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Steirischer Herbst 2021 invests in spectacle, but skips opportunities for radical inclusiveness.

by [Rosalyn DMello](#) | Published on : Oct 01, 2021



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I was determined to visit Thomas Hirschhorn's *Simone Weil Memorial* at Esperantoplatz, Graz, with an open mind. Since I perused the press release of [Steirischer Herbst's 2021](#) edition, titled *The Way Out*, the work had stood out as a potential highlight, given my long-standing fixation with Weil, the philosopher-mystic who has been not only a muse, but the subtext of the sequel to my debut memoir. Yet, on the day of the grand opening at Europaplatz, on September 9, 2021, I found myself overcome with reluctance. I had the opportunity to join the walkthrough facilitated specially for visiting press. At the appointed hour, my will to witness abandoned me. I couldn't shake the premonition that the work would leave me feeling more alienated than accommodating of my passion for Weil.

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The 2021 edition promised a departure, not only from the institutional normativity of white cube spatial contexts and more defiantly into the realm of the public domain, but also from the self-isolatory 'mode of imaginary participation', which, in the curators' words represent a 'huge blind spot of contemporary art, especially when it consists of social, activist engaged, and participatory practices'. Certain urgent questions were proposed as being foundational to the curatorial premise: "Why don't we as curators try to escape our comfort zones and safe spaces, refuse to be among our own all the time—whoever this 'our own' might be—and give others the right to an aesthetic 'otherness', to fiction, theatricality, and perhaps naivete? Why don't we tell more nuanced stories, whose moral is not so evident? Why don't we stop knowing for sure what is good and what is bad?" Despite many of the problematic baseline assumptions these questions purport about who gets to curate and for whom, they are certainly relevant to a European art world, which remains relentlessly white and intent on white-washing discourses made by non-white artists and intellectuals. The somewhat radical nature of their rhetorical performance seemed invitational. After the hyper-virtual 2020 edition, *Paranoia TV*, there was welcome relief in being able to encounter art, once again, and particularly within the intimacy of a festival's opening week.



Mounira Al Solh with her poster, *Things My Neighbour Could Say as She's Watching the Sunset* (2021), Plakat im öffentlichen Raum, Graz

Image: Rosalyn D'Mello

As I bordered the Mur while approaching the city's centre, from the moving taxi I glimpsed a naked brown female body performing a headstand on a blue carpet. Over it was inscribed text I was unable to read while in a state of movement. Nonetheless, it excited me to see an embodied reflection of brown subjectivity. Just the fact that the body seemed identifiably non-white felt reassuring. Later, I would read the English text of the poster that I learned was designed by Mounira Al Solh, titled *Things My Neighbour Could Say as She's Watching the Sunset*, one among a series of five posters commissioned by Steirischer Herbst. It included an avalanche of negative affirmations, some of the most piquant being; 'I Am Not Straight'; 'I Am Not a Pipe'; 'I Am Not Not Religious'; 'I Am Not Not Arab'; 'I Am Not White'; 'I Am Not a Woman I Am Not a

Man'; 'I am Not An Exile' and finally, 'I Am Not We'; followed by the conclusive, 'We Are Not We'. I was fortunate to meet Al Solh on the morning of the opening during the first press walkthrough and had the opportunity to photograph her being photographed in front of her poster. Over the next few days her work would assume grander dimensions because of how it would represent the marginalised brown body, how its headstand position would have to extend its metaphorical dimensions to accommodate its loneliness within the larger programming of the festival, which, despite its best intentions, remained, to the visiting critic of colour, doggedly white.



The setting for Tino Sehgal's piece *Sunrise till Sunset*

Image: © Stadt Graz / Fischer; Courtesy of Steirischer Herbst

I was literally and figuratively besieged by a more visceral manifestation of whiteness while in the throes of meeting the acquaintance of a visiting Black critic, Eléonore Bassop. As the two of us—both prominently among the so few-almost-negligible female critics of colour in the entire entourage—waited, along with the rest of the group, for Tino Sehgal's *Sunrise till Sunset* at Augarten to unfold, we began to bond over our shared passion for intersectional feminism and our personal experiences with racism within European institutions. Bassop, of Cameroonian origin and based in [Paris](#), publishes regularly with the Afro-feminist magazine, *Diva*, and has a committed engagement with the African diaspora. As the two of us settled deeper into our intersectional feminist glow, at least 30 performers, almost all white, began to move, dance, hum, gyrate, quack, and chant around us. I would learn later that this situation marked Sehgal's first foray into the public realm, and would be marked, perhaps, by complexities he hadn't necessarily foreseen, like the issue of consent. Within the security of the white cube, visitors indirectly assented to participating in his choreography. Their informed presence confirmed their expectation to collaborate. However, in the open air, and particularly within a site that variably hosted possibilities for either leisure or exercise, performers simply went up to people and narrated a self-scripted, non-workshopped personal story.

Bassop and I were constantly in the way and had to keep moving our bodies in order to accommodate the performers. I wished the performance could have elegantly circled around us, setting the stage for our blossoming intimacy. We persisted to relate to each other despite the situation, our bodies subconsciously and subversively countering the swelling tide of whiteness around which I certainly felt cornered. When the torrent subsided, one white male performer came towards us and began to recount an incident in which he was walking in [Berlin's](#) Tempelhofer Feld park and found himself drawn by eerie sounds that punctuated the cold winter air. Their source, he realised, was an opera singer who was practising their vocal range. He experienced the delight of being the unintended recipient of the notes. As I listened to him share, I reflected on how the degree of intention shapes not only what is registered as art but also who gets considered as its audience. I remembered the alienation of studying English literature and being compelled to compose elegies to the legacies of white male geniuses, whose masterpieces we were privileged, as brown women, to be able to access. To succeed as writers, to be published and to be seen we had to internalise their aesthetics, learn to think like them, write like them, or else suffer the elusiveness of marginality. Not all of us had the emotional resources to inhabit the margins and transform it into a site of power and resistance. Those of us who did, world-over, have been told time and again by the custodians of institutional power, including white feminists, that we had to be patient and wait our turn, wait until the white masters and mistresses felt less threatened by what we had to say so that they could

either offer us the platform with which to speak or appropriate our voice within their prevailing discourses, tokenism in the guise of diversity.



The various artist-designed posters commissioned by Steirischer Herbst
 Image: Rosalyn D'Mello

The next morning I made my way to Forum Stadtpark to be in the audience of a panel discussion titled *Competing with Public Space*, which brought together Sehgal, along with Al Solh and Estonian artist Flo Kasearu (whose quirkily orchestrated performance, *Disorder Patrol* used beautiful black horses ridden by women in absurdly oversized hats to draw satirical attention to the nature of surveillance in public parks in Graz) in conversation with Steirischer Herbst's chief curator, Ekaterina Degot and her co-curator, Christoph Platz. En route, between the fountain and the Forum, I saw a band of white performers and instantly recognised them as being among Sehgal's troupe, which is possibly why I didn't feel so alarmed when one of them, a white male who seemed around my age, came up to me and, without explicitly asking if I wanted to listen to him, proceeded to tell me a story from his childhood, about his efforts to protect his mother and siblings from a physically abusive father by calling the police, to little avail. He recounted that the most humiliating part of it was having to see his neighbour the next day at school. He mentioned that the source of his embarrassment was that things like these were not meant to happen to white, upper middle-class families, to people like him, but to others. I admired the candidness of his revelation, even as I resented the triggering nature of his story. Considering I had been, at the time, in the midst of the final part of Ocean Vuong's 2019 epistolary novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* and, consequently, dealing with my own traumas in relation to abuse, I wasn't sure what my presumed role as non-voluntary confessional was meant to signify. Was I meant to absolve him of his white guilt and shame? Was this non-consensual encounter a form of sidestepping therapy? We left each other teary eyed but the heaviness of his story already got entangled in my bloodstream. We had been contaminated by each other's trauma without necessarily processing how we had both been victims of racist patriarchy. Was I, invariably, made to serve as a safe space for him? Did this make the park an unsafe space for me?





Uriel Barthélemy mit Sophie Bernado und Salomon Baneck-Asaro, *Navigating the Ruins of the Old World*, Performance

Image: Mathias Völzke, Courtesy of Steirischer Herbst

Degot prefaced the discussion with her reflections on how the attention economy manifests within the public space, and how visibility demands a certain proportion of bodily entities (Degot recounted how Sehgal had, at the very onset, asked for at least 30 performers for his first ‘experiment’ in public in order to have maximal impact). But at no point was the question ever quite raised about whose attention was being solicited, and whether there were any ethical considerations that needed to be made in eliciting someone’s attention. During the discussion, Al Solh’s poster was reduced, intellectually, to the fact of her nakedness, and almost too much was made of how it managed to pass muster with the public authorities responsible for offering the festival precious eye-ball space at subsidised costs. The second panel discussion, held a few hours later, titled *New Ecology of Exhibition-Making* had an impressively all-white cast, with Matteo Lucchetti, Aneta Rostkowska, Sabina Sabolović, member of the curatorial collective, What, How & for Whom (WHW)—both of whom, I, doubtless, admire—in conversation with Degot and her co-curator, David Riff. When I asked a question on how each of them was working to dismantle the whiteness of the white cube, what structural changes they were instituting in order to be more radically inclusive I got a range of well-intentioned but unsatisfying answers.

In a nutshell, black, indigenous and people of colour would have to wait their turn because it would obviously ‘take time’. The way out, which is, also, we were told, the way in, was still not intentioned for us, even though many of the core ideas upon which white curators would over continue to premise their radicality, have their origin in the wisdom, intelligence, and subversions of BIPOC intellectuals and theorists. For instance, during the course of the second panel, the notion of care and its economy was referred to through the American anthropologist, David Graeber, which struck me as odd, considering so much of the discourse on care was initiated by Black feminists like Audre Lorde. Much of the conversation was coded with words like ‘socially engaged projects’, ‘diversifying’, and what it meant for institutions to venture outside of their comfort zones (safe spaces) in order to make themselves relevant while also critiquing the practice of measuring impact through footfalls. While, on the one hand, the dismissal of visitation numbers by curators intensifies ideas surrounding the premise and purpose of art, on the other, it also says something about the inability of art institutions to reach out and include those who have been not just historically excluded from the enterprise of art making, but whose lives and practices have, instead, been vitrified and othered for the gazes of white audiences (think here of human zoos or the colonial acquisitions of objects from colonised territories, which the white museum world continues to profit from).



Though the festival attempted radicality through its embrace of the outdoor, some of



Hiwa K *Cooking with Mama*, Performance mit Rowena Wogrolly

Image: Clara Wildberger, Courtesy of Steirischer Herbst

the highlights, like Sehgal's 'situation', or Hirschhorn's memorial felt like variations on already explored ideas, so 'safe', conceptually, it seemed suggestive of complacency. **The two outdoor performances that impressed me most were *Navigating the Ruins of the Old World*, which had a more diverse cast than any other work and was a gorgeously synchronised, evocative sound and movement symphony of sorts, and *the operatic satire, *Conversations: I don't yet know that word ... yet*, conceived by Dejan Kaludjerović, based on the subjectivities of children, performed by four adults, which turned the gaze upon the white audience as it spoke of rising xenophobia, among other fragilities.*** The one intervention I appreciated and loved most was conceived by Hiwa K, called *Cooking with Mama*, in which the artist invited immigrants to cook a meal while video-calling a relative, sharing a glimpse of their intimate lives with audiences before feeding them the cooked meal.



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Simone Weil Memorial*, Installation

Image: Mathias Völzke, Courtesy of Steirischer Herbst

A wonderful artist friend reassured me of the prescient critical undertones in Hirschhorn's practice, how politically minded he has been about his choice of subjects and material, and yet, I was unable to shake off my disappointment when I finally walked along Annenstraße to arrive at his memorial for Weil. As I moved further towards Esperantoplatz I made eye contact with so many immigrants, like me, who seemed to inhabit the street, who shopped in the 'oriental' shops and communed with each other, presenting an important counter to the historical centre, which was, undeniably Hirschhorn's intention in choosing his location. While his site location was commendable, I was not so impressed by his decision to repurpose the same aesthetic he had evolved for some of his other memorials. It seemed as if he had superimposed it upon this new memorial installation for Weil, soliciting the support of a local caretaker to keep replacing the roses and performing other acts of care and maintenance. For someone like me who has had no prior

confrontation with Hirschhorn's practice, the deliberate use of a kitsch aesthetic which, apparently, is a feature of spontaneous memorials, undercut the urgency that is supposed to mark such **installations**.

The work felt overwrought with intention, so obsessed with its aesthetic, it seemed to render invisible the life it was designed to memorialise. As a non-white Third World feminist art critic the memorial seemed interchangeable rather than unique. Too much attention was paid to mise-en-scene details, not enough to the feminist practice of citation which is primarily responsible for keeping alive Weil's memory, allowing not only for her work to be in circulation, but for the generation of fresh contexts within which to read her philosophy. The memorial invisibilises, therefore inevitably negating and erasing, the labour of feminist writers like Chris Kraus, whose 'failed' 1996 film, *Gravity & Grace* was one among a legacy of memorials to Weil that kept her alive for my generation of feminists. It bothered me that Hirschhorn seemed to claim Weil when she was always ours, in a certain way. It was feminists who reclaimed her from the tangle of misogynist male intellectuals who dismissed her as an anorexic anarchist.

My critique, not only of Hirschhorn but also of Steirischer Herbst, is probably invalid because it comes from too deep a space of emotion, another domain of subjectivity historically kept outside of the purview of art criticism, now being reconsidered under the rubric of Affect Theory, which, soon enough will get absorbed by white curatorial discourse, erasing the momentous contributions of women like Lorde (*The Uses of Anger; The Uses of the Erotic*), Gloria Anzaldúa, and anthologies like *This Bridge Called My Back*. Sometimes I envy the neutrality of white male and cisgender male artists, their ability to be able to flit between preoccupations, to land, unfettered, on new interests without having to necessarily wrestle with the fact of their privilege. I envy, similarly, the unaccounted privilege of white curators, especially female, who seek to establish solidarity with marginalised voices on the basis of their gender but who do not feel compelled to be intersectional, to either seek out or listen to voices like mine. For intersectionality is the beginning of radical inclusivity. It is, as far as I know, the only way out.

Steirischer Herbst 2021 is on view till October 10, 2021.

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