

## About the Seen and the Unseen<sup>1</sup>

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### The unseen as a relational phenomenon

*Mapping the Unseen* is dedicated to searching for social issues that are perceived as not present, as unseen, marginalized, or even taboo. The term unseen is introduced without providing an exact definition. Despite that, it is the intention to provoke and foster reflection through the ambiguity of the term. What the unseen might be, concerns the selection of the topics discussed during the project, the shape of the term, and the characteristic of the phenomenon itself.

In the course of the project, the unseen appears as an umbrella term for phenomena of missing visibility, perceptibility, or accessibility. It refers to visual and verbal representation, processes, and actions. On a factual level, it refers to topics, like LGBTIQ, flight, and devoid of Subjecthood and discrimination, addressed in the project. At its core, it concerns people who, in some way, are affected by a topic, who share experiences with it, or who are interested in it, and who also may have political intentions. In the LGBTIQ-cycle, mainly people from the respective communities participated. As persons concerned in various settings (artistic, scientific, political), they gave insight into their experiences. In the cycle Flight/Devoid of subjecthood, the group of actors was composed slightly differently. More persons without personal experiences with flight but with experiences in activities and organizations providing support participated. In the third cycle, Discrimination, the group of actors again was mixed. The topic revealed as a specific one, as very broad in terms of meaning and nearly ubiquitous. Similar to LGBTIQ, where the basic question of sex, gender, and sexual orientation concern everybody, it is an issue that in some respect might also concern everybody in private or professional life. A view on the participants and their actions during the project and on the discourses around the topics shows that in the dynamic of the seen/unseen, there are active and passive roles. There are performing people and the audience during the events. There are actively engaged people for or against something and more cautious and defensive people. And there are various reasons why something is not seen: Someone may not be able to see something, someone does not want to show something explicitly, someone may want to hide or neglect something intentionally. It can be observed that there may be contradicting forces lying beyond a being seen or unseen. There are tensions between can and cannot, want and want not, should and should not, between a must and a not allowed.

One of the most striking characteristics is that it is a relational phenomenon. That means to a certain degree that it is a question of the taken viewpoint if something is present, seen, or unseen, be it marginalized, be it taboo. Besides that, there are different degrees to which something can be seen or unseen: a topic as a whole can be unseen, aspects of a topic, background dynamics of a topic, the way a topic is handled in a social system; something can be seen in a broader public (mainly represented by mass-media), in particular societal fields or subgroups, and others, instead, not.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is basing on primary data through qualitative interviews, participant observation and auto-ethnographic fieldnotes. Hypothesis building was supported by interdisciplinary reflection of the process among the research team.

### **Intentions laying beyond: The normative background of making something seen**

To be seen in the course of the project turned out to be much more than just relating to questions of sensual perception. It contains emotional aspects, touches questions of social relationships and the dignity of individuals or groups. It contains value patterns, normative premises and has political implications. *Mapping the Unseen* starts with the hypothesis that it is essential to make issues seen. It follows the intention to intervene in society by addressing topics that are perceived as not being noted sufficiently. It traces topics which in some way are seen but which should get even more attention. The title of the project contains the ambivalence and the dialectic character of the seen and the unseen. The project is about mapping the unseen, and at the moment something is traced, addressed, and represented somehow, it is not unseen anymore. The ideas behind and the underlying normative aspects get into the foreground.

### **Reasons why the unseen should be seen: expressing individual needs and promoting concepts of society**

The project reveals that not the topics themselves are unseen, but the background dynamics and driving forces, the ambivalences and contradictions inherent to the topics under discussion. The motives to participate in the interventions and dialogues and the intentions and goals for doing it, on the one hand, are very personal. People who are concerned by a topic want to stress out their needs and fears. For instance, in the LGBTIQ context, the fear of stigma and oppression and the wish to be accepted as one is were expressed. The message addresses people with different attitudes and the mainstream of society, and people from the community. There is the intention to promote specific views of society and to change society. There is the intention to foster an exchange of experiences and empower people with similar experiences to live their lives positively. The aspect of empowerment reveals to be important also regarding the private environment. Addressing the particularly sensitive topic of sex, gender, and sexual orientation within the own family is described as particularly demanding. Besides the very personal approach to the topics under discussion, there are more general and political intentions, intentions that go beyond the individual and address the shape of society. In the context of the topic Flight/Devoid of Subjecthood, representatives of organizations and private persons engage as interceders who support asylum seekers, advocate their rights, and engage in changing political mindsets and institutional procedures.

Inducing change appears as a leading idea throughout the intervention and dialogue phases. Dealing with a topic in a public sphere is perceived as the first step towards change. The discourses are very much heading for intervention into the actual shape of society. That provides the chance to mark an overall position and to gain attention. On the other hand, it goes along with the risk of polarizing.

### **Settings, formats, and social constellations to address the unseen**

*Mapping the Unseen* provides settings and formats to integrate artistic work and to open up spaces for dialogue. Participants convey their approaches in exhibitions, performative settings, or talk about their experiences, their needs, their positions. By dealing with a topic at the individual level from contribution to contribution, the idea of it becomes more concrete and more understandable. The audience gets involved emotionally. It gets apparent that every human being, be it a lesbian, gay, or intersexual person, be it an asylum seeker, a discriminated woman, or a victim of violence, has similar needs. In the end, it is about security and human dignity. This very personal approach turns out to be fruitful regarding the change of predominant and not seldom unreflected mindsets.

Apart from individual micro-perspectives, the project integrates organizations dealing with the topic under discussion. Organizations do not have so much the focus on the individual experience but on aggregated individual approaches. The individual is institutionalized, embedded into an organizational framework. That helps to get into a distance from the emotional, personal, which protects people as individuals and at the same time helps to get more visibility and intervening power. The possibility to promote change is increasing.

The project revealed the significance of social media and public (mass) media. The first seems to be crucial for community building. The latter provides societal attention for a topic – be it through supporting contributions, be it an aggressive critique, be it news about harmful incidents. Paradox situations can derive from that: An assault against a gay couple or fire in a refugee camp suddenly are incidents that positively impact initiatives supporting people concerned. If something is present in media, it is seen.

Despite the possibilities to communicate with people worldwide, which is mainly based on digitalization, in the course of the project, it could be observed that spatial distance can still be a hindering factor. For quite a time, there was no response from Dhaka. Technical problems and turbulences due to the covid pandemic made it challenging to stay in contact, impossible to meet personally, and made it difficult to understand the circumstances and empathize with the situation. Vice versa, meeting physically enriches impressions. To see includes not only the sensitive, the cognitive, but also the body as a medium of experience.

### **Handling the transcultural requires transcending the usual**

*Mapping the Unseen* is realized by people with similar value patterns. People who stand up for the marginalized, the discriminated, and – implicitly – against the mainstream, against what can be called "the normal" or "the traditional". The consideration of the topics expands towards a more general critique of current societal circumstances and reaches into the political and ideological sphere.

The project is particularly interested in designing and reflecting transcultural processes. At first glance, the transcultural is linked to nationality, as intervention and dialogue phases occur in different parts of the world: Croatia, Bangladesh, Iran, and Austria. This perspective provides interesting and insightful reflections. Being an LGBTIQ person is very different in Iran or Austria. Flight in the context of the Rohingya crisis is very different from being an asylum seeker in Austria. Besides the intention to exchange experiences across nationalities and learn from each other, right since the beginning *Mapping the Unseen* understands transcultural in a broader sense. It is about dealing with societal differences, about dealing with different value patterns and different perspectives for future societal development. In this sense, the project intends more than what it can reach in the given project period.

### **Exploration of the unseen beyond the usual**

To explore the unseen means getting to know spheres beyond the familiar and usual. That implies the necessity to change perspectives and to accept other approaches and positions. Dealing with the non-familiar in an open-minded way helps not only to understand “the other” but also to recognize better and reflect on one’s positions. The foreign step by step gets more and more familiar. At the same time, contradictions, points to be negotiated, and red lines in discourse and action become clearer. Dialogue means encounter across borders.

**We can only see parts of the whole: Making something seen as a construction of realities**

*Mapping the Unseen* creates an archive of views on a selected societally relevant topics. The views are assembled in a participative process and provide a kaleidoscopic image. What gets seen is only partly organized. It emerges from the contributions of the participating people. The significance of the selection of perspectives to be involved becomes apparent. Making something seen never is a neutral process. It is value-based in its aims and its performance, and it is always a question of decision. What we get to see is a construction of reality. This reality is shaped by the perspectives and viewpoints that are lying beyond them. Thus, there is always the risk of misunderstanding and, ethically questionable, manipulation. Apart from that, one never knows to what degree something is accessible in terms of reliable information. The latter concerns knowledge of current situations or specific aspects of a topic and knowledge about the broader context, including historical development.

To see does not necessarily mean to understand. When do we know enough about something? Exploring, trying to understand, and dialogue across borders may take continuous effort. The latter includes sensibility and awareness of which topics can be raised in which form.