

Underground of Angyalföld – Graffiti: Why and why not?

The Collection of Regional History of Angyalföld (opened 1985) is the museum of the 13th district of Budapest, collecting local material culture and folklore from the 1970s to the present day. Each of its temporary exhibitions and occasional publications introduces one part of the rich past from the 13th district.

As with many European cities, graffiti is commonly found in the streets of Budapest. It has existed for years, yet nobody has known anything about it. Citizens and town management are full of prejudices about graffiti, yet no descriptive studies had been done on this subject in Hungary to date.

Objectives

- To document the graffiti found in the 13th district (some of them will disappear with the renovation of Margaret Bridge);
- To begin a dialogue between the graffiti subculture and so-called “dominant” or “high culture” which would help the two different worlds become closer, accept and understand each other;
- To present a public exhibition which would also be part of the process of learning and understanding.

Process

Background research identified people who could signpost organisers to others familiar with the topic and help in compiling literature. The history of Hungarian graffiti was explored through periodical library research, and graffiti in the 13th district documented through pictures.

In finding interviewees from the graffiti subculture, only the snowball method was successful. The high culture group included people from the 13th district affected personally or professionally by graffiti: a representative of the district council, chief architect of the district, a linguist, the director of the local Art Gallery, a paint artist, a school headmaster, a shopkeeper whose trade-sign had been done by a graffiti writer, a famous musician and a TV reporter. In addition, the head of the Department of Intermedia at the University of Fine Arts, representatives of civil organisations and the police were asked their opinions.

The exhibition opened in January 2009 under the title *Underground of Angyalföld. Graffiti: Why and why not?* It emphasised dialogue between the graffiti subculture and so called “high culture” without taking sides. The subculture was introduced from a different point of view, focusing on the social reflections of the drawings.

The texts of the exhibition boards (including a dictionary containing collected words from the language by the subculture, as well as a list with definitions on all styles of wall painting) were created in partnership with project participants. A graffiti writer designed the logo of the exhibition.

On the first floor of the museum's exhibition hall, photos of the documented graffiti were mounted on the walls, giving the atmosphere of a real “underpass.” Moving to the second floor was as if walking to the surface world of “public life.” On the second floor, visitors found themselves in interior designs of different styles, with high culture opinions in picture frames on the wall.

Leaving the exhibition visitors were asked questions encouraging them to express their thoughts in guest books made both in traditional book form, and as pieces of cardboard fixed to the wall. This sent messages to other visitors and entered into further dialogue. Follow-up displays also added diversity to the subject.

Outcomes

Introducing the graffiti subculture through dialogue was particularly successful. This was an absolutely new and unique way of introduction; people from both cultures appreciated it and found it valuable.

Graffiti participants felt that the opportunity to express their views in a new space contributed to the dispersal of prejudice. Members of the high culture group became familiar with the graffiti subculture, and in many cases acknowledged their mistaken views about writers.

The museum gained new audiences and dramatically increased attendance, and was approached by other organisations for advice on organising similar projects.

Pluralistic approaches were found to be the best way to establish a cultural dialogue in the museum. This meant giving up previous practice by not making a retrospective exhibition, but reflecting on a current happening.

The project and exhibition have led to an attitude change in the museum that will have great impact in the future. They will not stick to the primary or superficial meaning of objects but will focus on their reflection on society.

Neil – perhaps this quote could be used as an image?

Working together with people from different backgrounds was absolutely edifying - broadened my approach by all means. Cooperation proved to be useful during the planning and the making of the exhibition. Meanwhile I managed to know the desires and expectations of different kinds of people in connection with the exhibition, according to which I could plan and modify the project. Balázs Maczó, project coordinator

Institution

Local Historical Museum of Angyalföld
www.kult13.hu

Project coordinator

Balázs Maczó, museologist
balazsmaczo1981@yahoo.com

Target groups

Adults of the dominant culture with a positive or negative attitude towards graffiti;
members of the graffiti subculture of all ages.
The exhibition attracted 800 visitors