



Resonance & Resistance: Tracing the Sound of Vienna's Counterculture

Project Duration: 04/2025 – 09/2026

Artistic Direction: Conny Zenk

(<https://radperformance.at/> / <https://connyzenk.com/>)

Scientific Direction: Wanda Spahl

(<https://kris.kl.ac.at/de/persons/wanda-spahl> / <https://parabol.info/>)

The project is realized within the framework of the project call on Contemporary Forms of Remembrance for the Republic Jubilee Year 2025, issued by the Cultural Department of the City of Vienna. Historical research in the archives is conducted by Dr. Marius Weigl-Burnautzki, commissioned by the project management.

Project Description

The artistic-research project Resonance & Resistance: Tracing the Sound of Vienna's Counterculture investigates music in urban space as both a counter-design to structures of social oppression and a site for inclusive forms of living together. It engages with Austrian history of the 1930s and 1940s during the period of National Socialism, translating this "difficult history" into the present through transmedial commemorative cycling tours (Vienna Sonic Memories) in Vienna.

At its core, Resonance & Resistance undertakes historical and political research into the resistant youth jazz subculture of the so-called "Schlurfs" under Nazi rule, and renders their practices experientially accessible in the public sphere through participatory sound rides. The Vienna Sonic Memories activate the urban fabric by overlaying site-specific audio-visual layers—as a form of augmented reality—onto the physical locations once inhabited by the Schlurfs' music (counter) culture.

By weaving past and present together, the project establishes a dialogue between the histories of resistance embodied by the Schlurfs and contemporary Viennese music (counter)cultures. This is achieved through newly commissioned sound compositions by local musicians, smartphone-accessible visualizations of archival materials, public events, and performative Soundrides of Resistance that re-inscribe the city with resonant histories.

Historical Point of Departure: Youth Music (Counter)Culture of the Schlurfs

"In Vienna during the Nazi regime, there was a considerable number of working-class youths who developed their style from the offerings of the US cultural industry; they were called 'Schlurfs,' a derogatory term for 'idlers,' people who shuffled slowly through the streets... They wore their hair slightly longer, and their clothing included extremely wide trousers with high cuffs, long jackets, and shoes with double soles that were supposed to squeak as they walked." (Tantner, 1995, p. 40f)

In the 1930s and 1940s, thousands of young Schlurfs in Vienna embodied a way of life that stood in sharp contrast to the ideology of the National Socialist regime. Their passion for jazz music and their unconventional clothing became visible markers of resistance and acts of everyday defiance against enforced conformity. The Schlurfs gathered in cafés, dance halls, and public spaces such as the Prater, cultivating a vibrant social life that was at once musical, performative, and oppositional.

Within this subculture, distinctions emerged between the bourgeois "Swings" and the proletarian "Schlurfs" (Beyer & Ladurner, 2011; Gerbel, 1993; Sieder et al., 2000; Schulz, 2008; Tantner, 1995). Both groups were united, however, by their investment in transgressive aesthetics, sonic practices, and bodily gestures that articulated an alternative form of cultural belonging.

Vienna Sonic Memories

Resonance & Resistance: Tracing the Sound of Vienna's Counterculture develops a transmedial program that brings the music (counter)culture of the Schlurfs in the 1930s and 1940s into dialogue with contemporary Viennese music (counter)cultures. Through Vienna Sonic Memories, we design urban and digital commemorative cycling tours that activate the city of Vienna as a resonant space of remembrance.

These tours overlay site-specific audio-visual layers onto the physical locations once inhabited by the Schlurfs' music (counter)culture. In doing so, the physical reality of present-day Vienna is expanded by these histories of resistance through geo-data-driven AR technologies.

Participants access sound and visual content via their smartphones through a virtual map, developed in collaboration with the Artificial Museum (<https://artificialmuseum.com/about/#2/52.49/13.37>)

For instance, in 1943 approximately 200 Schlurf youths were arrested during a concert in the former Apollo Theater in Vienna's 6th district. Today, at the corner of Gumpendorfer Straße and Kaunitzgasse, the project allows participants to explore the interiors of what has since become a cinema. Through headphones, they hear a narrative voice recounting the arrests while listening to newly composed sound pieces. These compositions are created by Viennese musicians and

sound artists engaged in Resonance & Resistance, drawing on data and archival material on the Schlurfs. By translating their sonic practices into site-specific works, they generate a contemporary space of resonance (with existing collaborations including Viennese music labels such as Ventil Records, unrecords, and arooo.records).

The Vienna Sonic Memories also engage with the symbolism of the bicycle, a vehicle closely linked to (in)visibility in public space. Cycling itself can be read as a resistant practice, embodying sustainable mobility and a feminist appropriation of urban and social environments. The bicycle stands as an anti-authoritarian, feminist, and activist symbol. Following the spirit of “Pirati Cyclisti Antifascisti,” the project reflects on Vienna and its histories through music and digital storytelling.

Research Questions and Scientific Contribution

The project aims to make both a methodological contribution to the exploration of new technologies for contemporary forms of remembrance (Research Question 1), and a substantive contribution to the role of music in Vienna—both in the historical context of the Schlurfs (Research Question 2) and in resonance with present-day Viennese music (counter)cultures (Research Question 3).

The primary research interest of Resonance & Resistance: Tracing the Sound of Vienna’s Counterculture lies in investigating how new technologies, transmedial storytelling, and collective cycling can serve as contemporary practices of remembrance. From this arises the following central research question:

1. What role can audio-visual and performative AR technologies play for collective cultures of remembrance in public urban space?

Extended Reality formats such as AR, VR, and related technologies are increasingly employed in museums to mediate so-called “difficult histories” (Epstein & Peck, 2017), such as the Holocaust (Grever, 2017) or racist terror against Black communities (Hatfield, 2024). Resonance & Resistance adapts AR technologies to public urban space in order to engage with “difficult histories” in Austria, both during the Nazi era and in contemporary contexts. By situating AR within the city, histories inscribed in its spaces are reactivated. The project thus contributes to current debates on urban space as an active site of remembrance, and on how its qualities are transformed in the digital realm (Schulman, 2024).

A particular focus lies on public events and collective Soundrides, which are conceived artistically as spatial audio, transmedial storytelling, and audio-visual performance. Through AR, audiences are invited into participatory formats that probe how AR can function performatively and collectively, exceeding the individual experience by creating shared urban soundscapes. In this way, the project extends current research in Extended Reality that explores collaborative uses of XR to foster prosocial and cooperative interaction (Nguyen & Bednarz, 2020). Studies have shown, for example, how AR can support collaborative learning in education (Martín-Gutiérrez et al., 2015) and foster belonging in mental health contexts through shared play (Mittmann et al., 2022).

The project situates itself within a lineage of analog practices of remembrance in urban space,

such as Petra Unger's Wiener FrauenStadtspaziergänge* (<https://frauenspaziergaenge.at/themen/>), which emphasize collective remembering at physical sites. Increasingly, such practices also adopt the bicycle as a medium, as in Jasmina Jerant's Feminist Tour by Bike in Ljubljana (<https://ptich.si/ljubljana-feminist-tour-by-bike/>) or Johannes Staudinger's Willy-Fred Tours in the Salzkammergut, where cycling is linked to resistance practices against National Socialism (<https://www.salzkammergut-2024.at/projekte/touren-von-willy-fred/>). Through both self-guided routes and guided Soundrides, Resonance & Resistance creates experiential formats in urban space that spatialize remembrance and render it physically tangible. Its specificity lies in the simultaneous movement through physical and digital space: in the most literal sense of "augmented reality," physical reality is expanded by digital sound and images.

In addition, the project contributes to scholarly research on the Viennese youth movement of the Schlurfs, guided by the following question:

2. What forms did political resistance take within the music culture of the Schlurfs during the Nazi era in Vienna?

Building on historical scholarship on the Schlurfs (Beyer & Ladurner, 2011; Gerbel, 1993; Sieder et al., 2000; Schulz, 2008; Tantner, 1995), the project approaches the subject from a critical political science perspective that foregrounds the unequal distribution of power and resources in everyday contexts (Hay, 2002). Rather than focusing on Austrian state politics under National Socialism, it highlights "the political" as it manifested in the aesthetics, styles, subcultural codes, and resistant practices of the Schlurfs. Following Rancière (2004), "the political" here refers to the potential of individuals in society to participate and intervene in public space, thereby challenging existing power distributions and reconfiguring social dynamics.

Archival and literature-based research on the Schlurfs will focus on "the political" in this sense, including power relations within the group itself. Special attention will be given to class and gender: the project investigates differences between the bourgeois "Swings" and proletarian "Schlurfs," as well as the roles of women, who were disparagingly referred to as Schlurfskatzen. Finally, the project builds a bridge between the music (counter)culture and resistance of the Schlurfs and contemporary music (counter)cultures in Vienna. Through musical collaborations and dialogical formats, Resonance & Resistance seeks to establish a resonance space for this overlooked chapter of Viennese history, asking:

3. What resonances are generated between the music (counter)culture and resistance of the Schlurfs and today's Viennese music (counter)cultures?

Methodology

First, we employ historical and political-scientific methods to investigate the resistant music (counter)culture of the Viennese Schlurfs. This includes literature review and archival research into their youth culture under National Socialism: the spaces they inhabited, their aesthetics, clothing styles and subcultural codes, their music, as well as their forms of resistance and protest. Particular emphasis is placed on the axes of class and gender (as outlined above), which will also be explored further through expert interviews.

Second, Resonance & Resistance: Tracing the Sound of Vienna's Counterculture invites Viennese musicians to engage with the Schlurfs' music (counter)culture through spatial-audio compositions. The sonic worlds of the Schlurfs are reinterpreted through contributions from improvisation, jazz, experimental, and electroacoustic music, opening up a dialogical process of resonance across time.

Third, we conceive the collective Vienna Sonic Memories: Soundrides of Resistance (see below) as a contemporary methodology of remembrance in their own right. They create a space of possibility between raising awareness of historical forms of protest and re-appropriating urban space through contemporary artistic practices. In this way, the Soundrides themselves become counter-designs to social oppression and sites of inclusive, collective life.

By interweaving the histories of the Schlurfs with newly composed sound works and by fostering dialogue with participants, the project connects these resistant practices to the lived realities of Vienna's diverse and international residents today. Accordingly, Resonance & Resistance collaborates primarily with musicians whose practices are explicitly activist and political, engaging with issues such as LGBTQ+ rights and feminism.

Outlook

- Vienna Sonic Memories: Development of audio-visual augmented reality experiences on the history of the Schlurfs, hosted on the digital platform Artificial Museum and freely accessible from Summer 2026.
- Soundtrack of Vienna Sonic Memories: Release of contemporary compositions resonating with the Schlurfs, distributed digitally and in collaboration with Vienna-based record labels (Winter 2026).
- Soundrides of Resistance: Performative and participatory cycling tours interwoven with the Vienna Sonic Memories, reactivating urban sites through collective movement and sound (Summer 2026).
- Events: Concerts, sound art performances, and transmedial formats that highlight the continuing relevance of the Schlurfs for contemporary music (counter)cultures (Summer 2026).
- Publications: Dissemination of project results in peer-reviewed academic journals, situating the project within artistic research, memory studies, and sound studies discourses (Autumn 2026).

Contact

a_maze - Verein zur Förderung audio-visueller Kunst
Atelier Kunstkanal, Ulrichgasse 1, 1020 Wien
Conny Zenk, Tel.: +43 676 3878993
E-Mail: conny.zenk@gmail.com, wanda.spahl@gmail.com