

“Gastarbajteri” – Exhibition on Labour Migration to Austria

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Abstract in English

The exhibition “Gastarbajteri” tries to provide an original view on the history of labour migration to Austria from the 1960s until the present day. Unlike traditional approaches, the exhibition is mainly focussed on the migrants’ perspective. Based on this principle, the NGO “Initiative Minderheiten”, which organised the project, shows how workers from economically weaker countries such as Yugoslavia and Turkey were hired in order to support the booming post-war economy in Austria. After being shown in public localities, the exhibition still exists ‘virtually’ online.

Area

Media, Art

Kind-category of project

Exhibition

Kind-category of actor

Registered association

Country

Austria

Year

Public exhibition: 2004

Virtual exhibition online 2005-

5 key-words

migration, history, guest-worker, exhibition, public information

THE PROJECT

ACTOR

Initiative Minderheiten
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Description of the project

The project “Gastarbajteri”, which is a Yugoslavian neologism from the German term “Gastarbeiter” (“Guest-worker”), is based on the idea to provide and publish a new perspective and approach to the history of labour migration into Austria.

According to the identified hitherto existing deficits in public perception and dealing with the topic labour migration, the main goals of the project turned out as follows:

- The migrants’ perspective
Instead of examining and presenting the theme in just macro-economical

terms, of the population's analysis, or as a threatening inflow of alien elements "Gastarbajteri" tries to focus on the people as self-acting subjects. It was aimed to show how the individual human being had to cope with the situation of being a migrant.

- The female perspective
Following this approach, in which individuals play the main role, the exhibition tries to emphasise on the fact that women in migration were more than just an appendix of male labour migrants; they were active participants of migration processes too.
- Challenging traditional pictures of the "Guest-worker"
Some ongoing pictures of the typical "Guest-worker" are widespread and can be found whenever the topic appears on the agenda. To deconstruct to some extent these deep imprinted pictures and their standard associations was another aim of the project.
- Clarification of the historical and political contexts
The intention was to enhance the perception of "guest-workers" immigration against the background of an official call out for workers in order to support and to enable the booming post-war economy in Austria. Moreover, it was considered important to explain that using foreign man/womanpower was not a single phenomenon in history of western societies but had continuity through former colonial or even fascist times.
- Reaching the mainstream public
- Involving (not only) the migrant youth

Activities and contents

The exhibition "Gastarbajteri" actually consisted of two different but complementary parts. One exhibition took place at the "Wien Museum" in the centre of Vienna whilst the second part was situated at the library "Stadtbücherei am Gürtel".

I. Exhibition "Gastarbajteri – 40 Jahre Arbeitsmigration"

This part of the exhibition took place at the "Wien Museum", the former "Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien". According to Cornelia Kogoj from the Initiative Minderheiten it was a conscious choice to place the exhibition in this rather "mainstream" museum with a long and well-known tradition. Here it would be possible to reach and also target those who usually do not take an interest in this marginalised topic and to place and imprint it into the mainstream majority historiography of the city of Vienna.

The exhibition consists altogether of eleven stations. The exhibition roughly follows a chronological development. But the stations also differ from each other in local and biographical aspects. Individual fates stand as examples of the different facets of labour migration. To define the type of the exhibits clearly is not possible. Stemming from different private collections or public archives in the Austrian Wirtschaftskammer (industrial chamber) it ranges from family photographs, newspaper articles, official forms and documents to video exhibits.

The exhibition curators have not had the claim of completeness: "Diversity shall be preferred instead of completeness. The theme has to be shown with all its contradictions." (Gamze Ongan, Gastarbajteri. 40 Jahre Arbeitsmigration, p. 88) In line with their basic opinion, that there does not exist *one* history at all, but rather

many single histories, the somewhat fragmented appearance of the exhibition seems to be adequate.

The station within the exhibition:

1. “Anwerbestelle Narmanli Han”
1964 - the opening of the first Austrian hiring commission in Istanbul
2. “Grenzübergang Spielfeld-Strass”
1972 – the so called “Gastarbeiterroute” (“Guest-worker route”), which connects Austria with the countries of migration labour
3. “Bosanac – Waren aller Art am Mexikoplatz”
1973 – migrants become self-employed
4. “Arbeitersiedlung Walddörfel”
1979 – living situation of migrants in Austria
5. “Fischfabrik C. Warhanek”
1980 – female labour migration
6. “Büro des Vereins der Zeitungskolporteurs”
1987 – precarious labour conditions of foreigners as house-to-house newspaper salesmen
7. “Demotreffpunkt”
1993 – self-organisation and the resistance of migrants
8. “Adatepe”
1994 – a Turkish village shows the origin and return of migrants
9. “Lokalzeile am Naschmarkt”
1995 – migration and gastronomy
10. “Fremdenpolizei”
2002 – efforts to regulate migration on the part of legislation, media and police
11. “Islamischer Friedhof”
2004 – establishing of an Islamic cemetery in Vienna as a symbol of permanent stay in the receiving society

II. Exhibition “Gastarbeiter – Medien und Migration”

The second part of the exhibition was situated at the library “Stadtbücherei am Gürtel” in the outskirts of Vienna. According to Cornelia Kogoj the intention was to place this exhibition directly in an area where migrant youth and people would often spend their time.

This project is focussed on media, understood as a very wide and open term. One topic was “ways of communication between migrants and their countries of origin”. Moreover, the exhibition aims to approach from different sides the representation of

migration in the media and how their image is constructed in the public sphere . For example, they tried to show the discourse among migrants and their media that differs considerably from the perception within the majority society's discourse.

Some exhibits:

- Art installation of migrants' letters
- Extracts of the private newspaper archive of a Kurd, living in Austria for over 27 years
- Photographs made by a father and by a son, both of whom were guest-workers in Austria at different times
- Video, documenting the changing development of communication of a doctor in Vienna with his country of origin (Yemen), along with the changes in medial technology
- Music project made from an old language course disk that demonstrates the dominant discourse of the receiving society

The exhibition was accompanied by a programme which consisted of movies and guided tours through the exhibition, in order to communicate its content actively and to strengthen its intention (see more at 1.5 Methodology).

When and how long: structure and steps of the project

The preparation period took more than three years. Then the exhibition took place from 22. 1. 2004 until 11. 4. 2004.

In 2005 the online version was launched.

Place and context

For a better understanding of the context of "Gastarbajteri" it seems to be necessary first to describe in short the social and historical background and complement this by introducing the problems of hitherto presentation of migration history.

Different waves of migration have contributed to the present day formation of the Austrian society. Numbers that demonstrate the ethnical diversity of Vienna's inhabitants show that a homogenous society is an illusion in every case:

In 2005 the city administration indicated that 309,184 people were registered as foreigners in the city. The total number of inhabitants was 1,651,437. That means about 18% of the total population are foreigners in Vienna. But this does not take into account the numbers of already naturalised former foreigners and their descendants.

The main groups here are from the former Yugoslavia, Turkey and Poland.¹

The big number of inhabitants from the former Yugoslavia and Turkey can be explained with the large immigration flow that began in the 1960s. Yugoslavia and Turkey were the main countries of exportation. Instead of going back, as it has been assumed by politicians and a broad public, a lot of these people decided to stay in Austria.

¹ [<http://www.wien.gv.at/statistik/daten/bevoelkerung.html#bev>]

Already this short introduction may show the traditional and widely accepted approach in showing migration and its history. And, according to the opinion of the authors of “Gastarbajteri”, it may also unveil its problems. Dominant discourses in the media as well as in social and historical science would consider migration still as a process which is on the one hand an inflow of foreign and alien masses, often described as a threatening one, and on the other hand only from a macroeconomical point of view which does not regard the migrant as a subject himself.

Common descriptions and presentations mainly forget to mention the whole process and its diverse backgrounds; without the hiring offices in the countries of origin and without the importance of women as actors in the migration process.

To see migration in the context of a western-countries’ position, which considers people from economically weaker and “less-civilised” countries as an easy and available workforce seems, to Cornelia Kogoj, to present the important and hitherto almost non-existing perspective of the migrant.

In order to challenge and change the traditional perception of this topic, other civic museums in Europe have already shown exhibitions about migration. For example: “The People in London. Fifteen Thousand Years of Settlement from Overseas” (Museum of London), “Hiergeblieben” (Hannover/Germany), “Migrationsgeschichte(n)” (Museum europäischer Kulturen/Berlin), and also in Vienna “Wir. Zur Geschichte der Zuwanderung in Wien” (Historisches Museum Wien).

Now the “Initiative Minderheiten” and the “Wien Museum” have tried to deal with the misperception of migration in their own way (see 1.1 Description of the project). In the words of Brigitta Busch and Martina Böse who wrote a study of the exhibition “Gastarbajteri” this new way is to look at migration not in a multicultural context but rather by stressing diversity.

Target

According to Cornelia Kogoj, the exhibition at the “Wien Museum” wants to reach the “mainstream”-public – which is a reason why they used this location – instead of only reaching a rather “insider”-public who would visit such exhibitions regardless of where it was took place.

The other exhibition at the “Stadtbücherei am Gürtel” was intended to reach people of a lower class and people with migratory background. Especially the youth who would not visit the museum in the centre but instead spend their time at the “Stadtbücherei”.

Methodology

Without having seen the exhibition in reality one can make out three dimensions regarding the conception.

- A civil initiative collaboration with the museum
Firstly Wolfgang Kos, a representative of the Wien Museum, appreciates being a middleman between an initiative or NGO like the Initiative Minderheiten and the well established institution of the Wien Museum.
- Between the mainstream and periphery
Placing the topic at a famous and meaningful place for the city's understanding of history is important as it is an attempt to reach out to the under-represented minority at the locality of the library outside the centre.
- Framing the project with activities
Activities were undertaken in order to support the understanding of the exhibition's intentions. Hence the static exhibition was accompanied by a number of discussions, guided tours, workshops for young people and so on. The program was organised by "trafo.K" a company which is specialised in transferring exhibitions to the public.
www.trafo-k.at
Some examples of the program:
 - Literature info rooms
 - Trainees involved in making the medial installation
 - Youth's public action
 - Guided tours in different languages with different topics
 - Student discussions
 - Exhibition catalogue with deeper background information
- Online version which tries to trace the stations of the exhibition in reality
- Deliberate use of means to attract, provoke and encourage people in order to think further.
For instance, this is shown by using the title "Gastarbajteri" that is a neologism used among Serbo-Croatian people. It derives from the questionable and euphemistic German term "Gastarbeiter". According to Brigitta Busch (a medial scientist) and Martina Böse (social scientist), it loses its negative implication and shows rather an ironic and emancipating character because of the appropriation of the term by the migrants themselves.

Authors, Funding and Networks

Authors

Mainly the Initiative Minderheiten and Wien Museum. But there were also many single participants working on different stages and parts of the project (see the full list at <http://gastarbajteri.at/im/107455867486>)

Funding

Financing consisted of different sources of support. It was funded partly from European Union and the city of Vienna grants and also received support from

Austrian trade unions and the industrial chamber (see the complete list of supporters under <http://gastarbajteri.at/im/107463666800>).

Networks

The main actor Initiative Minderheiten cooperated with, besides the Wien Museum and the Hauptbücherei am Gürtel, a number of different groups and organisations (see <http://gastarbajteri.at/im/107463666800>).

Strengths and almost no critique

First of all it doesn't seem to be fair to evaluate the exhibition without visiting it. But in form and content the project conception has some remarkable aspects. According to Cornelia Kogoj the main strength is the way it shows migration from a hitherto mostly neglected perspective.

Moreover the conception of choosing a locality where usually "mainstream" oriented exhibitions take place implements the idea of influencing the majority's view very well. To choose this traditional museum, in Cornelia Kogoj's view, might be the first step of imprinting the topic in the historical self-perception of the city and furthermore in future times into the schoolbooks of Austria.

Another strength characterised by Wolfgang Kos from the Wien Museum is the interplay between an active NGO and a traditional museum with large publicity. Involving youth and also migrant youth into the project shows the general idea of encouraging people to take part and to focus on the subject as a self-acting one. The online version has to be appreciated as a possibility of giving the exhibition a long term and more sustainable character. At the same time the online version is not able to deliver the impression of a real exhibition and there is also a lack of completeness. In any case it serves as an instructive overview.

The exhibition tries to connect a very ambitious theoretical approach with a visible and, for a broader public, adaptable result. This problem is recognised by Wolfgang Kos from the museum as well as from Cornelia Kogoj from the Initiative Minderheit. To what extent this challenge was solved cannot be said clearly, but it seems obviously that the pictures do not try to trace the ongoing negative stereotypes or to overstress the exotic appearance of people but rather to show people leaving their home far behind and fighting in a very foreign environment where mistrust, suspiciousness and structural discrimination are the main aspects with which they were and are confronted.

There is the simple example of a father who had migrated to Austria and sends only very nice and pleasant pictures home. These pictures contrasted with the pictures of the uncomfortable reality taken by his son when he came to Austria, demonstrate only a fragment of how difficult and ambiguous the discourse and the perception of migration realities could be. Given such an example it seems to be clear that there is not one homogenous group of migrants and one history of migration. Headlines in newspapers or official and regulatory examples show in contrast to this the totally different way to look at these people from the point of view of mainstream society and the state.

Although, not being destined explicitly as an intercultural practise the making of the exhibition made it an actual intercultural practise because it contained such a lot of contributions from people with different ethnical backgrounds. This appears in the composition of the organisation and management team, the (not only) migrant youth projects as well as in the single contributions to the exhibition itself. After all, it was the intention to show the migrant as a subject which is the basis of every good intercultural practise.

LINKS

- www.wienmuseum.at
The Historical Museum of Vienna.
- www.gastarbajteri.at
The homepage of the exhibitions where one can find the online version.
- Hakan Gürses, Cornelia Kogoj, Sylvia Mattl (ed.), Gastarbajteri. 40 Jahre Arbeitsmigration, Wien 2004.
The catalogue of the exhibition.