

# Towards the Politics of Perception: A Turn in the Understanding of the Politicality of Performing Arts

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This article reveals the turn in the understanding of the politicality of performing arts and finds that, in the last two decades, displaying politicality has shifted from the modes of representation to the forms of perception. Formerly, the politicality of theatrical events was expressed primarily from the point of view of the politics of representation, that is, the question how creators staged a political gesture onstage. With the politics of perception, the audience and its role in (co-)creating the performed world become the centre of interest. The notion of the “politics of perception” is based on the findings of Erika Fischer-Lichte, which emphasise that watching is creative work. The definition of this notion is also aided by Hans-Thies Lehmann, whose starting point originates from the position of theatre in the mediatised world: the politics of perception does not just include the perceptive activity, in the process of which the spectators (co-)create the meaning of the action onstage, but also includes the cooperation between the spectators and actors in the very processes of representation that produce a theatrical event. Thus, the spectators are presented the link between perception and action, which, in the mediatised world, is interrupted or blurred.

The turn towards the politics of perception, which allows the audience to have an aesthetic, political and ethical experience, is highlighted in the context of the history of addressing audiences in 20<sup>th</sup>-century theatre. This history is presented within Slovenian performing arts, where including audiences into the stage action has been present continuously since the 1960s. In the 1980s and 1990s, the investigation of the relationships between the participants of a theatrical event was particularly intense. This investigation was an expression of a tendency to redefine the traditional communication model in theatre and to search for new concepts of theatre in dialogue with other arts and media, particularly visual and new media arts, performance art, and dance. Marked by a highly polemicised rejection of traditional drama theatre, this process was linked to the expansion of theatre into the wider conceptual field of performing arts.

As a harbinger of the shift from the politics of representation to the politics of perception, particularly exposed is the installation for a single spectator *Camillo – Memo 4.0: The Cabinet of Memories*, directed in 1998 by Emil Hrvatin. Since then, the privileged space of knowledge in the most cutting edge participatory practices in Slovenian performing arts is no longer the stage, but the spectator as the sum of emotional, intellectual, physical and intuitive abilities. The common characteristic of these practices is that they offer the spectators an insight into the configuration of perception, the link between perception and action, and allow the spectators to become aware of their own submission to the politics of perception as well as their own investment into co-creating the politics of representation. The performance *25.671*, directed by Oliver Frjić and produced by the Prešeren Theatre Kranj (2013), is analysed as a representative case for such experience. The performance reconstructs the erasure of 25,671 persons from the register of permanent residents of the Republic of Slovenia in 1992 (following the new country's establishment); an administrative order that violated these persons' basic human rights. This devised theatre work, at the intersection of documentary theatre and political activism, calls on the audience members to consider their own share of responsibility in the act of erasure. This question is reflected upon in the article with the help of Hannah Arendt's thoughts on guilt, personal and collective political responsibility. The article also includes an analysis of the performed aesthetic, political and ethical act, thus drawing attention to the director's provocative gestures that accompany the appeal to expressing solidarity with the erased. The theatre that bets on the politics of perception offers to its audience a first-class aesthetic, political and ethical experience, and at the same time steers towards responsible action – not just within the world onstage, but also in the spaces of everyday life.