13

PUBLIC ART ETHICS AND FAILURE

A postcolonial perspective on failure and the Centre for Political Beauty

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Introduction

A common understanding in theatre is that there are no actual consequences of any action performed on stage. However, there is a long tradition of interventionist performances in public spaces, which question the notion of theatre altogether. Such interventions are designed and made to achieve some specific, definite political goal through theatrical means of protest and playful public action. The Centre for Political Beauty presents a striking case of artistic activist interventions, which aim very high and arguably, at unachievable political goals: e.g., to dismantle all European border fences, or to stop the EU-Turkey Deal about refugee pushbacks. While they seek to intervene into contemporary Europe's collective failure to respond to the so-called refugee crisis (Bhambra, 2017), by calling for a renewed commitment to human rights they themselves fail to acknowledge our shared colonial past and are complicit in perpetuating notions of post-racial, exclusionary, nationalist belonging.

In their special issue of *Public Art Dialogue* about the failure of public art, the editors Cameron Cartiere and Jennifer Wingate note at the end of 2020, that

> we find ourselves in the midst of widespread systematic failure: failure of global healthcare systems to respond to a pandemic; failure of our economic systems to support the fallout of a global shutdown; failure of our governing systems to respond to the civic cry for social justice, anti-racism, and conscientious leadership. We are in need of a complete reevaluation of the postcolonial systems that are the underpinning of our societal structures. (Cartiere/Wingate, 2020, p. 111)

It is exactly that reckoning with the postcoloniality of our shared public and its racialised power dynamics that I focus on in this chapter. Here, I understand the "post" in postcoloniality along with Stuart Hall (1996), of course, not as an indicator that we have moved beyond or past a certain historical point, but that we find ourselves right in the middle of pervasive colonial relations (systemic, epistemic, psycho-social, capitalist, patriarchal, cultural) in a modern, multiracial Europe. In the spirit of a serious reflection on the implications of researchers into their chosen field of enquiry, I would like to introduce my position: I am a German researcher, currently living and working abroad in Denmark, following political and artistic developments in Germany mostly from a geographical distance but feeling deeply implicated in the ongoing work to decolonise practices in the arts and education in Europe. As German-born, white, cisgender female individual, I am committed to an allyship ethics in my theatre research that seeks to use the academic dissemination platforms available to me to progress the discourse around race and postcoloniality in Germany in tandem with arts research.

In this chapter, I investigate failure in – and of – the interventions by the Centre for Political Beauty through a dramaturgical, theatre studies lens. The Centre for Political Beauty constantly frame themselves as performance artists, but some critics have argued that they produce mere propaganda (Brock, 2014; Reichert, 2017). By drawing on theatre scholars' work on failure (Bailes, 2011; Mahala, 2019), this chapter analyses the Centre for Political Beauty's self-framing as ethically good artists and asks whether their interventions are explicitly and essentially set up to fail and, more importantly, "whom" they fail. In asking whether failure becomes pivotal for their interventions' dramaturgy, this chapter critically examines the potential to make visible wider systemic and racialised exclusions of their "public art," which appears "innocent" and seeks to do good, but only at first glance, which is, crucially, a white glance. Therefore, this chapter, in its final section, takes seriously and elaborates on Ida Danewid's critique of poststructuralist thinkers' turn towards a new cosmopolitan ethics (Ziarek, 2001; Butler, 2004; White, 2009), which posits the white European subject as ethically "good" and innocent of imperial histories (Danewid, 2017). The Centre for Political Beauty's failure lies in, I argue, making public art, rather than making art from within a postcolonial public. Because their art specifically aims to create awareness of tensions and suffering from European asylum politics and laws at the historical juncture of the so-called refugee crisis around 2015, I believe that their work should address its specific social context, which is the everyday racialisation of refugees in Germany and consequently in asylum politics and laws (Wynter, 2003, p. 261; Bhambra, 2017; Bhimji, 2020). However, as I will show in the following, their work fails to upkeep its artistic ambiguity and complexity, by assuming a racially homogenous public and audience (Lennox, 2016; Opitz et al., 1992).

Failed public interventions into asylum politics

The art critic Matthias Heine states about the public interventions by the performance collective Centre for Political Beauty that

this is the dumbest nonsense produced by German theatre in recent years
[…]. The reason behind all the noise around the artistic void is the notorious
over-estimation of theatre people themselves. They constantly feel pressured
into teaching the world about things that are completely out of their field of
expertise. (Heine, 2014)

By closely analysing the double-edged function of failure in the "nonsense" public
interventions by Centre for Political Beauty, I aim to introduce a performance per-
spective to this volume's discussion of the failure of public art: on the one hand, the
Centre for Political Beauty's public interventions question many European states'
failure to fulfil international legal obligations to human rights while facing an en-
ormous influx of refugees since 2015. On the other hand, their public interventions
are explicitly and essentially set up to fail, but nonetheless this failure becomes pivotal
for their interventions' political potential of showing that another world is imaginable.
As Marchart writes, "[p]olitics itself, in the sense of a genuine realisation of the
political, is *always* a praxis that aims at the 'impossible' itself – namely, at whatever the
hegemonic discourse defines in a given situation as impossible" (Marchart, 2019,
p. 147, emphasis in original). Finally, what is paradigmatic for their interventions is the
confusion of audiences and spectators on many different levels. In attempting to define
and locate the theatrical frame (or artistic nature) of their actions, some degree of
failure is inevitable – whether wearing the hat of a theatre scholar, a politician, or a
civic participant.

In 2014, their intervention *The First Fall of the European Wall* attempted to
tackle the statelessness of migrants who attempt the perilous journey towards
Europe and across various borders (Marschall, 2016, 2020). Protesting the Dublin
Regulation and the increasing militarisation of Europe's border zone, the Centre
for Political Beauty announced that they would commit the serious crime of
tearing down the European border fences in Greece.

The intervention failed – federal police, state security, and border forces
searched the participants at the beginning of the intervention and throughout its
journey, stopping them before they could reach the border fences in Greece.

In 2015, their work *The Dead Are Coming* sparked international reactions,
because they had exhumed two dead refugee bodies from anonymous mass graves
at the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, where they perished. They identified
them, contacted their relatives and with their permission, transported them to
Berlin, where they held a public burial ceremony with an Imam and invited
guests, politicians, and artists alike, whereas the former did not show up
(Marschall, 2017, forthcoming). Through a social media campaign, they called for
people to erect small symbolic graves on any possible public turf, and people across
the country did so and shared pictures of them online, as memorials to refugees
perishing in their attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Finally, they organised a
march in Berlin, heading towards the German Chancellery and Bundestag in
protest of German and EU asylum politics.

The intervention failed – neither Chancellor Merkel nor Minister of the Interior Thomas de Mazière attended the burial ceremonies in Berlin, let alone accepting responsibility for the refugees' deaths.

Also in 2015, with their intervention *Jean-Monnet-Brücke* the Centre for Political Beauty launched a project, purportedly run by the Austrian government, to build a bridge from Morocco to Italy across the Mediterranean Sea. Through a mock Austrian government webpage, the Centre for Political Beauty solicited donations from private supporters, which eventually led to the installation of a symbolic floating rescue platform in the Mediterranean.

The intervention failed – the symbolic rescue platform was stolen and the bridge was never built.

In 2016, for their intervention *Eating Refugees*, the artists installed a huge cage containing four Libyan tigers in an outdoor space next to the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin (see Figure 13.1). Against the backdrop of the political deal between Turkey and the EU for Turkey to accept deported migrants in exchange for financial investment, the artists protested against the restrictions on immigration imposed by the federal government. The Syrian actress May Skaf publicly announced that she would let herself be eaten by the tigers if there was not a parliamentary vote against this policy.

The intervention failed – neither was the parliamentary vote extorted, nor did the actress become a martyr and was eaten by the tigers.

FIGURE 13.1 *Flüchtlinge Fressen* (*Eating Refugees*, 2016), Centre for Political Beauty. (Audiences gathered to get a look inside the installed tiger cage in front of the Maxim Gorki Theater Berlin.)

Credit: Patryk Witt.

Despite these – at first glance – manifold "failures," audiences continue to crowdfund the Centre for Political Beauty's public interventions and thus, I argue that we need to ask: what is really at stake when this performance collective aims high to dismantle the Dublin Regulation, the Frontex border fences, or the EU/Turkey refugee deal? While the Centre for Political Beauty importantly emphasises the urgent need for political action and structural reform of asylum and migration law, I argue that the success of their work depends crucially upon its ambiguity. Thus, its failure lies in neglecting to address with equal complexity and ambiguity the public's (and their own) "white innocence" (Wekker, 2016). This is not to generalise that all public art must offer anti-racist political messages, but that in their specific cultural and political context, the Centre for Political Beauty neglects to engage with the pervasive structure of whiteness within postcolonial German society at all, which actually takes away from the presumed ambiguity of their works. They posit whiteness ignorantly as default social structure of their spectatorial address and dramaturgy, without creating an equally ambiguous artistic response in their work to pivotal questions of racialisation, which are in fact deeply imbued in the conditions of asylum and migration in Germany. I will return to this later in the chapter. Their interventions depend precisely on theatre and performance being granted a pivotal and uncontested role, as presumed safe space for effectively doing very little antiracist, postcolonial work, if not none at all. In the following section, I will give an overview of the Centre for Political Beauty's ethos and positioning.

A note on terminology: as a trained theatre scholar, I understand and view the Centre for Political Beauty through a performance lens, which also means for me that I understand the different media and public actors' responses as well as participants, as audiences. To indicate that there are many different mediatic, societal, and power dynamics to these audiences, I use the term in plural. This is also to highlight differences between the meanings of audiences and public (or publics), when we investigate, in this volume, different means and forms of public art and its failures. The two terms vex relations to public processes, spaces, and community engagement. I derive my understanding of public art from Oliver Marchart, who, in writing about artistic activism and the public sphere, defines that public art is about moving

> into the open space of the political public sphere. This public sphere has more to do with the freedom to act politically – or of political action – than with the fresh air of "nature" or in the "open air" space of urban traffic. In other words, art practices have emerged for which it is more important to be connected to political practices than to art institutions themselves. (2019, p. 144)

With reference to Habermas, Marchart defines that a public sphere only emerges, when a conflict breaks out and an otherwise silently presumed consensus is broken with (2019, p. 145). That is exactly where I position the Centre for Political

Beauty as creating antagonism. In particular, the Centre for Political Beauty takes on a role as a counter-hegemonic actor within the German-speaking public, aiming to politicise publics through their conflictual aesthetics. (The notion of counterhegemonic will be something I question through a lens of postcoloniality later in the chapter.) Their interventions, such as *The First Fall of the European Wall* and *The Dead Are Coming,* create at best a new, affective sensibility for the power dynamics and interconnections between public representatives, economic- and security-driven national interests, and international policies.

The centre for political beauty: Artists or propagandists?

The Centre for Political Beauty is a collective based in Berlin, which includes a number of ever-changing theatre-makers, artists, lawyers, scholars, and what they call "accomplices" (Centre for Political Beauty, 2020). The latter label is telling, insofar as the term points towards the context of criminal legal cases and the acknowledgement that they implicate others in an explicit wrongdoing.

Their works and populism have stirred heated debates and controversial responses across national and international newspapers and online forums. At times, their controversial tactics include defamation of political representatives and powerful public actors (i.e., the owners of a weapon manufacturer). There are varying forms and degrees of publicity to the Centre for Political Beauty's performances: some actions are taking place in the form of protest marches, installations, and theatrical actions in public spaces and in different locations. Others are presented online in the form of different media documents, or in theatrical terms: dramaturgical ephemera. The documentary aesthetic, which the Centre for Political Beauty uses for their works, includes professionally edited and filmed videos, press releases, social media campaigns, and photographs. These dramaturgical ephemera are the only lasting creative products, which resemble some sort of art. They have remained retrievable by the public through the Centre for Political Beauty's curated website, and they are accessible to reproduce by others. The situatedness of an event and the fleeting, ephemeral, temporal process are what make it performance art. There are manifold layers at work, which differ in temporality, space, infrastructure, but together they pinpoint where art intervenes in politics, economics, and other social structures.

The Centre for Political Beauty call themselves an "assault team"; in their own words they conduct "the most innovative forms of political performance art – an extended approach to theatre: art must hurt, provoke and rise in revolt" (Centre for Political Beauty, 2016a). Their brief self-fashioning mission statement is already shedding light onto their particular instrumentalisation of language and their own ideological underpinning of their work. Rather than calling themselves, for example, performance artists, their linguistic stress is on "assault" – a violent action, which is not only causing harm to others, but at the same time breaking the law. While some critical and theoretical lenses certainly produce an inherent relationship between violence and art, and violence and theatre more specifically

(Nevitt, 2013), I personally find something profoundly irritating about the Centre for Political Beauty's bold, if not "aggressive" (Centre for Political Beauty, 2016a) affirmation of art's destructive potential. What is confounding at second glance is certainly the apparent paradoxes in their mission statement: the aim of hurt and provocation on one hand, while on the other, they reference humanitarianism, and seek to establish "moral beauty, political poetry and human greatness" (Centre for Political Beauty, 2016a). Exaggeration is one of the focal means of the Centre for Political Beauty, not only with respect to their tactical use of language and framing here, but also with respect to their interventions themselves.

Public responses to their artistic interventions are telling insofar as they set people and media against each other. Some are celebrating the Centre for Political Beauty and some are denying their role as artists altogether, even going as far as accusing their assumed lack of respect for cultural values and other(ed) people, as well as attacking them in the media based on moral grounds. The latter, out-spokenly negative responses come from manifold public actors, such as elected politicians, but also other artists and other activists, scholars, art critics, and community representatives. For example, the professor for aesthetics and culture Bazon Brock, who has been active as a Fluxus artist himself, called the Centre for Political Beauty "naïve" in an interview with the German radio network Deutschlandfunk. He rejects that theirs is any form of art: "That is no art at all – it has nothing to do with art, because it is completely imprudent and thoughtless. It is wildly provoking, without knowing, what it actually wants to accomplish" (Brock, 2014, translated into English by the author). With this judgement, Brock responds directly to one of the Centre for Political Beauty's "operations," i.e., the first instalment of *The First Fall of the European Wall* (2014).

The theatre scholar Emma Cox pinpoints how *The Dead Are Coming* in particular is "something of a semiotic car crash" (Cox and Zaroulia, 2016, p. 146), as the Centre for Political Beauty not just in this case, but across their work, merge vulnerability, death and mourning with corporate elements, political speeches, and agitation. Their voices, bodily gestures, mimicry, and acting style are dead serious, sombre, and sincere, while the content and scope of their statements appear as satirical if not cynical. With this productive tension, the Centre for Political Beauty makes their audiences and the public experience an "ethical stuttering" (Marschall, forthcoming). By that, I mean the complex affects and the over-whelming ethical, aesthetic, and political contradictions, which make their works at the same time compelling and appalling. There is something disturbingly beautiful and troubling about "the way the interventions [are] situated uneasily between domains of representation and social practice" (Cox and Zaroulia, 2016, p. 146). Indeed, in their "operation" *The Dead Are Coming* there is a sensitivity at stake, when it comes to the media spectacle they make of the ceremonial burying of bodies from people who failed and died in their attempt to flee to Europe, by crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

In line with the discomfort Cox and Zaroulia express in their reading of the performance, scholars from different fields have critically analysed the Centre for

Political Beauty and often highlighted the problematic forms of othering they employ, as well as other limits and pitfalls of their aesthetics and ideology (Bieberstein and Evren, 2016; Marschall, 2016; Stierl, 2016; Lewicki, 2017; Merrill, 2018). The political scientist Ida Danewid most convincingly offers a postcolonial reading of the Centre for Political Beauty, in which she questions their attempt at reconstituting themselves as "ethical" and "good" (Danewid, 2017).

My brief introductory summaries of sample interventions by the Centre for Political Beauty, and my spotlighting of public responses, give a first impression of how this collective hybridises public art and political activism. Public responses deal with both their aesthetics and means of representation, as well as the critical investigating of the Centre for Political Beauty's political ideology. As stated in the opening of this chapter, the collective actively aims to provoke publics in such a way that they experience outrage, driving them to insurgency and ultimately taking responsibility for changing society. As the brief outlines of these interventions also make evident, the Centre for Political Beauty's strategies include making audiences more sensitive towards current political decision-making in light of national histories, in particular the Holocaust and atrocities committed against minorities.

I have started this article with the listing of sample public interventions by the Centre for Political Beauty, which failed: *The First Fall of the European Wall*, *The Dead Are Coming*, *Jean-Monnet-Brücke,* and *Eating Refugees*, the latter of which I will analyse in more depth in the next section, before explicating failure through a postcolonial lens.

Eating Refugees

In my analysis of the public intervention *Eating Refugees*, I work with different sources: digitally archived documents, images, videos, social media threads, regular newsletters, theatre coverage, and reviews. As I am always one step removed from the live site and public event, and did not participate in the interventions as an audience member, this study therefore speaks also to the merging of live, situated and digital publics or audiences. However, as Sarah Bay-Cheng has argued, "theater *is* media," and further: "[w]hat is needed now is a mode of criticality that can acknowledge both the digital record and the generative event as complements of what is an always incomplete and evolving record" (Bay-Cheng, 2016, p. 83). The title of a performance or cultural work – whether printed on posters in public squares or digitally announced on social media – is often the first thing we see or hear of it, and *Eating Refugees* is effective in this respect, a title which has disconcerting, uncanny, and moralising qualities. Considered in the context of the content, the title seems to be literally invasive: *Eating Refugees* has a visceral quality, and it foreshadows some of the matters at stake in the intervention such as migrant arrival, violence, othering, alienation, and grievability. The title – also through its grammatical gerund – points to an ongoing process, which could potentially be averted through an interruptive action in the present. From the title alone, it

FIGURE 13.2 *Flüchtlinge Fressen* (*Eating Refugees*, 2016), Centre for Political Beauty. (A close-up of the window looking into tiger cage with the teleprompter above.)

Credit: Patryk Witt.

remains ambivalent whether the refugees are being eaten at this urgent moment, so there is time to intervene and stop this violence, or whether refugees are doing the eating themselves. It also prompts the questions: who might be eating the refugees, who are the people having fled persecution, discrimination or war, and who would allow this man-eating?

Eating Refugees is a public intervention on the Platz der Märzrevolution (Place of the German revolution of 1848–49) and creates a modernised narrative around the classical Roman Circus. In front of the state-funded municipal theatre Maxim Gorki Theater in the city centre of Berlin, the Centre for Political Beauty installed a huge, approximately 20 × 50 m metal cage. From the outside perspective, three sides of this metal scaffold were mantled with a black, non-transparent plastic. On the Southern end of this cage, on the left-hand side, an approximately 6 × 10 m screen is installed, and on the right-hand side, we can see into the cage through an approximately 3 × 5 m glass window: four real Libyan tigers are browsing this arena. Above the window is a banner with the title of the intervention, "Flüchtlinge Fressen" (Eating Refugees) written in bold, in white on black. In between the banner and the window there is a thin, electronic teleprompter, which is constantly running, communicating with the audiences in front, and telling the overall story of the intervention (see Figure 13.2):

> To celebrate the big EU-Turkey deal, we built an arena with four Libyan tigers in the middle of Berlin. We searched for refugees who were willing to be eaten

for the successful defence policy of the federal government and for the transport ban for refugees (§ 63 Abs. 3 AufenthG) – a hyperreal Rome on the floor of the strong European Union. (Centre for Political Beauty, 2016b)

On the right-hand side of the window there is a countdown running – the time left for the blackmailed government. A few policemen patrolling the place, a few actors dressed in classical Roman style armour next to the cage, and knee-high barriers to keep audiences, reporters, and photographers from getting too close to the actual walls of the cage (see Figure 13.3). The installation is running over two weeks in June 2016, during the European football championships. While it seems to merely perpetuate our "daily spectacle of refugees in motion" (McIvor and King, 2015), the intervention makes explicit this violent disposition of watching refugees attempting and failing to cross the Mediterranean.

On June 16, the artists of the Centre for Political Beauty declare that they would have real live volunteer refugees devoured by the tigers by 28 June if the German President Joachim Gauck didn't delete a single paragraph in the German law called EU Directive 2001/51/EC. This paragraph forbids refugees to arrive in Germany via normal airline flights, rather than illegal, and perilous boat trips across the Mediterranean Sea. This announcement seems larger-than-real-life, and set up to fail from the very start. In addition to this blackmail narrative, the Centre for Political Beauty also calls on their audiences to crowdfund an airliner to transport 100 selected refugees from Izmir to Berlin on the final day of the two weeks.

FIGURE 13.3   *Flüchtlinge Fressen* (*Eating Refugees*, 2016), Centre for Political Beauty. (Police officers patrolling around the public intervention *Eating Refugees*)

Credit: Patryk Witt.

According to the artists, the final amount raised through crowdfunding was €72,000, yet the flight could not take place and was cancelled by Air Berlin, due to political pressure from the Minister of the Interior, which under the account @BMI_Bund had also officially tweeted about the intervention on 17 June: "Our comment about the #fluechtlingefressen: intervention is cynical & staged on the back of the supplicants." The artists retweet @politicalbeauty on 18 June: "The whole public discussion, whether the intervention is cynical or not, is staged on the back of the supplicants."

As with other interventions, *Eating Refugees* provokes a chorus of criticism across different media, including the infamous German theatre criticism platform Nachtkritik. The theatre critic Sophie Diesselhorst critiques, for example, that despite the non-ticketed access to the public installation and the live video feed online from the site, the artist had made it impossible to create any dissident spaces for their audiences and the wider public; there had not been any possible way to become actively engaged, to participate, and to share reactions and responses to the intervention. She goes so far as to call the artists' activist aesthetics "a total usurpation of both language and action" (Diesselhorst, 2016). Ultimately, the tigers did not devour any human beings – at least not in the eye and to the knowledge of the public. The public spokesman of the Centre for Political Beauty, Philip Ruch concedes and tells his audience on the final day of the intervention that they "failed miserably" (Ruch cited in Diesselhorst, 2016).

Helen Freshwater has taken issue with the prevalent scholarly assumption that it is important to engage audiences in a participatory way: she questions why spectating is understood as passive, untrustworthy, and contemptible (Freshwater, 2009, p. 25). Such engagement with the interventions is aesthetically inherent to them, because that very engagement "is called upon to do political work" (Bal, 2007, p. 23). They do not leave us "aloof and shielded, autonomous and in charge of the aesthetic experience," but take us to "the heart of what matters in the contemporary world" (Bal, 2007, p. 23): the mobility of people and our cultural dispositions towards them, which bind them to an identity they might not claim as theirs – with often perilous consequences.

The Centre for Political Beauty provides an imaginative transnational perspective on asylum policies and engages with issues of empathy, hospitality, and generosity, even if their ethical stance fails to address the struggle which continues after the moment of the refugees' arrival. Notwithstanding its aesthetic and ethical pitfalls, their interventions ultimately make us realise that we have much work to do in cautiously forming a new political community which "surpass[es] traditional ideas of [being] settled and bounded" (Stierl, 2016, p. 188).

What seems at stake, is perhaps not so much the social media comments to *Eating Refugees*, the failed blackmailing or the aesthetics of the Roman-styled arena spectacle, but as Marilena Zaroulia identifies it, the societal need to

> communicate or convey the weightiness of the body at sea, and, in particular
> the substantiality of the drowned body, [which] also seems to speak to a

> representational urgency that bleeds out of the gaps and absences across visible and tangible domains in this context, where 'irregular' maritime crossings (and failed crossings) are comprehended most often by means other than embodied encounter. (Cox and Zaroulia, 2016, p. 146)

I ask: How to possibly represent this physical (as well as metaphysical) distance between our privileged bodies and those drowning at sea, and to what end? I return to that question and the Centre for Political Beauty's failure in the next section, drawing on a postcolonial lens.

Failing the postcolonial public

My very brief descriptions of the Centre for Political Beauty's interventions at the opening of this chapter claimed them all to have failed. In her study of the Poetics of Failure, theatre scholar Sara Jane Bailes states that

> *failure* works. Which is to say that although ostensibly it signals the breakdown of an aspiration or an agreed demand, breakdown indexes an alternative route or way of doing or making. In its status as "wrongdoing", a failed objective establishes an aperture, an opening onto several (and often many) other ways of doing that counter the authority of a singular or "correct" outcome. Whilst an intended outcome imagines only one result, the ways in which it might *not* achieve that outcome are indeterminate. (Bailes, 2011, p. 2)

Bailes certainly positions failure as a strategy of hope, one that is due to its radical openness and indeterminacy, closely linked to the ontological concept of theatre and performance as media of liveness and immediate encounters between performers and audiences, publics, or participants. Bailes analyses how theatre dramaturgies such as the one of Samuel Beckett can explore the productive inadequacy of performance to communicate essential human experience (Bailes, 2011, pp. 25–6). In response to Bailes, Macelle Mahala writes about the tension for racially marked artists in Germany, which "lies not within the internal inadequacies of the efforts of a particular creator or art form but rather in the denial of Afro-Germans' very existence and the ubiquity of representational practices (such as blackface) that render black bodies as Other on the German stage" (Mahala, 2019, p. 95), and I add in other public art and cultural regimes of representation, too. While in this chapter I do not explicitly discuss these racial exclusions and othering in the theatre institution at large, it is clear that these racially exclusionary practices are merely reinforced in Centre for Political Beauty's public interventions: through their failure to culturally avow for the public as a postcolonial public, and merely engaging with asylum politics through a confounding cosmopolitan ethic of white innocence (or respectively a responsibility that is only due to the Holocaust).

In her article "White innocence in the Black Mediterranean: hospitality and the erasure of history," the political scientist Ida Danewid argues that there is an issue with European subjects re-constituting themselves as "ethical," "good," and "innocent of its imperialist histories and present complicities." In particular, she looks at the Centre for Political Beauty's "radical activist campaign" (Danewid, 2017, p. 1675) *The Dead Are Coming,* and argues that their focus on the role of grief and vulnerability eludes politics and responsibility in favour of a new cosmopolitan ethics. While their work is necessarily counteracting the rise of populist, far-right, xenophobic, and racist political movements and parties, their mere gesture towards – and call for empathy and solidarity with migrants lost at sea – is called into question by Danewid. Acknowledging the important postcolonial and feminist question of "who counts as human" and who does not in regard to contemporary wars, forms of militarisation, and other dehumanising struggles, Danewid argues that there is danger, when poststructuralist thinkers such as Judith Butler (2004, 2010), Ewa Ziarek (2001), and Stephen White (2009) focus on the ontological, rather than historical, in the turn to ethics and their search for what binds us *all* together. Indeed, they argue for a new, critical humanism based on the notion of shared bodily vulnerability, which in turn should make it possible to recognise migrants' lives as part of the European or Western political community. However, Danewid argues

> that these responses are indicative of a general problematic, endemic to both left-wing activism and academic debate, which reproduces rather than challenges the foundational assumption of the far right. By focusing on abstract – as opposed to historical – humanity, these discourses contribute to an ideological formation that disconnects connected histories and turns questions of responsibility, guilt, restitution, repentance, and structural reform into matters of empathy, generosity, and hospitality. The result is a colonial and patronising fantasy of the white man's burden – based on the desire to protect and offer political resistance *for* endangered others – which ultimately does little to challenge established interpretations that see Europe as the bastion of democracy, liberty, and universal rights. (Danewid, 2017, p. 1675)

What is at stake and what makes up the failure of the Centre for Political Beauty then, perhaps, is to be found in the spectacle and fetish they create around the figure of the refugee – and crucially, for whom or what kind of public, rather than whether they are indeed performance artists creating art or mere political propagandists and activists. This question about the make-up of the German (or wider European) public goes to the heart of "white innocence," as Gloria Wekker (2016) has identified. While creating a momentary media debate about the ethics of migration, the Centre for Political Beauty's interventions point exactly to a whitewashed sense of self, "that sees little or no relation between current social advantages and the long history of structural violence" (Danewid, 2017, p. 1681). It is important that the Centre for Political Beauty draw and invigorate wide

international media attention to all our reckoning and solidarity with those living through, enduring and having witnessed first-hand the perilous consequences of fleeing from persecution, seeking refuge in Europe and navigating its asylum system. However, their interventions do not take into account the Centre for Political Beauty's – as well as our own – complicit modes, ignorant or even wilful reinforcements of racialisation, othering, and exoticisation. The failure thus, I argue, lies in producing cultural work for a public, which they do not recognise is indeed, a *postcolonial public*. Wekker's concept of "white innocence" pinpoints the following paradox, which challenges the Centre for Political Beauty's dominant narrative of "ethical" and "human-rights-driven" European citizens: the passionate denial of racial discrimination and violence, coexisting alongside pervasive structural racism and xenophobia.

Importantly, the Centre for Political Beauty reproduces much of the debates about inclusion and the ethics of migration: the "starting premise of white nationalism: namely, that migrants are 'strangers', 'charitable subjects', and 'uninvited guests'" (Danewid, 2017, p. 1675). Further, Fazila Bhimji positions the everyday racialisation of refugees in Germany since 2012, in a wider culture of the German asylum system, which is embedded in a longer history of racism and has long considered people coming increasingly from the Global South "potentially problematic migrants" who would "'abuse' the 'generosity' of the German asylum system" (Bhimji, 2020, p. 23). Bhimji considers the institutional racism and systematic othering of refugees "with respect to refugee camps, detentions, and deportations" an "exertion of state power [which favours highly skilled white refugees over black migrants from countries with ongoing conflicts] in terms of colonial domination over people from the Global South by the German state and mainstream society" (Bhimji, 2020, p. 24). Further:

> The "undeserving economic migrants" encountered refusals and came to be racialised and denigrated by society and the state at large, whereas the highly skilled migrants who arrived from Syria to Germany received global attention and much sympathy during 2015–2016 (however, in the subsequent years the "welcoming" mood changed to an unwelcoming one amongst certain segments of German society). Although many Africans and people from countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Albania, and Pakistan had arrived in Germany prior to 2015 and continued to arrive in the subsequent years, the acceptance rate for Syrians remained high while many refugees from these latter regions were subject to deportations and consequently experienced precarity. (Bhimji, 2020, pp. 24–5)

Heide Castañeda and Seth Holmes pinpoint this racial injustice in the taxonomy of "deservingness," in which the figure of the refugee becomes yet another object of comprehension of US and European political-economic interests (Castañeda and Holmes, 2016, p. 18). In Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez's poignant words:

> While current EU migration and asylum policies do not operate *explicitly* within a framework of racial or ethnic difference, by coupling nationality and the right to asylum, they construct hierarchies in the recognition of rejection of asylum in terms of nationalities. This places people in zones of recognition or rejection of the human rights to liveability. This coupling follows from the foundation of racialized notions of the Other. (Rodríguez, 2018, p. 24)

The Centre for Political Beauty's strategy to tackle the issue of statelessness and asylum is clear in their interventions: tearing down the European border fences by means of civic force, ending the immigration deal between Germany and Turkey through a parliamentary vote, and installing floating rescue platforms in the Mediterranean Sea. Clearly, these approaches are both symbolic and driven by pragmatic political solutions, aiming for social cohesion and structural political reform. The Centre for Political Beauty offers concrete political guidance for audiences far beyond the theatre, the presumed safe space for make-believe. However, the collective's interventions reproduce practices of othering and the idea of white saviourism, and they fail to make art for/with/against the public, who is crucially a postcolonial one, neglecting pervasive colonial power dynamics, regimes of representation, structural violence and racism against refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants.

   With regard to how the artists relate to the nation-state as an opposing player and adhere to the rule of law, as well as to democratic decision-making processes, the Centre for Political Beauty's approach is "[f]ar from grandly proclaiming a tabula rasa," suggesting instead "a chess move in the middle of a minefield" (Lütticken, 2018). My investigation of the collective and the wider field of scholarly and artistic work on theatre, asylum, and migration aims to address academics, cultural practitioners, artists, policymakers, and politicians alike, in order to work through their present complicities, biases, and privileges when seeking to conduct (cultural) work about refugees to "do good" (Bishop, 2004, p. 79). Without disavowing the cultural labour of creating small gestures and social encounters, the examined interventions equip us with a different way of looking at the transnational scale of forced displacement and migration movements. Crucially, they anticipate what political performance might mean on more widely dispersed geographical and institutional levels, but fail to see it through a post-colonial lens. With their public art or respectively propaganda, the Centre for Political Beauty reinforces the problematic distinction between citizen and migrant or refugee, by failing to understand the construct of the nation-state as one based on imperial histories of empire: by making their interventions address European associated populations only, and thus, rendering the postcolonial present invisible, "invisible the long-standing histories of empire and colonialism that already connect those migrants, or citizens, *with* Europe" (Bhambra, 2017, p. 396).