizen, with all the rights and duties to promote and demote the general welfare… (Jelinek, 2016: 46).

By showing that there are special laws for special people, Jelinek explores the meaning of the word "solidarity". It is a word that is easily manipulated by several factors. Jelinek provides us with

[7] See "Russian's Investments in the West", http://intersectionproject.eu/article/economy/russians-investments-west.

[8] See "More or less desirable citizens: Mediated spaces of identity and cultural citizenship", https://www.db-thueringen.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/dbt_derivate_00024461/GMJ2_klaus_drueeke_final.pdf.

a "translation" of the meaning of this word as it is understood in Europe today:

> … Everything has been mobilized to prevent floods, to prevent worse, to prevent us, to prevent people, throngs of people from flooding you, a veritable sea, a sea of troubles… they are coming and that must be prevented, 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 collaboration 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, yes and this is when you help your neighbors, so we won't overrun you like water, that's solidarity for you, readiness is all, for action (Jelinek, 2016: 36).

According to Jelinek, we share solidarity among "us" in relation to "them". "Our" solidarity stands united against the arrival of the "Others". This division between "us" and "them" is strongly promoted by media, and Jelinek presents these mediated images to us in order to explore how the media governs our ability to only sympathize and grieve for certain "kinds" of human lives (Butler, 2009). The specificity of our empathy is what Butler calls a "regulation of perspective" (Butler, 2009). Our perception of catastrophic events is tinted by the media and political discourse in such a way that we cease to recognize the "Others", who are the most affected by these events, as human. In her book *Frames of War*, Butler explores the relationship between visual dimension of war and atrocities as well as the ability to grieve as an ethical reaction defined by norms. Jelinek shows that European field of perceptive reality is framed in a way that there is a clear division between "us" and "them". Refugees, "them", are perceived as an exceptional and unrelatable category. Therefore, through this kind of framing, there cannot be solidarity between "us" and "them" until "we" recognize "them" as humans, inseparable from "us". Jelinek uncovers the bitter fact that we are the ones who "share the norms that provide the frames in which those lives are rendered destitute and object and treated" (Butler, 2009: 99-100).

If we are indeed the ones who, by sharing the norms, provide the framework for a definition of asylum seeker as unlawful, then it is not a refugee crisis, but a European crisis. Jelinek expands the field of our perception in a way that includes the socio-political context ignored by media: double standards in the granting of citizenship, the responsibility of Europe in the conflict in the Middle East, the mobilization of troops along the EU borders, the questionable activities of FRONTEX, and

suspicious contracts between the government and private companies who manage the refugee camps as well as profit from them. Hence, Jelinek's text can be read as an analysis of the crisis of the European Union in which our field of perception is regulated by state authorities. The regulation of our perspective attempts to prevent "us" from not only grieving for people in need, as "them", but to see that it is "us" who are responsible for the crisis, not "they" as an extrinsic category. It is "us" who divided "us" from refugees, because we are the ones who have political and civil rights, and therefore share the norms that put and keep the refugees in an unlawful state of exception. Jelinek twists the narrative given to us by the media and makes us confront the refugee as a human being betrayed by Europe.

One could criticize Jelinek that she, as a privileged person, is being hypocritical in the sense that she appropriates the voice of the refugees. However, this approach is precisely what is essential: by speaking through the refugee's character, she calls into question the framing device given to us. Speaking through the refugee she breaks the "we" (Europeans) and "they" (refugees, Muslims, criminals) narrative. She refuses to think within the frame where "we" and "them" are divided. Therefore, solidarity starts by recognizing the "Other" as a human being, by recognizing that these are not "their problems", but "ours". Jelinek writes:

> Human dignity, important at the beginning and at the end of life is not a property, a quality, no, not a property, it is the result of our existence as humans, and if we are not human, we have no dignity, if we have no dignity, we are not human, oh no, no one human is one of us, how lucky for him! But that's exactly what we are dying to be! Every one of us, to be! (Jelinek, 2016: 19).

3.1. Translation as a means of control

In her text, Jelinek addressed another important problem to which the Austrian state does not pay adequate attention: the role of translation. As one can see in the demands of the Refugee Protest Camp above, refugees are faced with serious problems due to the lack of interpreters and translators. According to the Asylum Information Database, interpretation does not always depend on the work of accredited interpreters[9] in Austria. This fact is especially

[9] See Asylum Information Data Base, http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/austria/asylum-procedure/procedures/regular-procedure.

worrying as this inadequacy can negatively influence the outcomes of public security service interrogations. The Federal Agency for Immigration and Asylum (Bundesamt für Fremdenwesen und Asyl, BFA) provides interpreters for the interviews who are often not accredited, qualified interpreters, but BFA contractors. The problem appears at the interview when an interpreter does not properly interpret the utterances and interprets in such a way that the asylum seeker cannot understand the proceedings of his/her case.[10] In cases in which asylum seekers complained about their interpreter, they were given another interpreter. However, this action further delays the interview process and the refugee in question is forced to wait even longer. In many cases, interviews are held in the language that BFA supposes the asylum seeker understands. For example, Chechen refugees are often interrogated in Russian, or African asylum seekers often have to comply with English or French translations. After the interview, the asylum seeker receives the transcript translated into his/her language, which needs to be signed. Before signing the translation of the transcript, the asylum seeker has the chance for corrections. After having signed the document, the asylum seeker only has a few weeks to notify the BFA of any mistake that he/she has found in the transcript.[11] Yet, due to linguistic barriers, refugees are often not aware of their own rights, as Jelinek's play describes:

> … we must remain silent and that stands to reason, for everyone denies us an answer. Our words, only sighs, squeezed from the depth of the heart, are denied an answer, we give everything to the spokesman, we give him every information, but no one wants any, everyone wants to hear only the one daughter singing and not hear the other at all… (Jelinek, 2016: 23).

There are cases where, in order to discern which country, the asylum seeker originates from, the officer asks the interpreter to confirm, according to the dialect that the refugee speaks, whether s/he is telling the truth. Such practices change the task of the interpreter and a new

[10] There are no standards for the qualification of interpreters in asylum procedures, which means that interpreters are often people who can speak the language, but lack professional training in interpreting. There are cases in which the interpreter and the asylum seeker do not speak the same dialect and this immensely increases the risk of misinterpretation.

[11] See Asylum Information Data Base, http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/austria/asylum-procedure/procedures/regular-procedure.

role which is demanded by the state: the judge who confirms whether the refugee speaks the truth or not. The second major problem relates to the availability of interpreters in healthcare. Although every person who seeks asylum in Austria has basic medical health insurance, the right to an interpreter during a doctor visit is not regulated by the state. There have been cases in which some hospitals have used their medical, technical and cleaning staff with immigration backgrounds and language knowledge to interpret. However, this choice to try to seek a solution to the language problem is wholly dependent on the good will of the medical staff and these occurrences do not produce a permanent solution to this problem. In practice, this means that the asylum seeker needs to find his/herself an interpreter in order to be able to see a doctor. In many cases, friends, family members, and volunteers step forward as interpreters. Sometimes, interpreting via telephone can be provided by various organisations, Caritas and Diakonie, for example, but they depend on very limited financial resources.

Communication is impossible without translation. By not recognizing the need for translation as a critical issue, and by denying the asylum seeker's right to a professionally trained interpreter, the State uses translation as a powerful means of control. Through minimizing the communication between refugees and local population, the State can manipulate the public's field of perception more easily. By not being able to understand or communicate, refugees are not perceived as a human being, as expressed in Jelinek's play:

> … fugitive, foreign and needy, someone like that is not permitted to speak here, someone like that is not permitted to be here… (Jelinek, 2016: 7).
> … we can't even speak German, that's what they blame us for, with good reason, thank you for telling us again… (Jelinek, 2016: 43).

The Austrian Government speaks of the need for refugee integration, which is based on the paramount condition of German language acquisition. However, in reality, courses organized in asylum seekers camps are not regularly held, as it is only when a person is granted asylum that he/she has a possibility to enroll in German classes. As a result, asylum seekers are forced to depend heavily on social initiatives and NGOs.

Jelinek's text is mostly performed in German-speaking countries, both in theather houses and in public spaces. In 2014 the first German performances, directed by Nicolas Stemann, were staged in

Hamburg at St. Paul's church, performed by Thalia Theater together with African asylum seekers. In 2015 these Hamburg performances were followed by stagings in Bremen (directed by Mirko Borscht), in Freiburg (directed by Michael Simon), in Oberhausen (directed by Peter Carp), and in Vienna at the *Burgtheater* (directed by Michael Thalheimer).

In 2016, the artist collective *Die Schweigende Mehrheit sagt JA*, overseen by Tina Leisch and Bernhard Dechant, presented the work in public spaces in Austria. Further in the article I will concentrate on the performance of this artist collective which performs Jelinek's text as an example of a counter-narrative that amplifies both the voices of the asylum seekers, as well as the local population that do not agree with the policies directed towards refugees.

4. Die schweigene Mehrheit sagt JA *(The Silent Majority says YES)*

Die schweigende Mehrheit sagt JA is a multilingual, international and political collective where asylum seekers, local people, and activists work together to explore new forms of critical thinking and political intervention. The group also functions as a solidarity platform for the exchange of information among refugees and supporters. They also organize assistance and support for their refugee participants.[12]

Since 2015, the collective performed Jelinek's *Charges* under the title *Schutzbefohlene performen Jelineks Schutzbefohlene (The Supplicants perform Jelinek's The Supplicants*) for which they received a special Nestroy Theatre Award. The setting in their performance is the Traiskirchen camp where the ORS[13] officer, in order to maximize the profit of the company, and to show to the public how effective this company is, hires an Austrian actor to teach refugees Austrian literature as a proof of their successful integration. *Die Schweigene Mehrheit sagt JA* say that their play constantly changes, just as events in Austria: "Because we lose friends through deportations, gain new ones, some find a new home elsewhere. Because we always work on the text in the rehearsals..." (http://www.schweigendemehrheit.at/schutzbefohlene-performen-jelineks-schutzbefohlene/). By performing in public spaces, the play is imbued with a strong political character by focusing

[12] See http://www.schweigendemehrheit.at/.

[13] ORS is a Swiss private company that runs many refugee camps in Austria, Switzerland and Germany.

"our attention in the weight and value of the actions we take" (Martin, 1990: xi). Moreover, the performance creates a safe space for gaining the political activity. The play is mostly performed in squares, schools, universities, artistic and social spaces across Austria. By moving the play outside of the rarified space of the theatre, the collective attempts to erase the boundary separating "us" from "them". In doing so, they depict a society in which "we" are all part of the same public space where refugees and local people live together. By occupying a public space, the collective makes an intervention in the field of our perception in order to reframe the significance of human life within Austria's socio-political context. The work disrupts the normative framework of public perception by both empowering and supporting society's most vulnerable group. At the same time, the work challenges the xenophobic ideology that has worked to maintain the precarious conditions surrounding the uncertain legal status of refugees.

Die schweigene Mehrheit gives the opportunity to the people to see, to hear, and to take a position. In the play, the chorus asks the ORS officer: "When will we be somebody again?" (Jelinek, 2016: 17). The officer does not answer the question. In the performance, this question can be understood as addressed to the audience: When will you, citizens, humans, see us as also humans? The play turns the prefigured narrative of the refugee on its head by showing its protagonists stepping out of the role of passive, victimized, and voiceless beings. During the performance, asylum seekers have a voice again, at that moment they are not reduced to a bare life (*homo sacer*), they are given a political identity (*bios*). For them, the performance becomes the space of political struggle for their rights, a place where they engage in the political life, where they are *somebody* again.

In April 2016, during the performance at the Vienna University, the collective was attacked on stage by an Identitarian[14] group of twenty to thirty people. Right-wing extremists doused the actors and audience members with red paint. Some of the actors and people in the audience were also physically injured. Although the refugees described the attack as a traumatic *Déjà-vu*, they continued and later ended the performance with the following words:

We were uprooted. Disillusioned. Left alone and reborn. We were pitifully abandoned by those who bear the responsibility. Lied! Comforted! It is we

[14] The Identitarian Movement of Austria is an extreme right-wing nationalist organisation that is part of a Pan-European Identitarian movement.

refugees who steal the dignity from European politics. We are those who on your borders fight for the right to asylum. It is a human right. It is our right. It is your right. It is our right. We, the strangers who have lost everything give you something at the gates of Traiskirchen that you are about to lose. Humanity! Solidarity! And through the bars we reach out to you! This fence may be your border. It is not ours. This fence on the Hungarian border, on the EU external borders, in Spielfeld, in Lampedusa, in Macedonia, on the A4, in the minds of people, in the minds of our politicians. This fence will fall. This fence will fall! This fence will fall! We will face each other again as human beings. Thank you, the Austrian civilian population! Thank you![15] (My translation).

5. Conclusions

The aim of this article was to discuss the ways in which artistic interventions have the ability to break the normative frame of perceptive reality and create a space for solidarity within the context of contemporary Austria. Moreover, I argue that by not recognizing the need for translation as a critical issue and by denying the asylum seeker's right to a professionally trained interpreter, the State uses the translation as a powerful means of control. Within this kind of perceptive framing, there cannot be solidarity between "us" and "them" until we recognize "them" as humans, as part of a shared "us". The counter-narratives given here are examples of rethinking the cultural norms that support the perceptive frame in which the lives of refugees are considered to be less important than our own. If we are the ones who share the norms that maintain the frame through which asylum seekers are viewed, as subjects stuck in an unlawful situation, then it is not a refugee crisis, but a distinctly European crisis. These two dramatic projects described above, have two functions. Firstly, they create a counter-narrative which contests and critiques the contorted public perception of the current migrant situation, and, in

[15] German original: "*Wir, die Fremden, die alles verloren haben, schenken euch vor den Toren Traiskirchen etwas, das ihr im Begriffe seid zu verlieren. Menschlichkeit! Solidarität! Und durch die Gitterstäbe reichen wir euch die Hände. Dieser Zaun mag ihre Grenze sein. Es ist nicht unsere. Dieser Zaun an der ungarischen Grenze, an den EU-Außengrenzen, in Spielfeld, in Lampedusa, in Mazedonien, auf der A4, in den Köpfen der Menschen; in den Köpfen unserer Politiker. Dieser Zaun wird fallen. Dieser Zaun wird fallen! Dieser Zaun wird fallen! Wir werden uns wieder von Mensch zu Mensch gegenüber stehen. Danke an die österreichische Zivilbevölkerung! Dankeschön*". See https://www.vice.com/de_ch/article/vdjwn4/die-schutzbefohlenen-spielen-jelinek-tu-wien.

doing so, motivate people to take personal responsibility for this crisis in their own countries. Secondly, they empower refugees to regain their political life (*bios*). In the collective *Die Schweigene Mehrheit sagt JA*, refugees and local people work together on the play, creating a safe space where every person has a voice and is valued as a human being. In this way, the collective produces the space of political life and offers a rethinking of our understanding of human rights. Art, in the form of artistic collectives, has the power to rearticulate the meaning of solidarity within Europe.

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