PUBLIC ART AS SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE. RE-IMAGINING AND RE-WRITING URBAN POLICY

ABSTRACT _____ The contribution develops the understanding of public art as "social infrastructure" (Klinenberg 2018) and proposes using this perspective as a basis for art funding and associated urban policy. To examine the role urban policy attributes to public art in shaping public space as a place for socio-political discourse, the tax-based public art funding agency Public Art Vienna is used as an illustrative case study. Within the policy analysis of its funding guidelines, "infrastructural violence" (Rodgers / O'Neill 2012) and the feminist concept "care" (Fisher / Tronto 1990) are used as critical lenses to identify hegemonic notions in the understanding of public space. This analysis is informed by feminist infrastructure critique, spatial theory, and an interview conducted with the managing director of Public Art Vienna. To demonstrate that public art approaches public spaces in a much more nuanced, intersectional, and politically critical way as demanded by urban policy, five public art projects funded by Public Art Vienna are referenced. The contribution re-imagines public art as "social infrastructure" and consequently proposes the care-ethical re-writing of Public Art Vienna's funding guidelines.

_____ This contribution analyses the role that urban policy attributes to public art in shaping public space as "social infrastructure" (Klinenberg 2018). Furthermore, it re-imagines this transformatively by employing a care-ethical infrastructure critique and referencing artistic projects.

_____ In light of contemporary undemocratic endeavors in European countries, there is an increasing emphasis on the potential of public space to facilitate public interactions among strangers and democratic discourse – its potential to be a "social infrastructure." Urban policy strives to cultivate this potential and identifies public art as a tool for revitalizing public spaces. Public Art Vienna (*KÖR Kunst im öffentlichen Raum*), a publicly funded institutional body responsible for organizing and delivering public art in Vienna, aligns with this aim. In its mission statement, it states that public art shall revive public space "as an agora – a place of sociopolitical and cultural discussion" (Public Art Vienna 2023a). As outlined in Public Art Vienna's funding guidelines, funds are allocated to artistic projects that engage with freely accessible public space for everyone, as well as highlight and deepen the urban identity

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(Public Art Vienna 2024). Here, the funding guidelines function as a policy instrument. By using Public Art Vienna as an example, the contribution explores what role urban policy attributes to public art in fostering social infrastructures.

_____As a basis for the critical analysis of the funding guidelines, their institutional origins and references to art theory are retraced. Here, Public Art Vienna's website (www.koer.or.at) and its extensive online archive (www.koer.or.at/en/projects/) are referred to, as well as an interview with the managing director, Martina Taig.[1] Through this, I examine which understanding of public space is inscribed within the funding guidelines. To highlight hegemonic notions within this understanding, the concept of "infrastructural violence" (Rodgers/ O'Neill 2012) is used as a critical lens.

_____Building on this critique, I propose a re-writing of the funding guidelines aligned with re-imagining the role of public art in creating social infrastructures. Here, the feminist concept of "care" (Tronto 2013) serves as an ethical foundation. Furthermore, I think through and with artistic projects funded by Public Art Vienna. I use these as reference points to underscore that the care-ethical re-formulation of the funding guidelines corresponds to contemporary artistic practice. This substantiates that public art engages with public spaces in a more nuanced and intersectional way than dictated by policy. Thereby, public art not only fosters public space as social infrastructure but _is_ a social infrastructure itself.

_____With reference to spatial theory, infrastructural violence, and care, the contribution expands a feminist infrastructure critique to include care-ethical aspects and argues that this should encompass both critique and re-imagination. By using Public Art Vienna as an example, it demonstrates how feminist infrastructure critique is adaptable to urban policy. Thus, it has the potential to be applied to other policy documents formulated by various public art institutions.

PUBLIC ART AS SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURES _____In urban policy as well as by Public Art Vienna, the potential of public art to create spaces of social interaction and democratic exchange is recognized. This is based on a specific understanding of space that conceives public space as "social infrastructure." The concept of "social infrastructure" is situated in Urban Theory and was introduced by the American sociologist Eric Klinenberg in his book _Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life_ (2018). Social infrastructures encompass physical public space such as sidewalks, parks, community gardens and playgrounds, which both enable and shape public interactions.[2]

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By inviting people into public space, social infrastructures foster face-to-face encounters within specific social groups, as well as among social differences (Bloomaert 2014; Klinenberg 2018). Its aim is to facilitate sociality (Latham / Layton 2019: 3).

_____ Indeed, public space is not a *social* infrastructure per se. Rather, it is an infrastructure with the potential to be social, although this potential is not always realized. Public space is, after all, inherently political. By regulating the relations between goods, people, and resources, infrastructures determine who is connected, who has access, who can control movements, and who cannot. They enable or prohibit certain forms of social life and multispecies coexistence (Beck et al. 2022: 9). Due to their power over regulation and accessibility, infrastructures are instruments of politics. Thus, public space can foster social cohesion and equal access, but at the same time reproduce infrastructural violence.

_____ The term "infrastructural violence" (Rodgers / O'Neill 2012) describes the fact that infrastructures play a certain role in (re)producing socio-political inequalities (Star 1999; Larkin 2013; Lemanski 2019: 21) and global social asymmetries. These structural injustices manifest themselves in various forms of colonialism, racism, sexism, and classism (Beck et al. 2022: 9). Moreover, infrastructures (literally) transport narratives of economic growth, technological progress, and neoliberal equality across the globe (Anand et al. 2018: 3). Therefore, when discussing infrastructural violence, it is crucial to consider the exploitation of natural resources and environmental degradation as well. It can be stated that infrastructural violence hinders public space from being a social infrastructure.

_____ Public space is not a place of vivid sociopolitical and democratic discussion per se. It has to be *produced*. In this regard, public art can play an activating role by initiating conversations, interactions, and political discussion.[3] It not only fosters public space to be a social infrastructure but acts as a social infrastructure itself. Here, public art is part of the described ambivalence as well: While it has the potential to address and challenge infrastructural violence, public art can also reproduce urban power structures (Liinamaa 2014: 531). Therefore, it is crucial how policy documents define the role of public art in engaging with public space.

CARE-ETHICAL INFRASTRUCTURE CRITIQUE OF PUBLIC ART VIENNA'S FUNDING GUIDELINES_____ Public Art Vienna (*KÖR Kunst im öffentlichen Raum*) is an example of the tax-based funding of public art in Europa. As the most important institutional public

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art body in Vienna, it has organized and delivered public art since 2004.[4] It receives funding from three different departments: Vienna's municipal administrative units of Housing, City Planning, and Culture. This demonstrates that public art is not solely funded out of artistic and cultural interest. Rather, its significance in shaping public space is acknowledged as well. Thus, public art can be seen as an interface practice between art, architecture, and urban development. Consequently, it must not only embody artistic value, but also engage with its urban context. So, how does Public Art Vienna, as an actor of urban policy, expect public art to engage with public space? How can this understanding be re-imagined in order to foster public art as a social infrastructure?

_____ To answer these questions, the funding guidelines of Public Art Vienna are critically analyzed. They serve as one of the central instruments in the funding process[5] and are thoroughly considered by artists.[6] They determine basic conditions and formal characteristics for submissions by encompassing the "principles and perquisites for funding" (Public Art Vienna 2024). In addition to a multitude of legal and bureaucratic conditions outlined in nine sections, one addresses the practical implementation of submitted projects.[7] Within this section, there are two paragraphs (2.1 and 2.2) particularly describing how public art should engage with public space. They state that public art engages with freely accessible public space for everyone and emphasize the importance of public art in highlighting and deepening urban identity (Public Art Vienna 2024). Both paragraphs refer to the agora as an ideal for public space as referenced in Public Art Vienna's mission statement (Public Art Vienna 2023a).

_____ In the following, I will examine hegemonic notions inscribed in the understanding of public space as expressed by these paragraphs and the reference of the agora. Therefore, I use a care-ethical infrastructure critique as a transformative tool. Care is embedded within feminist theory and is defined as an activity of maintaining, continuing, and repairing multispecies livelihood (Fisher / Tronto 1990: 40). Thus, care relationships can be observed in all areas of human and more-than-human coexistence (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). Moreover, care encompasses a theoretical critique of power, patriarchy, and capitalism, as well as highlights practical and daily effects. Considering (social) infrastructures, it draws attention to care inequalities and the hegemonic distribution of care—specific types of infrastructural violence. Furthermore, care is an ethical concept that is connected to other concepts such as interdependency, responsibility, vulnerability, maintenance, and solidarity. Budling

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on these concepts, I re-imagine public art as social infrastructure. To demonstrate how specific care-ethical aspects are already considered by contemporary artistic practice, I reference five public art projects funded by Public Art Vienna. These projects represent various formats, including performance, monument, artistic research, art competition, and city walks. The re-imagining results in a care-ethical re-writing of Public Art Vienna's funding guidelines.

THE AGORA – A PATRIARCHAL PUBLIC SPACE _____ Public Art Vienna references the agora as a "place of sociopolitical and cultural discussion" (Public Art Vienna 2023a), a well-functioning social infrastructure. Thereby, the Greek agora serves as the archetype. Historically, the agora was the socially and structurally central element of Greek cities in 700 BC (Hölscher 1998: 161) – a place of gathering and policy-making (ibid.: 161–162; Dickenson 2017: 1). As an archetype of practiced democracy, it continues to influence Western culture (ibid.), particularly in urban planning and urbanism. Referencing this, Public Art Vienna declares public art's potential to contribute to the revival of the agora (Public Art Vienna 2023a; Taig 2023). However, through the lens of a care-ethical infrastructure critique, the agora as a political ideal can be critically examined.

_____ Upon closer examination of the historical context of the Greek agora, a significant gap between the Western ideal and its actual circumstances becomes evident: those engaged in lively public discourse were adult, free – meaning they had civic rights – , male, and owned property (Wildner / Berger 2018). Only due to their "privileged irresponsibility" – their ability to exempt themselves from care work through financial means and patriarchal oppression (Tronto 2013: 59–61) –, these men could afford the time and rights to congregate at the agora. Meanwhile, women and slaves were excluded from these spaces and thus from political participation. Furthermore, the Greeks devalued the private sphere as "idiotic" because it was "merely" concerned with reproduction (Arendt 2016: 89). It is apparent that the Greek agora was not a democratic space for everyone, but rather for a few privileged male citizens.

_____ The agora can be seen as an urban and structural manifestation of the strict division that existed(exists) between the public and private spheres. Its contemporary reference is an example of what cultural theorist and urban curator Elke Krasny describes as a strategic ignorance of the "violent contradictions between the political idea of public space and [its] (the) material, economic, and social histories" (Krasny 2022). It is essential to critically examine the ideals promoted by policy. What is glorified and strived for

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matters significantly. If urban policy fails to address hegemonic power structures connected to these ideals, their invisibility and effects are reinforced – whether intentionally or not.

ACCESSIBILITY OF PUBLIC SPACE AS A DEMAND, NOT A STATUS-QUO
_____In its funding guidelines, Public Art Vienna demands that:

> "Projects shall be implemented in the City of Vienna's freely accessible public space where art can be experienced by everyone. They have to be accessible and experienceable free of charge" (Public Art Vienna 2024).

_____Drawing on spatial theory and a care-ethical infrastructural critique, the notion of public space as freely accessible to everyone has to be critically examined.[8] In the following, I expand on care-related issues of hegemonic exclusion and discrimination, though there are numerous other concerns as well. Urban exclusion arises from hegemonic decisions in urban planning and policy. Infrastructural needs of oppressed and vulnerable groups often go unaddressed in public spaces: There is a lack of toilets, breastfeeding facilities, and consumption-free places; car traffic is prioritized over public transport, cycling, and walking; numerous physical barriers hinder access to public spaces, transport, and institutions for every*body*; participatory urban projects take place when public childcare is unavailable and require educational and temporal resources; to name just a few. There is a continual denial of infrastructural needs, leading to a restricted design and use of public space. Moreover, paradoxically, most people caring for urban spaces are excluded from them. Maintenance workers do the labor required for the constant and uninterrupted restoration of the normal state (Krasny 2021: 200) – the cleaning, repairing, and servicing. Despite urban life and public spaces depending on this work, it has to remain invisible in capitalist societies. This results in the social and monetary devaluation of maintenance work, as well as its racialized and gendered distribution, further reinforcing urban exclusion and discrimination (Vergès 2019). Moreover, by excluding maintenance workers from public debates and policies, this problematic is systemically reinforced.
_____Thus, public art does not take place in and engage with freely accessible public spaces. Rather, it has to interact with spaces that

// Figure 1
Agnes Bakucz Canário, *A Common Kingdom or Two Cuts Lie Parallel in the Same Flesh*, 2023, © Aaron Josi Sternbauer, 2022

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hegemonically exclude marginalized and discriminated social groups. This fact is highlighted by the performance *A Common Kingdom or Two Cuts Lie Parallel in the Same Flesh* (2023) by Agnes Bakucz Canário. In this performance, a heterogeneous group of performers with various experiences of discrimination traverses Yppenplatz and Volksgarten in Vienna. Making their marginalized bodies visible in public space forms an act of disruptive resistance.[9] The performance conveys that a freely accessible public space – as built environment and social infrastructure – is a *demand*, not a given status quo.

⎯⎯ If public art aims to strengthen democratic and inclusive public discourse, it has to acknowledge that it operates within hegemonically designed spaces to avoid reinforcing infrastructural violence. Heike Mutter and Ulrich Genth exemplify this awareness by installing a *Sleeping Horse* cast in bronze on Vienna's Reumannplatz. This square has a multifaceted history as a site of right-wing mobilization, labor dispute, exploitation, consumption, deportation, migrant life, and a famous ice cream parlor. "So what kind of monument does Reumannplatz need?" asks art theorist Nora Sternfeld in her review (2023). Mutter and Genth recognize the hegemonic history of the place and propose an unheroic monument that rejects authoritarian power. Moreover, the *Sleeping Horse* is a counterpart to heroic equestrian monuments throughout Vienna.[10]

⎯⎯ Concerning a care-ethical infrastructure critique and the described artistic practice, I propose a feminist re-writing of the examined paragraph:

> *Projects shall be implemented in the City of Vienna's public space. They have to prioritize maximum accessibility[11] and be available free of charge. Moreover, they have to be aware that selected public spaces are not equally accessible to everybody due to hegemonic power structures.*

THE PLURALITY OF URBAN IDENTITY ⎯⎯ The second content-related paragraph of Public Art Vienna's funding guidelines states:

> "The object of funding shall be projects in which the artists' discourse and mental interchange with urban space contributes to highlighting and deepening the urban identity of the City and its districts" (Public Art Vienna 2024).

// Figure 2
Heike Mutter and Ulrich Genth, *Sleeping Horse*, 2023, © Iris Ranzinger, 2023

9)
For further information, see https://www.koer.or.at/en/projects/a-common-kingdom/.

10)
For further information, see https://www.koer.or.at/en/projects/sleeping-horse/.

11)
In German, I would use the term *Barrieresensibilität*. It denotes the recognition that barriers will always exist. Hence, the goal is not the absence of barriers, but rather the sensitivity to them (see Awad, Kreuzer 2023).

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_____ In the interview, Taig explains that this point refers to *site-specificity* [12] – a particular term in public art. She also talks about Public Art Vienna's experience that artistic projects engaging with a particular site – its historical context as well as its built environment and social use – produce a higher quality. Furthermore, facing Vienna's rapid urban development and the emergence of new districts, the necessity for elements that foster identity arises (Taig 2023).
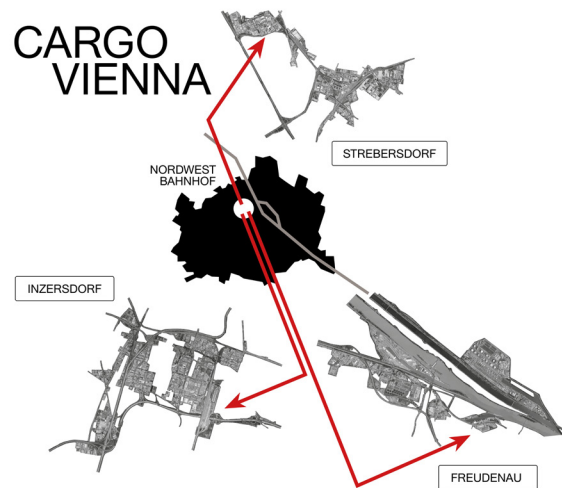
_____ It can be questioned whether there is something like *the* urban identity, as described in the paragraph. Identity is a heavily disputed term in contemporary discourse about migration and racism. These debates determined that there is nothing like a singular – German, Austrian, or Viennese – identity. Rather, identity is the subject of political and social struggles and negotiations. It always consists of various facets: history and self-perception, but also external ascription and social construction. These facets apply to urban identities as well. Moreover, the notion of *the* identity does not correspond to the current diversity in urban centers such as Vienna.

_____ Public art is part of the production of urban identity. This can be misused by processes of gentrification and capitalism, as cultural and art scholars such as Miwon Kwon and Saara Liinamaa criticize. Public art and its site-specific approach can be applied in urban marketing to create uniqueness and distinctions from other cities (Kwon 2002: 4). It can be used to activate the economic potential of particular districts and living areas (ibid.). At the same time, public art has the potential to critically engage with different urban identities within a specific place.

_____ In this context, Taig addresses public art's ability to tell new narratives. These narratives have the capacity to positively reclaim depreciated places, uncover displaced histories, and shape new facets of places' identity. For example, this is exemplified by the project *Cargo Vienna – Urban and Logistics Landscapes as Changing Work and Living Spaces* which critically engages with the *Nordwestbahnhof* – a former logistic hub in the middle of Vienna. The *Tracing Spaces* collective examines fragments of its history, as well as the displacement of crucial infrastructure and its employees to the city's periphery. By organizing bus tours and founding a museum, they discover and convey various stories associated with this place (Hieslmair / Zinganel: 2023).

// **Figure 3**
Tracing Spaces*, Cargo Vienna – Urban and Logistics Landscapes as Changing Work and Living Spaces*, 2023, © Tracing Spaces, Hieslmair & Zinganel, Geodaten Stadt Wien, 2023

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Further, Kwon states that site-specific art can highlight repressed histories and marginalized groups (Kwon 2002: 3). This was demonstrated through an open competition organized by Public Art Vienna in cooperation with the Viennese Anti-Discrimination Office for LGBTQ issues (*WASt*) from 2021 to 2022. The two-stage competition called for proposals for a "Memorial to the Men and Women Victimized by the Persecution of Homosexuals in the Nazi Era." The artists Sarah Ortmeyer and Karl Koblitz won with their concept for the sculpture *ARCUS (Shadow of a Rainbow)* – a symbol for remembrance and mourning in solidarity.[13]

Moreover, public art discovers places that have been obscured by dominant culture (Kwon 2002: 3). Therefore, the project *Wandertag* (a day of walking) curated by Nora Mayr serves as an example. It started in 2021 as an ongoing series and invites participants to break out of their everyday urban routes and discover new places in Vienna. Artist Julischka Stengele was part of the first "Wandertag." She created a humorous tour through often overlooked places and informal paths in Vienna's 10th district.[14]

As artistic theory and practice demonstrate, public art produces identit*ies*. Hence, I propose a care-ethical reformulation of the examined paragraph:

> The object of funding shall be projects that adopt a context-sensitive [15] approach to the sites and their multispecies inhabitants where they take place. They shall critically examine and contribute to the plurality of urban identities in the city and its districts.

CONCLUSION Public art examines public spaces in a much more nuanced, intersectional, and politically critical way, as demanded by urban policy. As a practice, it critically approaches hegemonic spaces and discovers emancipatory moments. It has the ability to strengthen the demand for accessible public spaces and to discover the variety of urban identities. Thereby, it acts as a social infrastructure. In order to foster this potential and concern the ambivalent role of public art in producing public space, urban policy has to be reflective and precise in attributing a certain role to public art. As the analysis of Public Art Vienna's funding guidelines demonstrates, this requires a re-imagining of existing political and spatial ideas and a corresponding re-writing of contemporary policy documents.

A care-ethical infrastructure critique is a transformative instrument for this endeavor. By building on spatial theory,

// Figure 4
Sarah Ortmeyer and Karl Koblitz, mock-up of *ARCUS (Shadow of a Rainbow)*, 2022, © Markus Wache, 2022

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infrastructural violence, as well as care as an ethical concept, it stimulates both a feminist critique and re-imagination. Thereby, this approach can be applied not only to the example of Public Art Vienna but to other European art institutions that fund public art. Through funding, these institutions determine which kinds of public art are supported and which ethical requirements they have to fulfill. Therefore, policy documents are crucially important for recognizing and fostering public art as social infrastructure.

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Figure 4: Sarah Ortmeyer and Karl Koblitz, mock-up of *ARCUS (Shadow of a Rainbow),* 2022, © Markus Wache, 2022

Figure 5: Julischka Stengele and curator Nora Mayr, *1st Wandertag – a performative guided tour by Julischka Stengele*, 2021, © Hannah Mayr, 2021

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Miriam Kreuzer is currently researching a feminist care perspective on urban policy. She is investigating the concept of *Caring Urbanism* as part of her Ph.D. at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and KTH School of Architecture Stockholm. Furthermore, she works as an author, lecturer, and designer in the field of Urban Practice and Transformation Design. As part of this work, she co-edited the publication *MACHT STADT SOLIDARISCH – Denkanstöße für eine solidarische Urbane Praxis* (2022) and the article "Barrieresensibilität in der Stadt" (2023), which was published in the *BundesBauBlatt*. Moreover, she is a founding member of the *Zukunfts*archiv* collective, which examines feminist approaches for an eco-socially just transformation.

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