



Perform, Citizen! On the Resource of Visibility in Performative Practice Between Invitation and Imperative

Maike Gunsilius

‘I did not choose this theatre course. I do not want to go on stage’. Leyla, a 13-year-old student with whom I was working in my artistic research project *School of Girls I*, said this when we were preparing a public presentation of our research about what it means to be a female citizen—in the sense of being an active member—of our postmigrant¹ society. I was disappointed, irritated, disempowered. Actually, my project was *about* inviting the 12 co-researching girls to take the stage, so becoming *visible* and *audible* as citizens in public. I noticed that I presupposed performing on stage would be a desirable moment of agency and would form an emancipatory approach to my research setup. However, Leyla’s statement made me rethink the relation between visibility, performance, agency and citizenship.

Consequently, this chapter asks: what exactly do we offer by inviting young citizens to become part of a performative research project? Who and what exactly has to become visible on stage, and in what way, to provide an experience of self-efficacy and to create agency, or maybe even

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produce citizenship? The essay looks first at the theoretical relation between visibility,² performance, agency and citizenship in general and then goes on to question the promise of visibility in the context of cultural education projects. The text finally relates these two areas of investigation and asks how the *resource of visibility* can be used in performative practice to generate agency—for both children and adults.

CITIZENS BECOME APPARENT AND PERFORM

Whenever we talk about citizenship being more than just a national status connected with civil rights and duties, we talk about it as a question of social rights and participation (Marshall 1950). Following Allman and Beaty, citizenship describes the idea of a subject position that articulates itself by ‘a set of learned and constantly reproduced practices and conducts, as well as expectations and claims’ (see Allman and Beaty 2002; Peters 2016). Agency as a condition of such an articulation can be defined here as the capacity to choose how to act within a social structure. Articulations and ‘acts’ (Isin 2008) of citizenship—including claims and fights for it—are constitutively connected to the public sphere (Arendt 1998; Butler 2004, 2011; Mackert 2006; Isin 2008; Schaffer 2008; Holston 2009; Spivak and Butler 2011; Hess and Lebuhn 2014). However, the relation between citizenship and public visibility/audibility is seen ambivalently within the citizenship debate. In Hannah Arendt’s notion, human acting—strongly connected to speaking—is generally performed in front of the eyes of others, of a public. More than that, identity, for her, is constitutively performative: the self ‘appears’ visible in the world, speaking and acting.

With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. (Arendt 1998, p. 176)

Intersubjective acting as the moment of becoming visible and audible in front of each other creates a ‘space of appearance’ (Arendt 1998, p. 199), it constitutes the citizens’ stage—*the public*. Power and freedom for Arendt emerge when people act and create something together. The efficacy of this acting lies in its execution, in its performance itself (see Arendt 1998, pp. 198–9). The hesitant reception of Arendt, and her concept of *acting in public* within feminist and postcolonial theory,

results from the critique of her distinction between public and private that traces back to the model of the Greek polis, without questioning the exclusion of women and others from this public (Benhabib 1998; Spivak and Butler 2011). Focussing on this exclusion from *appearing* and *performing* on the world's stage, Judith Butler brings in the term 'intelligibility', explaining that norms provide a structure in which an emerging subject position is recognized and recognizable. But, if a human way of living is foreclosed by repressive social norms, this life is excluded from visibility, from intelligibility, from agency as the possibility to 'matter' (Butler 2004, 2011). Postcolonial theory has identified the lack of access of marginalized groups—especially women to rights and to means of social, cultural and political participation—as a missing possibility to be seen and heard in public. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, as well as (her readers) Nikita Dhawan and María do Mar Castro Varela, insistently point out that her notion of 'the subaltern' (Spivak 2011) is not to be understood as an identity, but rather, it is asking to move focus from the capacity of the marginalized subject (or group) to the mechanisms of and the power structures behind his or her marginalization—to make active exclusion *visible*.

The discussion about visibility, regimes of visibility and representation shifted from affirmative claims for visibility, raised by antiracist and feminist contexts in the 1980s and 1990s, to the critique of different forms of representing 'the other' as the moment of creating 'the other' (Steyerl 2002; Rogoff 2005; Spivak 2011; Schaffer 2008; Varela and Dhawan 2015), and to the claim for the 'right for opacity' (Glissant and Wing 1997). The concept of 'becoming imperceptible' (Deleuze and Guattari 2002), has been developed further on to the 'imperceptible politics' by Vassilis Tsianos, Dimitris Papadopoulos and Niamh Stephenson (Papadopoulos et al. 2008). In answer to increasing debates about migration movements and illegal migration, here, the authors radically question the concept of the political subject. Visibility, as a resource of recognition, undergoes change within the neoliberal logic of today's urban and national life; a society that values the acting of people in all areas of life in terms of efficiency and productiveness. The right, or the chance, to become visible, to be recognized and to perform citizenship, has turned into an imperative: *Be* citizen! Citizens often see themselves called upon to become *visible*, to perform as active and responsible members of society, as Nikolas Rose has pointed out:

This transformation from citizenship as possession to citizenship as capacity is embodied in the image of the active entrepreneurial citizen who seeks to maximize his or her lifestyle through acts of choice, links not so much into a homogeneous social field as into overlapping but incommensurate communities of allegiance and moral obligation. (Rose 2000, p. 99)

Migrants, especially, find themselves under obligation to show their efforts; for example, to fulfil integration agreements and other conducts, to ‘earn’ citizenship—as a legal status as well as a possibility of social and cultural participation (see Rose 2000, p. 98). If the *visibility* of a citizen is considered as her or his social inclusion and participation, claims for imperceptibility can be better understood ‘as “not being included like this, in that way and under these conditions”’ (Schaffer cited after Lorenz et al. 2012, p. 286); as a pushback of a hegemonic power relation. Claims and fights for visibility, as well as its rejection, question and negotiate spaces, ways and conditions of participation and power relations. Agency has to include a possibility to choose a position towards *visibility* and *performance*, either to use this resource for public articulation and appearance, or else to reject a performative imperative through strategies of invisibility, disappearance and resistance.

If we look at artistic practice, the ambivalence of *visibility* and *audibility* as a resource of agency on the one hand, and as a regime of representation on the other hand, remains widely discussed in different artistic fields. Artistic strategies, like ‘giving a face’ and ‘lending a voice’ to marginalized positions from an artist’s privileged perspective, are questioned (Schaffer 2008; Steyerl 2008; Lorenz et al. 2012). With regard to performative and theatrical works with children in the context of cultural education, this discussion is in its early stages. *Visibility*, most of the time, is created affirmatively in these projects.

THE PROMISE OF CULTURAL EDUCATION: BECOME VISIBLE AND PARTICIPATE!

Cultural education holds a promise, a promise for agency and, following this, even for citizenship. In the German context, *cultural education* is strongly connected to eighteenth-century concepts around aesthetic experiences shaping the human character (The term *aesthetic education* is used further on.). Since Friedrich Schiller’s *Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Schiller 2000), art and aesthetic processes are seen as means to empower, or maybe even generate, the free civic subject. On the basis of

this promise, many performative projects in the context of aesthetic education—especially projects in which art and educational institutions, like theatres and schools, cooperate—are about creating ‘cultural, social and political participation by enabling children to speak and to be seen in public by their brought in or newly developed artistic forms of expression’³ (Sting 2014, p. 44). Curricula and funding guidelines are built on the promise: performance = public visibility = participation, for young citizens of our postmigrant society.⁴ Particularly in times of bigger social change—like the increase of migration, diversity, and social segregation—in times when citizenship is transforming radically, aesthetic education seems a promising tool for solving complex questions of citizenship such as ‘how can living together work? How can we organize it justly?’

Principally, aesthetic education projects focussing on disadvantaged or migrant (or both) children and teenagers, often reproduce the dubious construction of deficient young citizens that have to be motivated by the arts to work hard, to make the ‘bodily experience of music, dancing or acting’ that finally leads to the fulfilling ‘success of the collective performance’ in a (maybe even hegemonically structured) public space—for example, in a theatre (see Mörsch 2011, p. 12, translation by author). The participants quite often are *made visible*, are represented (on purpose or not) as formerly deficient, but now happily empowered subjects who finally learned some soft skills on their way to becoming active, participating, performing citizens. To appear, to speak and to act on stage means to be seen and heard in public, to receive attention and potentially appreciation. But ‘[...] is someone already self-effective only because he or she succeeds in drawing the attention of the others on him or herself? Or does the wish for attention have to stand in for other participatory needs and desires?’ Sibylle Peters asks (Peters 2012, p. 9; translation by author). In other words, if *visibility* within a compulsory school project is to provide participation, it has to be used for first creating the experience of self-efficacy within a social or cultural question, or a process in which one wants to involve oneself—this applies to children as well as to adults. Of course, *acting* on a theatre stage does not have the same social efficacy as *acting* in the frame of ‘reality’; it will not change the world’s structures immediately, or on its own. However, art has the possibility to build up temporary ‘zones’ of ‘acting on trial’ (Peters 2012; Plischke 2016, translation by author) in which children and adults are able to claim agency, to build up and enact alternative social orders—and to make this *visible* in public. Sometimes, this ‘acting on trial’ even goes beyond the frame of art and extends into the social arena.

Childhood, as a protected space, constructs children as citizens in becoming—with temporarily limited rights and duties—who at the same time are affected by social decisions quite directly. Their demands for social or cultural participation bring up questions of power and power relations (Deck 2014). How are these articulated in theatrical and performative projects with children and teenagers? In what way is *visibility* used here so far, and how else could we use it, knowing about the ambivalence of this resource?

BIOGRAPHIC THEATRE AND THE VISIBILITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The concept of biographic theatre has become a common strategy used in order to connect to complex, and perhaps abstract, topics and questions, in theatrical works with non-professionals and children. What is made visible here, the young individual and their biographical experiences and stories—from past, present and future associated with certain social, cultural or political questions—are told on stage to give a narrative quality to their knowledge, perspective or appropriation of the world. Ingrid Hentschel has pointed out that biographic theatre has to transform authentic material into a play between self and world without becoming a theatre of illusion, but also without reproducing the publishing of privacy as found in social media. The theatre stage and the assembly of the presentation enables this play with difference by playing with the contrast of showing and not showing⁵ (see Hentschel 2016, pp. 258–62). Regardless, in a setup like this, typically, children perform and speak on stage and parents and teachers are sitting in the dark watching, while the initiating artist is proudly standing behind the lighting desk. An intergenerational public dialogue about questions of power and participation within this constellation is limited, inevitably a children's public in which adults *make* and children *become* visible implies a pedagogic framing and reproduces a distinct power relation.

VISIBILITY, POWER RELATIONS AND POSTMIGRANT SOCIETY

Researching on children's agency as citizens within the structure of state schools in Germany today means to collaborate with the generation in which the majority situation between people with and those without a

migrant background is tipping within German society. Today, nearly 50 per cent of the students have a so-called migrant background,⁶ whereas 90 per cent of their teachers,⁷ and 75 per cent of theatre-makers working with them, do not (Ahrens 2009, p. 25). Educational and cultural institutions have been identified as powerful spaces that create difference and exclusion (Sharifi 2011, 2014; Mecheril 2014; Castro Varela and Mecheril 2016). Given this situation, art projects within these structures inevitably are part of, and reproduce, their exclusive logic. Questions of participation and power arising within these projects are crucial issues to be negotiated in a postmigrant society. For example, who allows whom to speak about what, and to become visible in what way here? What happens if somebody does not want to be seen? What if he or she does not want to take part? Is it possible for students not to be made visible, or necessarily be empowered the way I—as the initiating artist—advocate or facilitate?

VISIBILITY AS A DRAMATURGIC JUNCTION

Using the resource of *visibility* for creating agency for children *and* for adults within performative practice means to look at it as a dramaturgic junction for negotiating relations, structures and conditions of *acting* and participating as citizens. Instead of adults solely administrating this resource, children should also be in control and fully able to decide if and how to use the resource. In effect, this addresses not only the chances and limits of *becoming visible* as individuals on stage, but also the strategies of *making* something or someone *visible*. For example, to make the structures and relations that frame encounters between children *and* adults visible, including power relations like teacher-student, parent-child, artist-participant. Or to make other social mechanisms and conditions of participation and exclusion visible. Or to make the co-acting of children and adults visible.⁸ Further, we should think about strategies of using *visibility* for ‘playing by the rules of the game’ (Sternfeld 2013). What if we used the theatre stage—the space of showing and making things public—to play with the difference of showing and not showing? If we used it as a space for hiding, for not appearing, or for disappearing? What would that ask of the audience and of other participants in aesthetic education processes—like teachers, artists, parents? And how would that change our concept of (aesthetic) education?

A play like this could offer possibilities for collaborative *acting* in a self-effective way—not despite, but precisely because, it is irritating previously accepted common orders.

To look at three examples:

Example I: Public Incantation (Turbo Pascal) – Hiding and Looking Back

The first example is a work produced by the performance collective Turbo Pascal. The two artists, Plischke and Oberhäusser, were working with students of the Hector-Peterson-Gesamtschule⁹ (most of whom have migrant backgrounds), on the project *Public Incantation* (*‘Publikumsbeschwörung’*).¹⁰ On stage, there is a white box. Students are inside the box, not visible to the audience. They glimpse out through a venetian blind, watching and commenting on the audience (Fig. 1).

Later on, they step outside the box and invoke the audience by mirroring the assumed projections of the audience regarding them. The students call the audience ‘the poor, the deficient, the victims, the lost, the being rescued persons, the anti-socials’. The artists also take stage and reveal their own projections before the students in front of them and are subsequently interrogated by them. Children and adults are questioning one another’s positions.



Fig. 1 *Public Incantation*, Turbo Pascal 2011, © Alexei Fittgen

Example II: The Godfathers (Turbo Pascal) – Showing Relations in Constructing and Deconstructing Difference and Similarity

In another school project, the artists met 17-year-old Alper. Following comments quoting Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* in relation to each other's bossy behaviour that arose in certain working situations, Alper and the male artist Frank agreed to work together on a project focussed around that film. The two male actors—17 and 37 years old—share and confront their different views of, and associations to, different figures within the film and thereby present biographically inspired stories about manhood and power. Both of them build up (fictional) self-images; but in the next moment, the other one is challenging this image, by proposing his own view and ascriptions (Fig. 2).

Surprisingly, in their face-to-face-encounter on stage, these two men—both in their appearance as well as in some of their intentions—seem quite similar, sometimes even indistinguishable from each other. Different images of each other, alternative perspectives on their relationship, are constructed and deconstructed—teacher-student, father-son, German-Turk, competitor-friend. They continuously interchange the roles they represent for one another. All these constellations become visible and negotiable.



Fig. 2 *The Godfathers*, Turbo Pascal 2015, © Milan Benak

Example III: School of Girls I (Maike Gunsilius) – Resisting Performance

With this final example, I return to Leyla, the girl who did not want to perform on stage during my artistic research project about female citizenship, with students from Hamburg Veddel. Having observed that women and girls in the neighbourhood of Hamburg Veddel are underrepresented in public forms of civic or political practice, I started an art-based research project with 13 year-old girls from this neighbourhood (students of the local school). We started looking into how their everyday practices influence their surroundings, their social life and whether and how these practices produce citizenship. We developed tutorials about these practices to make the girls’—maybe implicit—knowledge explicit: to make it *visible*. I had thought about the possibility that the girls’ practices of citizenship might be not recognized, and perhaps might not be presentable as such. However, I was sure that their visibility on stage in public would let them experience attention and appreciation as active citizens who would show us—the adults—what to learn from them. Leyla, and her friend Sietara from Veddel, resisted this setup when they said about the project: ‘It is our school!’ ‘I just want to do *nothing* here, just chill’ (Sietara). ‘I do not want to perform on stage’ (Leyla).

What can be learned from this opposition to performing within an art-based research framework?

- The opposition against a pedagogically framed power relation within an intergenerational encounter like this should be read as a claim for agency.
- A setup that offers enough space for agency to the participating children first of all includes the choice of whether to take part or not. It also provides different possibilities for *performing* and *appearing* in public. If it fails to do so, a well-meant invitation quickly turns into an imperative to ‘perform’ in a double sense: to show one’s effort and achievement.
- Convinced that it is the responsibility of the initiating artist to build a clear and strong art-based research setup, this should still stay flexible enough to allow for unexpected results, or even opposition, and view this as a chance to rethink and adjust the framework.

Leyla’s statement, expressing her wish not to perform on stage, changed the presentation of the project quite radically from the one I had planned. After welcoming our audience, the girls walked off the stage, whereby I



Fig. 3 *School of Girls I*, Maike Gunsilius 2016, © Margaux Weiss

was left there alone. I was the one to present our research about citizenship, while the girls watched off-stage and commented on it with short remarks and videos. I put on my mother's old Norwegian pullover and displayed some posters bearing slogans from protest movements in the 1980s. The girl's opposition, their 'wanna-do-nothing', was mirrored by biographical images of my childhood and stories about my own socialization as an active, or even activist, citizen in which opposition and resistance were central strategies for me to appropriate spaces of action. In a monologue, I started a speech towards the girls about rights and duties of the performing citizen that became more and more paradoxical; this finally revealed my invitation to perform as active citizens within the *School of Girls I* as being an imperative (Fig. 3).

What became visible:

- The clash of interests, motivations and socializations of the different co-researchers, concerning questions of everyday practices, regarding acting in public and citizenship.

- The power structures within our encounter: a well-meaning white, middle-class theatre-maker doing research *with* students of a socially disadvantaged neighbourhood, 95 per cent of whom have a so-called migrant background—and at the same time doing research *on* them.
- The unfulfilled promise of *visibility as agency* being rejected and turned around; the girls were in return researching on *me* in a way that made my agency as a theatre-maker implode.

On the topic of agency for children and adults, achieved through collaboration and negotiation, we tried to ‘do nothing’, to ‘destroy something’, we tried to appear on and to disappear from stage. We confronted our different expectations and approaches concerning the *School of Girls I*, concerning ambivalent wishes and fears of becoming visible, of *performing* in public as citizens. We made our positions visible in a way that was irritating.

WHO IS PERFORMING? HOW TO PLAY WITH THE VISIBILITY OF A SOCIAL CONSTELLATION ON STAGE

In these examples, *visibility* is used for constructing and deconstructing relations between adults and children *on* stage, as well as between on- and off-stage. Visibility is used to negotiate structures, mechanisms and conditions of our ideas and possibilities to participate, to act as citizens.

I tried to demonstrate ways of using the resource of *visibility* within performative practice that go beyond the imperative of having to perform oneself, and thereby to fulfil the paradoxical order for self-empowerment. Returning to the initial question: What do we offer when we invite children and young people to take part in a performative research project? I would suggest thinking of this collaborative research process and its public presentation as a possibility of *co-acting*—for children *and* for adults. Agency, as the capacity to choose how to act (on stage), means to use the resource of visibility not only for *becoming*, but also for *making* visible. This has to encompass letting *all* participants of cultural education processes, including children, define what is seen as worthy to be made visible and how. It might also include bringing *all* participants, also adults, with their different or similar perspectives, on to the stage to create collective forms of agency. It might also incorporate claims to refusal, to denial; a resistance of citizens against a performative imperative by using the stage for hiding, for looking back, for disappearing, for irritating each other.

NOTES

1. The term ‘postmigrant’, originally deriving from American cultural and literature studies, was brought into the German discussion by S̄mhermin Langhoff, director of the *Maxim Gorki Theater* in Berlin. The prefix ‘post’ does not name an end of migration, but marks cultural and social transformation and negotiation processes that occur after migration has become characteristic for (German) society as a whole (Foroutan et al. 2014; Widmann 2014).
2. Talking about *visibility* in this text usually means audibility as well. The visual is connected to the audible appearance of citizens here.
3. For example, Wolfgang Sting describes a cooperation between schools and artists by TUSCH-projects in Hamburg, See also <http://www.tusch-hamburg.de/TUSCH/index.php>
4. Compare funding guidelines of German programmes like, for example, ‘Kultur Macht Stark’: <https://www.bmbf.de/de/kultur-macht-stark-buendnisse-fuer-bildung-958.html>; ‘Kultur Bewegt’: <http://www.hamburg.de/kulturbehoerde/kultur-bewegt/>; and so on.
5. Although Norma Köhler points out that ‘biographying’ in theatre is nothing that happens in just one direction, that the audience members also involve themselves in what is shown and told on stage with their own biographical perspectives—*on* stage it is the biographies of children that are told and performed *on* stage (Köhler 2015)—that become visible and audible in public.
6. 44.9 per cent of the pupils in Hamburg overall have a so-called migrant background; in the Hamburg neighbourhood of Veddel, it is 95 per cent (Behörde für Schule und Berufsbildung Hamburg 2016).
7. See, Hamburger Netzwerk Lehrkräfte mit Migrationshintergrund: <http://www.wegweiser-kommune.de/projekte/kommunal/hamburg/>, date accessed 13 December 2017.
8. Compare examples such as the works: *Haircuts by Children*, *Eat the Street*, and so on, by Mammalian Diving Reflex, <http://mammalian.ca/projects/>, or projects of the Forschungstheater / Theatre of Research, like *Die Kinderbank* or *Playing Up* <http://www.fundus-theater.de/forschungstheater/>
9. A high school in Berlin Kreuzberg.
10. The title refers to Peter Handtke’s play *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (‘Offending the Audience’) (1966), in which the idea of theatrical representation is rejected: the audience’s expectations and thoughts are analysed, the audience is watched back from stage.

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