

As Arge Schubhaft¹ counsellors, we are naturally committed to awareness-building for the subject of asylum seekers held in pre-deportation detention. In the course of time various personal items have collected at our office, including letters and drawings sent to us by detainees. Such material carries a much more powerful message than any text written by an outsider; it has the immediacy of authenticity. We therefore decided to use these documents to create a kind of exhibition. For that purpose we contacted Franz Wassermann and he readily offered to help. His particularly intensive involvement with detained asylum seekers and the work done by the Arge Schubhaft organisation finally led to the SCHUBHAFT art project, which Franz Wassermann produced in co-operation with Arge Schubhaft.

From our daily work we were well aware of the fact that, on the basis of the current political situation, immigration and the problems of migrants and refugees was an unpopular subject with purely negative standing. We were nevertheless surprised to discover the same negative attitude in the world of art as well. To our consternation a in addition to frequent approval and praise a the art project and Franz Wassermann himself attracted criticism from the cultural, political and ecclesiastical establishments.

In this context it is worth mentioning the comments made by Dr Silvia Eiblmayr (director of Innsbruck's Taxigalerie) in an article that appeared in the Innsbruck weekly "Tip" (28th volume, issue no. 43, author Christiane Schneider) on the subject of the "occupation" of the art gallery. There it says that Franz Wassermann "made a high-handed attempt to instrumentalise the subject of pre-deportation detention for asylum seekers, the people involved, the gallery and myself". The artist's goal of providing people whose voices go unheard with a sanctuary located between art and politics was completely ignored and made to look ridiculous. Arge Schubhaft also came in for criticism: "The artist's ego might benefit from the incident but not the cause of Arge Schubhaft, but maybe they have chosen to kowtow to art in the belief that, since it is supposed to be art, it must be good." That is a view we refute. On the contrary, the initiative to contact Franz Wassermann came from Arge Schubhaft itself and was taken in the light of the social commitment the artist had shown in his earlier works. The project was handled in collaboration with Arge Schubhaft, although the organisation had no say in the actual execution, i.e. no restrictions were placed on Franz Wassermann's artistic freedom. Readers of the newspaper article were also told that Ms Eiblmayr felt she had "a right to pass judgment in terms of artistic merit" and said that "it is now fashionable to lay claim to such subjects in such questionable style as Wassermann does".

The fact is that pre-deportation detention for asylum seekers cannot be considered a fashionable phenomenon at any level of society. At most, it has become standard practice at certain levels of the political establishment to seek to preserve the

instrument of pre-expulsion detention instead of abolishing it. If the subject really were attracting public interest and had really become a subject of democratic debate, it would perhaps no longer exist, or at least not in the form it generally takes in Austria.

We are grateful to Franz Wassermann for his refusal to be discouraged by the difficulties confronting the project. Thanks to his commitment, those who normally remain invisible to society were given a public stage for a short time at least.

We were successful in our aim of generating fresh interest in the migration problem by transforming the subject into an art project and thus finding a new approach to the question in the public space. It nevertheless remains a fact that large sectors of the population know little about the situation of the refugees or the circumstances that caused them to flee, and migrants still tend to meet with general rejection.

Apart from people whose work brings them into contact with questions of human rights, there is little interest in the subject in society. For that reason very few people actually know what pre-deportation detention really means, or who is likely to be detained and why. The traditional thinking is that only those individuals are taken into custody who have done something seriously wrong. That is a belief that criminalises the detained asylum seekers and legitimises the institution of pre-deportation detention as an instrument of protection from a diffuse, unknown danger.

In a climate of uncertainty the unfamiliar is always a threat, and simple explanations are sought and labels applied that often stigmatise the innocent. In this context we would refer to the letter dated 3 December 2001 from Bishop Kothgasser, who did not bless the mobile home, among other things because of "the very negative light cast on the subject of detention for asylum seekers and hence on the authorities, who have their duty to do at a time of terrorist activity".

In the course of the art project we issued communications and held press conferences in order to explain our position and provide vital information, and we would like to take this

opportunity to say a few words about pre-deportation detention for asylum seekers and the Arge Schubhaft organisation.

In Austria, individuals without the right of abode in the country are placed in administrative detention for up to six months. They are held in special prisons which do not meet Western European standards. Many of the detainees are asylum seekers who fled their countries to escape political, religious, racial or some other form of persecution. Others were forced to leave their homes because of the sheer

impossibility of satisfying such elementary human needs as nutrition, health, education, etc. The detainees live in a state of multiple psychological stress. That derives from their personal biographies and flight on the one hand, and from the experience of detention on the other, which is all the more disturbing because of the problems of communication, the difficulties of making contact with relatives, the unpredictability of the length of stay in prison, and the absence of any meaningful form of activity.

From 1 January 2001 to 31 March 2002 a total of 2508 people were held in administrative detention pending deportation in Austria, and 1508 detainees were deported.

Arge Schubhaft is a registered association that started off as a project organised by students of the Innsbruck Social Academy in 1998. Since then members of the association, mostly working on a voluntary basis, have provided help and counselling for men and women held in pre-deportation detention. The work involves weekly visits to the detainees, providing them with information on their situation, organising legal counsel and medical assistance, and providing them with essentials including phone cards, books in various languages, clothing, etc. Arge Schubhaft also seeks to improve the conditions under which women, men and young people are held in detention prior to deportation and works in general for better reception services and living conditions for refugees in Austria.

¹ Working Party on Pre-deportation Detention

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