



Marschall, A. (2018) What can theatre do about the refugee crisis? Enacting commitment and navigating complicity in performative interventions. *Research in Drama Education*, 23(2), pp. 148-166. (doi:[10.1080/13569783.2018.1438180](https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2018.1438180))

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Deposited on: 22 June 2018

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What can theatre do about the refugee crisis? Enacting commitment and navigating complicity in performative interventions

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This article argues that in a society transformed by an increasing bureaucratic nexus of migration, artistic responses to political crises are particularly effective when working with institutions. To probe the prevalent discourse on the efficacy of performance art, the article interrogates *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* through a lens of institutional aesthetics. Dwelling at the intersection between performance and institutions, this intervention combines refugee accommodation with a tourist hotel and artist studios. Ultimately, the article outlines the role of commitment in the intervention, which stands exemplary for emerging art practices that permeate the boundaries of institutional policy, performance art and social fields.

KEYWORDS: Political performance, refugee crisis, asylum seekers, institutional aesthetics, social commitment

What can theatre do about the ‘refugee crisis’?

Combining refugee accommodation, artist work spaces and a tourist hotel with a café bar and cultural program, the Augsburg-based intervention *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* (2012–) has become a lasting cultural organisation, and thus, it differs profoundly from other socially engaged art projects. This durational collaboration between artists and asylum seekers creates spaces of encounter that reach beyond the fetishised moment of ‘refugee arrival’. To probe the still prevalent discourse on the efficacy of performance and theatre, this article investigates this durational performative intervention, which stands exemplary for emerging social art practices. I argue that in a society transformed by an increasing bureaucratic nexus of migration and bound by the slowness of

institutional change (Roland 2004), artistic responses to contemporary migration movements and asylum policy can only be effective when rooted in and working with institutions and various societal stakeholders. In the following, I frame this performative intervention as a lasting and socially engaged one because it dwells at the intersection between performance and institutions: it has functioned for more than five years at the intersection of asylum law, the tourist economy, socio-political engagement, and performance art. This article contributes to the emerging field of institutional aesthetics by examining *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*, and by tracing some of its ethical considerations and performative implications as well as putting it in dialogue with what Sara Ahmed has coined the ‘non-performativity’ of institutional commitment (2004, 3). I discuss the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* from a politically interested performance studies perspective which propels me towards the question: what can theatre and performance actually do about the refugee crisis?

When faced with the question about what can theatre do when situated in an expanded field (Read 2013), theatre’s impact has been analysed in the context of devised practices that contribute to communities’ healing, in the context of site-based story-telling and creative skill-sharing within vulnerable and/or minority groups, through theatre’s immersion, affective encounters and sensual experiences, and through theatre’s potential to queer normative categories of identity and belonging, and even through the ways in which political protest can be playfully advanced through means of theatrical communication. What many of such politically motivated scholarly accounts and case studies have in common is that they are advocating on behalf of theatre’s capacity to actually achieve behaviour change rather than pointing out how theatre may only be gesturing towards the social real. Nevertheless, those different contemporary performance models all have to face the almost unbearable slowness of institutional change (Roland 2004, 116), the gradual and unpredictable ways how and when societal systems will transform.

Addressing the question about what theatre can do about the refugee crisis in a quantitative,

sociological sense goes beyond the means of this article, but I nevertheless aim to provoke a productive critique and potential reassessment of how we might understand the efficacy of political theatre that engages with refugees, that intervenes in the systematic failure of dealing with contemporary migration movements in Europe. The motivation to reassess the very question of what theatre can do evolves from the politicised urgency of the so-called refugee crisis – a crisis that could be more properly defined as a humanitarian crisis in which many refugees, migrants and racialised groups have to face unjust asylum laws and perilous nationalistic politics in Europe. Awareness of the systemic nature of the crisis is the impetus that drives me to write about this topic. This nature reaches beyond the much-mediatised moment of perilous border-crossing, the all-pervasive ‘moment of refugee arrival’ on a nation state’s territory. In their discussion about contemporary performance works that address this ‘refugee crisis’, the politics of arrival and the perilous crossings across the Mediterranean in particular, Emma Cox and Marilena Zaroulia ask the very question that we need to keep addressing: what happens after the arrival, after we have reacted to images of migrants’ arrival or demise? What can we, what can theatre do after the fetishised moment of arrival about the ‘structural problems that perpetuate such injustice[s]’? (2016, 148)

Many meaningful socially engaged art works and theatre projects with and about refugees have aimed to bring about individual empowerment, have put up a fight for the rights of the marginalised and have created a new sense of belonging within new cultural environments.¹ However, sometimes what becomes problematic in the ubiquity of the represented, aestheticised refugee body is the prevalent disjuncture of *we* and *them*, of *here* and *there*. What annexes much of the political stakes of contemporary refugee art projects, I would suggest, is the occluding of the very realm of political decision-making itself that engenders the moment of crisis in the first place: the political stakes are high in regard to Europe’s organisation of its response resources, the policing of refugees’ mobility, and the classifying of statelessness, which at worst costs so many people their

lives. More often than not, many contemporary images and narratives about refugees do not only perpetuate discourses of dominant non-refugee European audiences, but almost inevitably, they serve as ‘emotional commodity’ (Cox 2012, 128) and reinforce social and political hierarchies that objectify refugees’ lives without challenging their audiences to enact social action.

Socially engaged performances tend to reach out into everyday life and reference the labour of performing; they endeavour to demarcate the event (or product) of public performance from its creative process (Jackson 2011). Claire Bishop has argued that socially engaged performing arts with their privileging of process instead of product can make you feel ‘good’ but they do not necessarily have to ‘do good’ (2004, 79). James Thompson (2009) proposes that the means and value of socially engaged art works are to be found in a narrative of affect rather than concrete effect because an affect-orientated perspective allows for less defined, less constricted encounters of publics with the performing arts. Through this account, the political potential of the art work lies in its possibilities to transform individuals through an affective encounter and through enactive storytelling. Emphasising the contiguity of affect and effect on the other hand, recent works on theatre aiming to enact social change (O’Gorman and Werry 2012, 3) prompt me to suggest that it is productive to interrogate the temporal deferral of political efficacy by socially engaged performances, in particular contemporary ones which respond to perilous migration movements.

Performing art works which intervene in the ‘refugee crisis’ and seek to ‘do good’ at times take solidary action with regards to asylum cases.² They do instantiate political effects which often create a concrete shift and make social realms accessible for refugees. Moreover, they engage with institutional critique and challenge political representation by asking whose bodies are least represented in ‘our’ society. I frame the Augsburg-based *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* as such a socially engaged performative intervention. Due to its continued process, this intervention calls for a recalibration of the scholarly narrative of socially engaged performance. Therefore, the argument I

am making about *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* shifts the analytic lens from affective phenomenology to institutional aesthetics.

The *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* has been in operation since 2012. I have been following the project for several years but I visited and engaged with the intervention for the first time as hotel guest in spring 2017. In light of that lived experience, I contend that the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* marks a compelling case study, which intervenes in the representational politics of cultural institutions and engenders solidarity for refugeehood, solidarity with people enduring an often isolated and indefinite limbo for years (Brun 2016, 422). This performative intervention conceptually speaks to a new strand of research about institutional dramaturgy, about theatre and performance as socio-political realities that are embedded in specific institutional working and living conditions. Thus, this article aims to interweave a thinking through performance as a means for effecting political change, with a thinking through the means of performing commitment. My argument therefore takes off with positioning myself in the encounter with the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*. In a second step, I examine this project through an institutional aesthetic lens that helps me investigate its connective tissue, binding aesthetics and politico-legal domains regarding asylum. Third, by bringing the performative intervention into dialogue with notions of commitment and hope, this article seeks to provoke a new scholarly understanding of performance's political efficacy.

In my understanding, the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* does not produce political performance as a single aesthetic or affective event, but instead performs long-term political commitment and practises hope for a non-discriminatory and just future. Despite being situated in the temporal vicinity and the framework of the so-called crisis moment of the influx of refugee flows in 2015 in Europe,³ this socially engaged art project does not respond to contemporary migration politics through a singular timely event aesthetic. Instead, the intervention has been enacting political

commitment since 2012, and thus it confounds the politicised narrative of urgency and crisis that has been attached to contemporary migration movements. Therefore this article raises the following questions: how do collaborations between artists and asylum seekers such as in the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* contest the singular notion of urgency? How can we assess the longevity and the commitment of performative interventions regarding contemporary politics of crisis, refugeehood and asylum?

Dwelling together: a hotel for ‘guests with and without asylum’

The Augsburg-based *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*⁴ is in its self-descriptive terms a hotel for guests ‘with and without asylum’; it combines a hotel for tourists with refugee accommodation. It is as much a tourist destination in the South of Germany for international visitors interested in the arts, as it is an asylum detention centre run by the local immigration authorities of Bavaria. In addition, this combinatory space also offers a varied cultural program, a café and restaurant space; one can find artists’ studios and communal spaces for various locally-run workshops and seminars. While the lease for the building has been funded by Augsburg’s municipal office, the performative intervention has been funded through project-based grants by different stakeholders, for example: Kulturstiftung des Bundes, the federal foundation for culture and the arts (2015), as well as the Robert Bosch Stiftung (2013–2015), a foundation associated with the eponymous private industrial company. By reflecting and intervening in the means of representation in a multiracial society, the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* is an emerging art organisation that bridges often-purported oppositions between activist, economic and aesthetic priorities, between effect and affect.

The *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* was initially founded in September 2011 by three local artists and activists. Together with around 150 volunteers, they converted a former home for the elderly into a living and working space that comprises accommodation for around 60 asylum seekers, hotel

rooms for around 40 tourists and it has around 13 community spaces that have been used by several artists as studio spaces. While the building is owned by the Protestant church, the non-profit organisation Grandhotel Cosmopolis e.V. rents different parts of the building from the church. Being an official asylum seekers' centre, parts of the building are also rented by the local administration of the state of Bavaria which administers the district's asylum centres.

Augsburg provides housing for around 3,300 asylum seekers; approximately 800 of them stay in emergency reception centres, around 980 can be accommodated in collective lodgings, 280 unaccompanied minors are hosted in child care institutions and around 1,100 live in decentralised housing (Stadtverwaltung Augsburg 2017). As the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*, or rather, part of its building facilities are registered as one out of the nine collective accommodation centres in Augsburg, the government of Swabia (a regional administrative division of Bavaria) has allocated asylum seekers to live there while they inhabit a so-called preliminary right to residence and while they go through the bureaucracies of applying for asylum, which can last up to several years.⁵ Asylum claims in Germany are processed and granted or rejected by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, which places the asylum seeking person in the emergency reception centre that is closest to their place of arrival. Thereafter, their administrative allocation to a collective accommodation centre such as the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* follows a system of quotas which depends on the population number and tax receipts of the respective federal state. In the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*, asylum seekers inhabit nine double rooms of 16-18m² on three floors, respectively, and on each floor they share a recreation space for common use, two kitchens and bathrooms. The majority of asylum seekers living in the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* are families who live in one or two private rooms depending on the number of family members. Single asylum seekers are accommodated in multi-bedrooms as is general practice in collective accommodation centres across Germany. These spaces for asylum seekers are designated as 'private'; they cannot be accessed by

the public without the invitation of a resident and they are located in closed-door tracks separate from those of the 'hotel without asylum': 12 double rooms for tourists and other temporary guests on two floors.

On their web-hosted cover-page, the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* flags the difference in opinion of asylum policy between themselves and the regional government, without tapping into a polemic of radical cynicism directed against the state:

The Swabian government is responsible for the collective accommodation centre Springergässchen 5 (official term of the government) and employs a director and caretaker to look after the site. View of the Swabian government.

The people working and living at the Grandhotel Cosmopolis (official term for the hoteliers) are the ones responsible for running the place. View of the hoteliers.

(Grandhotel Cosmopolis e.V. 2017, translated by the author)

With that juxtaposition, the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* perpetuates a discourse of independency which allows them to imagine themselves as self-governing and as undermining structures which adhere to asylum policies of refugee accommodation. Issues of refugee housing and asylum detention centres have been propagated by media and performing arts alike as politically relevant to various stakeholders, whether positive or negative for re-thinking our social spaces, everyday proximities and institutionalised ways of living together. While there is substantial sociological and anthropological research about refugee accommodation as sites of social control, about the technologies of bordering within, and about the politics of (marginalised) space (Gibson 2003;

Bloch/Schuster 2005; Hubbard 2005; Matejskova and Leitner 2011; Attoh 2011), and while there is a substantial discourse about site-specificity in performance art, the implications of durational interventions in refugee accommodation have not yet been analysed from a performance studies perspective. Thus the interrogation of the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* provides a new means of thinking through the everyday temporal proximity of crisis and the means of performing institutional commitment to effect non-discriminatory access to the very social realm itself.

The *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* is centrally located in Augsburg's Cathedral Quarter and it is meant to be a point of contact for locals in this newly redeveloped residential area. This lived spatial proximity provides the opportunity for interaction and community-building and therefore it challenges the problematic issues of prolonged confinement of refugees in state-controlled accommodation facilities. More often than not, European refugee accommodation centres are located outside of city centres and therefore, they often have only marginal access to public transportation systems – which also means marginal physical access to society in general. But providing an alternative to such excluded accommodation necessarily means the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* becomes in part complicit with the refugee housing policies of the Bavarian state ministry – particularly in terms of room sizes, furnishing, decoration, restricted access but also in terms of confined mobility regulations (Grandhotel Cosmopolis/Graßmann 2012, 18). The hotel therefore is not a utopian space, its hoteliers and guests are for example confronted with the everyday realities of asylum seeker deportations and the bureaucratic constraints of the asylum procedure. Only a few days after the public opening in 2013, the first deportation notifications for some of its guests 'without [legislated] asylum' arrived and confronted the utopian thinkers and pioneering practitioners of the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* with the workings of immigration offices.

While the hotel is neither a complete safe space nor an anarchical form of social resistance, I would argue that it positions itself in between the embodied performance of everyday solidarity and

the legal confinements of an official asylum seeker's centre. The church Diakonisches Werk Augsburg also provides social counsellors for the asylum seekers living at the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*. They assist with the legal asylum process and they form points of contact with governmental authorities which means that they could be seen as institutional mavericks: while they conduct emotional labour for the asylum seekers, they also form part of local administrative committees and have direct political influence on local asylum policies.

While the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* is intertwined in the political environment that controls the dominant representation of refugee reception and dependency, the hoteliers nevertheless openly voice their critique about the state institutions that determine the nature of assistance and legal aid available to asylum seekers. They actively seek to engender political change from within that institutional complicity by campaigning for refugee rights, by advocating for a change in asylum politics, and by allying with large-scale social justice movements such as #refugeeswelcome and My Right is Your Right. It is telling how the artists, migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, guests, and hosts who work and live at the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* all call themselves and each other 'hoteliers'. In conversations, they mostly refrain from using the labels 'guests', 'host', 'migrants', 'refugees', 'asylum seeker'. 'Hotelier' instead seems to offer them a distinct and somewhat leftist way of rejecting demarcations between owners and workers, and categories that demarcate labour, citizenship status and national identities. Hoteliers, as I understand the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*' self-fashioning, are all those people who even substantially engage with the project over a longer period of time – be it on a voluntary basis, as refugee, employee or artist-in-residence.

Before contextualising this case study at the discursive and pragmatic intersection between performance and institutions, I will briefly map my personal encounter with the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*. During my first email contact with the organisers, they made it clear from the beginning that if I was truly interested in a visit, in staying at the hotel and in writing about the

project that they would ask me to give something in return. I was asked to propose a form of knowledge exchange that would profit both sides – the email reply said: ‘you are welcome to come and exchange views and ideas with us. However, it is important to us that this exchange happens on an equal footing. [...] Therefore, it is much appreciated if you could show us possibilities how you share your insights, knowledge and material with us in return’ (email translated by author).⁶ This emphasis on participation and commitment in the project *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* addresses all possible bystanders, interested parties, societal stakeholders, academics, artists, neighbours, visitors. Participation as part of the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*’ institutional aesthetics is ingrained in the heart of its conceptual foundation, or so to speak, it is its architectural substructure. The fundamental concept of the project is participatory action. As the founders suggested initially, it is only

able to exist through active participation. For culturally engaged individuals, the incentive will be the rent free housing. Hotel residents with asylum can become involved based on their personal possibilities in the cultural activities and hotel operations going on during their stay/residence. Hotel guests who are in transit will experience their stay as part of a unique project. The mixed system of participation and consumption can give rise to surprising novel “services”, such as those that were common in the Grands Hotels of years gone by. (Grandhotel Cosmopolis/Graßmann 2012, 20).

This brief mission statement forms part of the proposal that the artists initially addressed to the building’s owner, the notional tax payer, the potential funding bodies, as well as the local politicians. It is telling how the brochure makes use of specific economic-interest driven terms such as ‘synergies’ and ‘incentive’. But it also operates within a more self-reflective and nuanced language that considers different models of temporal living situations, transit spaces and durational

ways of inhabiting, of dwelling somewhere. The hotel's concept can be accessed online and it explains the initial infrastructure and the outset of the social art project which seeks to encompass a manifold of personal needs, rhythms, networks and flows of different people and habitants. The activist and volunteers are often being invited to academic conferences, workshops and art festivals to speak about their practices, their ethical commitment, and the implications, processes and issues of a 'migratory living together' (Carneiro 2016, 315). The project positions itself consciously and even programmatically in relation to the field of art by explicitly referencing Joseph Beuys's concept of 'social sculpture' (Grandhotel Cosmopolis/Frech 2015, 67). In the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*, art's salient participatory openness is used to create political campaigns and to engender social change, but in working with institutions such as the affiliated asylum centre these practices often collide with juridical realities and legal actions.

The aesthetics of the project manifest and signify in part through the artistic remodelling of the building facilities; every hotel room and every part of the accommodation complex has been designed by different artists. During my stay, I was located in the hotel room 'Utopia' which is designed by the Helsinki-based artists Suvi Ermilä and Aapo Raudaskoski. Upon entering, the room playfully addresses its hotel guest with the question 'what do you really want?' which is printed on the door. This question is followed by a signposting that prompts the hotel guests to access the digital platform utopiatoolbox.org which functions as a virtual expansion of the hotel room 'Utopia' and links the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*' hotel guest to another international artist network. This rhizomatic linking to other creative art projects, organisations, and networks is fundamental to the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*' participatory structure and aesthetics.

The organisation does not only facilitate cultural events such as poetry readings, discussions, concerts, and theatre performances, but it also forms multiple points of encounter to negotiate, reflect and engage in enfolding social (art) practices themselves. This critical engagement with and

as part of their own social art practice is even signified in the building's design. On the staircase which connects the public entrance with the hotel rooms and the asylum accommodation dorms, a wall printing suggests, for example, '[l]et's not talk about the weather' – this being an English invitation to the hotel guests and hoteliers to skip small talk and to focus instead on political issues in their potentially multicultural and multilingual dialogues. Further, on the walls in the hotel lobby and café, another print in English asks, '[h]ow to connect to a process which you haven't started?' and welcomes you 'to your Lobby' – a signifier that pairs the mode of taking participatory ownership of the project with the equivocal meaning of the term 'lobby' which might refer to the political solidarity and institutional entanglement of the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*.

The manifold social art practices in the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* are collaborations between local artists or artists-in-residence and the hoteliers and interested refugees; among others they comprise the publication of poetry and creative writing in the hotel newspaper 'Le Grand Magazine', the remodelling and designing of the hotel rooms, the up-cycling of old furniture, meditation and the practising of yoga and mindfulness, graphic design, photography and illustrations by the 'Grand Graphics', as well as the performative documentation of the project *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* by the working group 'Gepäckbeförderung' ('Checking Baggage').

As example of the range of art practices at work in the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*, I will detail the project 'The Grand Beauty Salon', which is a cosmopolitan art studio for beauty and was initiated by the German artist Frauke Frech who moved into the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* in 2014 as part of her long-term artistic project 'Mein ganz privates Deutschland' ('My Own, Private Germany'). Together with refugees and immigrants of the community of *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*, Frech founded The Grand Beauty Salon – a performative workshop setting in which refugees and migrants from a variety of cultural backgrounds perform beautician services for interested participants. The art project has been funded by the Bavarian State Ministry of Sciences, Research

and the Arts; the Augsburg Office of Cultural Affairs and the Heinrich Böll Foundation; and it has been sponsored by the ecological beauty brands Dr Hauschka and Uslu Airlines.⁷ While the salon is located in an atelier of the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* and opens once a week, it also moves outside of this environment and engages with different theatrical public spheres: The Grand Beauty Salon has performed as artists-in-residence in Prague and Bangalore at the respective Goethe Institute as well as at various performance art festivals such as *The Future is Female* (2017) at the Sophiensaele Berlin, and the *Open Border Congress* (2016) at the Kammerspiele Munich and it has collaborated with the municipal theatre's make-up artists.

The performing actors – skilled beauticians and ‘experts of everyday life’ (Dreyse/Malzacher 2007) – come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds and their treatment of customers follows their translocal embodied knowledge of beauty rituals and practices in their (former) home countries: manicures and hand massages influenced by Nigerian culture, or eyebrow plucking and henna painting techniques influenced by Afghan culture. During the encounter of getting a haircut, make-up or a massage, The Grand Beauty Salon facilitates conversations which invite the hairdressers to tell their own stories about who they are and where they feel belonging to. These are one-on-one encounters which allow for intimate dialogues about what makes one feel beautiful, about gendered and racialised norms of beauty, about motherhood or what it means to be a woman in different cultures. At times, both beautician and participant can be faced with language barriers and need to find other means of communication and trust in one another beyond a logic of negotiation and consent through words. The performative arrangement allows for an intimate exploration of trust, transformation and physical intimacy: what happens and how does it feel if you lay your feet, hands, head or face into the hands of a stranger?

In line with the other projects and services of the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*, The Grand Beauty Salon operates on a basis of ‘pay as you want’ which means that you do not find a list or menu of

set prices for an overnight stay in the hotel, for a cup of coffee at the lobby or for a haircut; but in this participatory pricing model, buyer, participant, or customer decide the monetary exchange value for a given commodity. While I stayed at *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* my first and the continued commodity exchanges could be thought of as microcosmic performances of public trust and personal values. When the social habit of paying for a product or service (without it being designated as ‘free’) suddenly became suspended, I encountered affective moments of hesitation and reflective pausing on my relation with the product or service, the concept of labour, and the person offering or facilitating the commodity exchange as well as my relation to the performative intervention as a whole and its financial and infrastructural backing. In fact, throughout my brief stay at the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* and the conversations with the hoteliers, I felt quite hesitant to directly approach and talk to people in this very public space and instead, I actively chose to occupy the role of listener and observer rather than interviewer with set questions. Because of many of the hoteliers’ learned suspicion about how researchers have covered the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* and refugee projects in general in the context of the supposed German ‘welcome culture’ as I have discussed elsewhere (Marschall 2017, 95), I positioned myself as accomplice and intentionally facilitated non-recorded confidential and informal conversations in which I would listen to some of the hoteliers’ current thoughts, concerns and reflections about the project.

My engagement with the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* has been a constant re-negotiation of the presumed insider-outsider dichotomy that still lies in the heart of many migratory research encounters (Nowicka and Ryan 2015). Magdalena Nowicka and Louise Ryan argue that this dichotomy in migration research usually takes the form of ethnic and national categories, but that we ought to challenge the dominance of this ethnic lens and challenge assumed commonalities in favour of intersectional dynamics of gender, identity, sameness, difference and ethnicity (2015, 4). In line with their methodological suggestion and instead of locating myself on an axis of hospitality

along the lines of guests and hosts (Derrida 2000; Rosello 2001; Woolley 2014, 31), I necessarily approached the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* from a position of uncertainty in relation to my research agenda in order to open a wider array of possible encounters. During my brief stay there in spring 2017, I was constantly negotiating my pluri-functional roles of guest, citizen, foreigner, multilingual German, academic, white female. This is telling insofar as my own part-observational lens and part-participatory engagement behaviour already revealed the many entangled institutional domains of the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*: the entrenched structures and persistent mechanisms of our overlapping social orders, the formal and informal rules that govern our behaviour and organise interactions – be it nationhood, family, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, language, asylum laws, or academia.

In the following, I employ a lens of institutional aesthetics that focuses on institutional relationships surrounding, shaping and conditioning the social work of performance rather than focusing on an affective encounter between spectator and performer. This lens provides me with the means of investigating a collective social subject when analysing the performativity and artistic practices of the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* which negotiate with, through and beyond institutions but without the pitfall of anti-State, anti-institutional cynicism. Institutional aesthetics was coined by the eponymous research centre *inaes* for institutional aesthetics which was founded in 2016 at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich. The institute works across the humanities to research the effect of structural organisation in relation to the production, distribution and reception artistic outcomes particularly for the performing arts, and conversely, the aesthetic impact on institutions themselves (ineas 2016a). Research issues put forward by the affiliated and newly organised IFTR working group are the reformulation of the ‘concept of “aesthetics” away from the individual (Kantian) to a collective subject, can one speak of an “institutional” subject?’, exploring ‘the relationship between performativity and institutional aesthetics’ as suggested by Argyropoulou and

Vourloumis, and asking how ‘the global shift to neoliberal economic and management policies [has] affected the institutional frameworks of the performing arts’ (ineas 2016b).⁸

The concept of the institution does not only refer to complex organisational structures; the emergence of sociological neo-institutionalism provides a theoretical framework to understand institutions in relation to performance as social constructs, as part of our laws, political paradigms and cultural environments (Argyropoulou and Vourloumis 2015). I understand performance art in that regard as a set of social institutions and the ways in which they relate to society – be it through interfaces such as censorship, public scandals or advertising (Balme 2014). This article’s methodological challenge, then, is to employ institutional aesthetics which shift away from what Christopher Balme calls ‘the modernist and postmodernist fixation on the evenemential temporality of the aesthetic dimension of theatre’ (2014, 13–14). However non-affective and a-theatrical institutions seem, they are embedded, form part of, and intervene in everyday sensualities; they sanction and police our ways of living together. Institutions – such as the asylum centre, the university, the tourist hotel industry, the local government, the church, the EU – in this regard provide the spaces and rules for our everyday encounters and our means of communication.

Contemporary performing arts can take on many different modalities and forms that seem to refuse an ‘easy binary between inside and outside of institutional frameworks’ (Argyropoulou and Vourloumis 2015, 1), between the artistic, social and political realm. To effect change, the durationally performed *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* necessarily works beyond and from within powerful institutions such as the neoliberal tourist market and the asylum centre governed by German and European asylum laws and refugee housing policies. The *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*’ modes of action are multiple and vary in length, scope, aesthetic, and engagement. All of these modes seek to overcome how social exclusion is engendered but at the same time, they struggle to effect wider social change because the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*’ practices and sites are ultimately

complicit with the asylum laws that are currently in place. This article refrains from offering a theatrical analysis of an affective momentum of participatory engagement, but it aims at interrogating the implications of a performative intervention that is instantiating different ways of living, of enduring or rather lingering together,⁹ ways of performing solidarity with the precarious and politically-forced ‘dwelling in the temporary’ (Brun 2016, 423) of refugees, and ways of engaging with issues of diversity and representation within state-funded cultural arts institutions as well as envisioning their remodelling through a ‘migratory living together’ (Carneiro 2016, 315) in Germany.

While much is at stake at such a political and socio-juridically invested performative intervention, concepts such as ‘political’ risk become all-encompassing and lose their meaningful significance for analytical research and their merit for application further afield. Prevalent images of the so-called refugee crisis such as of the ‘clearance’ of the Calais Jungle in late 2016 express an urgency to act and respond inasmuch as those images of ‘the refugee crisis’, this ‘European refugee panopticon’ (Cox 2017, 478) continuously reveal the lack of their durational impact. This urgency speaks the nature of the crisis itself, and avows for the time-sensitive need for physical action to save endangered lives. However, the weightiness of crisis has also become paradoxically ubiquitous and has been perpetuated by politicians and other political stake-holders alike (Castañeda and Holmes 2016, 2). The duration and persistence of long-term voluntary engagement and the hope of envisioning a just future alternative to the crisis seem to become annexed by this urgency and the political demand for a radical single solution to it. To enable the sustainable reimagining of social institutions by performative interventions, it can only be vital to reassess the political stakes of socially engaged performances, and to contest our aesthetic narratives and performance registers rather than to perpetuate a traditional ‘mistrust of structure’, bureaucracy and policy (Jackson 2011, 24).

Enacting commitment, navigating complicity

With the social turn in performance art, the focus of scholars and practitioners of theatre as a socio-political reality and medium has valued its capacities to stage the contingency of belongings and identities. In addition, scholars have shown how performance artists more often than not need to prove to policy makers the necessity and impact of their work, and how funding bodies and academics need to be convinced of the importance and meaningfulness of theatre projects that look to transform communities and individuals for the better – and how these confinements risk putting the creative openness and fluidity of theatre processes at stake (Harvie 2013). Cognisant of these discourses, I argue that it is especially necessary to stay vigilant about the supposed political efficacy of theatrical narratives at the site and time of perilous border crossings, containment facilities, detention centres and policed states of living in limbo. The very mixed economy of hotel business, private donations, invisible emotional labour, unpaid volunteer work, philanthropy, and continuous short-term project-based applications for governmental funding for the arts by the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* signal the need for a renewal of future funding courses: a funding model which allows time for collaboration and reflection upon discourses and aesthetic form as well as structural support for building networks rather than a pressuring through external claims by social entities, audiences, bureaucracies and governments for a one-sided exchange of finished productions (see Jackson 2011, 26). In her interrogation of political engagement both in art projects with anti-institutional stances as well as in art projects which reimagine social institutions, Shannon Jackson reminds us of the crucial meaning of sustainability of performative interventions in terms of space and temporality: ‘[w]hen a political art discourse too often celebrates social disruption at the expense of social coordination, we lose a more complex sense of how art practices contribute to inter-dependent social imagining’ (2011, 14).

The *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* reimagines the asylum centre as social institution by instantiating a sustainable artist-run infrastructure in the form of social enterprise. By law, this allows asylum seekers to pursue gainful labour and to perform as skilled experts, as beauticians and hairdressers, as musicians and architects, as chefs and programmers. In addition, many have been positively vocal about the daily social access to an emerging community and about the social interrelations that help to hone their language skills. While the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* has been performatively intervening in the bureaucratic and institutional nexuses of asylum, their arts practices as previously detailed in the example of The Grand Beauty Salon are not part of a larger complex organisational structure but comprise ‘anti-institutional’ (ineas 2016b) workshops and collaborative practices in relation to larger state-funded (theatre) institutions such as the Kammerspiele Munich. The ‘migratory aesthetic’ (Bal 2007, 23) employed by the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* contrasts with many of the representational infrastructures and theatre institutions whose conception, self-image, structures and legitimacy have vividly been questioned over the last three decades (Michaels 2011, 124).

During the unfolding of the so-called refugee crisis in Europe during the summer of 2015, German state-funded cultural institutions developed a great interest in working on issues of migration and refugeeness. While theatrical narratives can be meaningful and effective, it seems necessary to analyse the performativity of policy which can work to transform and to replicate unjust institutional matrices already in place, given that most effective cultural interventions aim at a clear “institutional uptake”, at juridical consequences (Yúdice 2003, 78). Performance art has become an important public site for the political struggle for refugee and migrant solidarity and theatres have renewed their political relevancy as public institutions through mobilising issues of refuge and asylum, through collaborating with social movements such as *borderline-europe*, *Kein Mensch ist Illegal* and *My Right is Your Right*, and through intervening in everyday asylum politics

(Kasch 2016, 55). To name two striking institutional examples: in 2014, German theatre director Nicolas Stemann premièred his stage adaptation of Elfriede Jelinek's play *Die Schutzbefohlenen* (*Charges (The Supplicants)*) which engaged refugees to perform onstage. But when the production moved to Amsterdam and Hamburg later that year it exposed the theatre's failure to intervene in everyday asylum politics: it had to substitute the refugees with 'new local refugees' because of their incapacitation due to the *Residenzpflicht*, that is, the obligation of refugees to remain and not leave their specific local area. A different example is the fringe platform *Kampnagel* in Hamburg which has provided spaces for refugees to live and to perform in since 2014; and whose director, Amelie Deuflhard was prosecuted in 2016 for assisting in the defiance of immigration law. The prosecution was initially instigated by local politicians of the then newly formed populist right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)*. Insofar as the cultural institutions in Germany are part of a historically embedded and state-directed funding economy, they shape a specific national heritage and cultural landscape. With their significant turn towards socio-political outreach work, it seems as if they have attempted to overcome and make up for their past and continuing present role as propagators of social exclusion and even more so culturally institutionalised racism (Durrant and Lord 2007; Sharifi and Wilmer 2016).

Therefore, it is not only productive but necessary to ask and interrogate what cultural institutions actually do 'do' and whether their commitment to asylum issues in their programs might be 'non-performative' (Ahmed 2004, 3) – that is whether they perform an image of themselves rather than changing their organisation's 'citizenist', nationalist, racist, gendered, ableist, unequal status quo. I would argue that in opposition to the institutional, that is dramaturgical and 'non-performative' commitment of many German state-funded cultural institutions to issues of migration and asylum in their program during the summer of 2015, that the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* intervention is aware of the problematic of 'non-performative commitment' and follows their stand

on decolonising politics and their commitment to social change through persistent performative action.

In her research on diversity policies in higher education, critical race studies scholar Sara Ahmed defines 'non-performative' with reference to J.L. Austin as those speech acts and documents that make claims about a political stand, about ethics but that do not follow-up and take real socio-political action. She uses the word 'non-performativity' to describe how institutions like universities easily commit to e.g. anti-racism without doing anything that is evident of that commitment. Thus, a commitment that is not followed through by means of an active doing is non-performative. Ahmed contextualises the problem with commitment as follows:

A commitment is often understood as a performative: it is not describing or denoting something; a commitment "commits". But what seemed to be the case was that commitments were makeable *because* they were not doable: it seems you can make a commitment because commitments do not commit institutions to a course of action. Commitments might even become a way of not doing something by appearing to do something. Understanding the role or function of institutional commitments was to understand how institutions do not do things with words, or how institutions use words as a way of not doing things. (2016, 1)

Likewise, Ahmed makes her readership aware that to not do anything, to not follow through a commitment is still an action or can even be a technique. To clarify: commitment to diversity, to safe spaces, to empowering vulnerable groups can easily be adopted by an institution, it can be part of an institutional statement of a municipal theatre, and it can often be read in various theatre project's objectives. However, to adopt policies, to utter words and to make decisional statements

can be done without taking action to change anything real. What is at work in this kind of societal dramaturgy of commitment is non-performativity: a commitment to socio-political change might in turn be only a convenient alibi for stasis, it might only be reproducing a racist status quo ‘by the very appearance of being transform[ative]’ (2). While I am not specifically looking at the rhetoric and mission statements of institutions as Ahmed does, it is nevertheless productive to critically reformulate her activist approach: ‘[i]f institutions do words not to do things, then we have work to do, which often means work to do on these words – work to do with these words’ (3). And in terms of performance art and an aesthetic interested approach this could mean that if theatre institutions do repertoires, if performance art gestures towards the real not to do things, then we have work to do, which often means work to do on these paradigms of theatre’s and performance’s undoing – work to do with the performativity, with the political efficacy of theatre and performance. For this institutional aesthetic lens it is vital to stress how we are not outwith the institutions when aiming to transform the norms governing institutional life, and to stress the high political stakes when facing institutional life that governs literally the thin line between life and death in refugee contexts and asylum cases.

The mission statement of the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* articulates its ethical commitment to stand ‘against poverty and exclusion and for fairer conditions in our community. The goal must always be to value and support the strengths and potential of residents, so they can live in dignity and freedom. The explicit aim is to enter into an open dialogue with other groups in the city’s society to promote fairness and humanity in how we live together.’ (Grandhotel Cosmopolis/Graßmann 2012, 22). What becomes clear is that the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* is not merely an event-aesthetic response to the so-called refugee crisis but its ethical commitment targets larger systematic issues of social exclusion and migratory nexuses. This signals the need for a new performance register which can successfully work against perpetuating the figure of ‘the refugee’ as

emotional commodity and as representative index for the socio-economic merit of such a performative intervention.

The *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* was created to be partly based in the art world and its institutional structures but it is not an art institution in the sense of a traditional artist-run space. Its social art practices refuse to perform an institutional critique that operates immanently within the structures of art, nor do they entirely fit within the ‘Avantgarde’s merging of art with life’ (Lütticken 2015, 5). Because this positioning allows the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* to encompass artists, intellectuals, activists, migrants and refugees and to expand how we recognise expertise beyond project-based modes of production, it functions as a site for public discourse rather than spectacle. In juxtaposition to contemporary art institutions, it politicises the continuity between social work, service industry, culture, and leisure, so that it could be placed within a genealogy of radical pedagogy (Graham, Graziano and Kelly 2016, 34). It comprises educational formats which range from workshops, seminars, and lectures to collaborative de-colonial research projects which seek to unlearn privileges and to deconstruct the power balances of pedagogy itself as well as the division of labour. These social art practices all are durational, and their ways of performing political commitment unfold in time. Thus, the intervention highlights the social realities of performance as durational process rather than performance as single event constrained by a limited temporal framework. As Nicolas Bourriaud states, the ‘role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real’ (2002, 13). Therefore, the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* not only offers an alternative temporal model of performance, but it also highlights the temporal constraints of crisis, political change, institutions, and participatory engagement. To understand performance as a starting point for political engagement through performance’s affective potential is crucial, but I argue that it is equally important to understand performance with reference to Ahmed as a means of actual political

‘doing’.

What impels the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* to endure as political intervention and to face the institutionally complex issue of migration, I would further suggest, is the ‘enactive’ doing of hope which can bring social realities into being by envisioning a desired future (Cox 2012, 120-122). Hope manifests in the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* in the ongoing engendering of an everyday alternative politics that actively rejects the singular notion of ‘the refugee crisis’. This performative intervention refuses to coalesce with the shorthand imposed by political leaders that insists on the definite singularity of ‘the refugee crisis’, on the urgency for a political fix, for a single responsive action. As feminist scholars Rebecca Coleman and Debra Ferreday have argued, hope is central to marginal politics (2010, 313), and as I argue, it is central to the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis*’ socio-political commitment. What is characteristic to this practising of hope by means of committing and to hope generally is that it is both ‘actual and potential’ (313): a desire for a better life, a cognitive, affective orientation towards the future; and at the same time, hope embeds us in the present (Massumi 2002, 211). This placing of hope in the present, arguably, makes it distinct from an anticipated outcome, ‘an expected success’ (211) and it helps us to think through how the temporal enfolding and straightforward linearly conceived ‘refugee crisis’ might be understood differently. It further leads me to question whether hoping for a just society can be understood with regard to the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* not only in terms of the affective, cognitive mode of imagination often sparked by artistic events, but rather that hoping is effective and rooted in present action: that hoping can be understood as a necessary practice for social change which weaves imagination together with stamina, with an embodied commitment to ‘new ways of doing politics’ (Haran 2010, 395).

Ultimately, as a response to the question, what can theatre do about the refugee crisis, the performative intervention *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* extends well beyond the political practices of

time-stamping, documenting and classifying the arrival of refugees; it extends beyond the momentum of politicised crisis in a temporal sense as well as in a political sense. Due to its duration, this intervention can do more, it permeates the boundaries of performance art, legal institutions and social fields. What we see with the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* is how such socially engaged art practices can respond to politically marked ‘urgencies’ in our ever-increasing multicultural societies with a long-term performed commitment that confounds our understanding of political performances and their temporal enfolding. Pragmatically, such interventions dwell and persist at the intersection between performance and institutions, and they create ‘relational work/life models that insist on other ways of doing culture’ (von Osten 2014, 283). Emerging social art practices such as in the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* therefore make us rethink how performance’s political efficacy might reside in its potential to encompass multiple temporal rhythms that refrain from a dramatic beginning, middle and end. To account for the political meaning of performance beyond reference to its immediacy, I would suggest, calls for an institutional focus in the performing arts which can address the slowness of institutional change and which can question the constraints in our scholarly paradigm of performance’s mere gesturing towards the real, towards social change.

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- 1 It is important to stay vigilant about the complexity of what makes a socially engaged art work *meaningful*, and who has the agency to decide its societal, economic or aesthetic merit. My intention here is to produce productive friction about issues of power, instrumentalisation, and efficacy of and in socially engaged art works with and about refugees. See i.e. the refugee-led and advocacy statement of ethical principles for cultural work by RISE (Cañas 2015).
 - 2 For project examples, I am referring to Phipps 2017, 11–16.
 - 3 According to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), 476,649 persons applied for asylum in Germany in 2015, although the number of refugees arriving in Germany is even higher. With the asylum seeker distribution software EASY, the BAMF registered 1,091,894 refugees in Germany at the end of 2015 (BAMF 2017).
 - 4 The name 'Grandhotel Cosmopolis' of the performative intervention entails discourses that prove to be productively problematic for the contextualisation and analysis of it: the 19th century grandhotel and cosmopolitanism. It is troubling that the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* actually works with the self-fashioning image of a grandhotel – the 19th century European concept that (despite bringing together people from different social and political backgrounds and meeting the merits of a private home and public institution) is linked to colonial travellers who sought to create a nobleman's European home abroad. Likewise, the name Cosmopolis referencing

cosmopolitanism is not less problematic when used as a fashionable self-promotion of art centres. It risks to fall short of subverting established cultural hegemonies and ignoring invisible power structures (Gilbert/Lo 2007, 8).

- 5 The German term “Gemeinschaftsunterkunft” means literally translated “community or communal accommodation” as opposed to the English equivalent “collective accommodation centre”. The collective accommodation centres are the most frequent form of contemporary accommodation for asylum seekers during the processing of their motions in Germany.
- 6 In my response to their requirement to engage and facilitate an open encounter that benefited both sides, I asked about their limitations in relation time and financial resources and explained my own. With genuine interest in a collaboration from both sides we agreed that instead of proposing a one-off workshop event or talk to a community which I had never engaged with before, I therefore would aim to continue working with the *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* in an emerging transnational capacity through cultural communication and networking. Because the UNHRC is fully dependent on national states and their (financial) contributions, Karin Geuijen et al have illustrated the importance of connecting social enterprises, public organisations and civil initiatives at the transnational level in order create international communities and constituencies for influencing transnational policy and infrastructural support for refugees (2017, 635).
- 7 At the time of writing the article, The Grand Beauty Salon has started a crowdfunding campaign due to the lack of continued state-funding. The campaign aims to raise money to support a touring of the art project to rural places around the country in 2018, private funders can suggest and support the route of the tour by contacting the team via social media (Frech 2017).
- 8 Christopher Balme has mapped the methodology at work in his investigation into the institutionalisation of theatre in emerging nations post 1945, he aims to make use of the actor-network-theory to investigate the agency of expert networks through e.g. the construction of theatre buildings, establishment of national theatres or theatre academies, the sociological concept of path-dependency can shed light on the institution building agency of government policy papers, money flows etc., as well as prosopography to trace individuals' influence on cultural policies. This research combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies, oral history, archival research and discourse analysis rather than established registers of performance analysis because in this context “theatre needs to be investigated as an institution in the sense of a complex of norms regulating social action; institutions invariably operate on the basis of law and impact on collectivities as much as individuals” (2017, 128). While I am not institutionally affiliated with inear and employ these methodologies, the article at hand responds to this emerging research field by communicating this discursive intervention itself as well as connecting it to questions about sustainable artistic responses to the supposed refugee crisis.
- 9 I want to place emphasis on the notion of lingering instead of enduring which risks to embed the action of resistance in masculinist, racialised and ableist histories, as Hentyle Yapp suggests (2014, 136). With reference to Henri Bergson, she offers ‘*lingering* as a a different temporal relation’ (136), as a more heterogeneous time experience within the ordinary, the everyday, which enables us to demystify performance from the development of thought (beginning) to performed action (end) (145).