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How to Speak Precarious Histories from a Precarious Position?

Form(s) of knowledge. Nothing is given …

Katja Kobolt

Migration is "a complex texture […] continuously produced and reproduced as a part of socialization, which we ultimately want to transform"
(Labor Migration, 2014: 21).1

The guest worker/*Gastarbeiter/gastarbajter* – a figure which supposedly belongs to the European past – is a figure that stands in the forefront of all (im)possible backgrounds: labor, legislation, societal, economic, personal, historic, geopolitical. The discontinued temporariness of the work/life conditions of guest workers, immediately connoted by the term's construction through the "guest" and his/her "work," has often served as a backdrop for sketching out this figure, for constructing subjectivities that are supposedly more defined by their externality than by agency.

"Migration has, like no other social phenomenon, been shaped by images, patterns of interpretation, and political categorizations that

have been publicly produced and circulated," emphasized the editors of the catalog of Crossing Munich (2007–2009), presenting contributions on migration from the fields of art, science, and activism (Bayer/Engl/Hess/Moser 2009:89).2 Not even a decade later, as ever-intensifying global inequality and wars – with different and by no means exclusively military means – have caused millions to become "refugees," we can now witness once again how visual denotations and connotations of migration perpetuated in the mass media intersect with social, legal, and political conceptions which influence and restrict subjectivities.

Migration is indeed a "*conditio humana* and a generator of social change" (Hess 2015:51), but as it takes place and is rendered within a nation-state setting, migration has served as one of the central vehicles for power (division): dividing between those belonging to the "national body" and having representational power (e.g. through institutions of representative democracy) and those not belonging to the nation, who do not have the possibility to articulate their own voices publicly: taxation yes, but no (political) representation. It is the welfare state that has served as the primary representational framework for imagining the historical figure of the guest worker, primarily through the so-called Recruitment Agreements that emerged in the mid-1950s.

On the one hand, these Agreements orchestrated labor migration in "Marshall Europe" to some extent. On the other, Recruitment Agreements were more of a reaction to the reality of labor migration that had already been taking place on a large scale in spite of actual recruitment mechanisms. By signing the Recruitment Agreement with the Federal Republic of Germany in 1968, Socialist Yugoslavia attempted to more closely regulate labor migration as well as military servicemen. Yugoslavia also endeavored to assure more social rights to its citizens working

abroad, to temporally solve unemployment problems within the modernization process – especially regarding people from non-industrialized regions. However, it also hoped to profit from remittances while finding ways of strengthening ties with Western markets and economies (Ivanović 2016).

The figure of the *gastarbajter* seems to often be taken as a transparent and given one, and has evidently been the subject of various truth regimes (Foucault 2001), often (and repeatedly) stripping people who have migrated of their agency. The catalog of the 2016 exhibition *Jugo moja jugo* (Yuga My Yuga) at the Museum of Yugoslav History in Belgrade, which presented artifacts, archival material, media clippings, and testimonies regarding labor migration from Socialist Yugoslavia, outlined that: "A Gastarbeiter is first and foremost, someone who went to work abroad in the 1960s and at the beginning of 1970s, with the intention to earn as much money in the shortest period of time in order to be able to solve some existential issues in his home country. Foreign workers didn't go to learn the language, make families, or start a completely new life out there – they had the intention to return. Therefore, they kept a very close contact with the homeland, feeling primarily as citizens of Yugoslavia and not of the country to which they went to. Later migrations, i.e. the people who left Yugoslavia in the 1990s, cannot in any case be called Gastarbeiter" (Ivanović 2016:1).

Gastarbeiters have consequently not only actively contributed to developing the economies of their host countries, they have also been – especially in the contexts of Germany and Austria – devastated by the genocidal Nazi regime and war, which is also significant in a sociodemographic sense.[3] *Gastarbeiters*, their children, and their contemporary counterparts comprise the core of contemporary postmigrant societies.[4] Class, ethnicity, race, nationality, gender,[5] as well as other positive attributes that

intersect within the living body of a *gastarbeiter*, now retired, paved the way for millions to embody a new labor mobility:[6] professionals and non-professionals with temporary (sometimes even permanent) work, many (small-scale) entrepreneurs, and a string of contemporary terms denoting people who migrated (for work). Most of the terms represent the "working" base of people who (should) move because of / for work: foreign or migrant workers (*ausländische, migrantische Arbeitskräfte*) or expats, for example. In reference to the mobility of these "workers," however, we see a number of adjectives that primarily denote foreignness, such as *Ausländer*in* (foreigner), *ausländische*r Mitbürger*in* (foreign [co-]citizens), or *Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund*, the latter of which points to the migrant history of people themselves or that of their families or their multilingual background – like the term "NDH" (*nicht deutsche Herkunftssprache* / non-German mother tongue). The term "NDH students" is officially used in German educational policy and bureaucracy, apparently in order for the students and the schools they attend to be able to apply for financial and personnel support based on the German proficiency of the students. Even the term *Mehrheimische*, meaning "having more home(s)/lands," which has been promoted by some critical migration researchers with the aim of creating a positive reinterpretation of migrants' "hybridity," still points to people's "otherness" in the end – whilst in Germany they comprise a fifth or even two-thirds of the respective population in some conurbations or some cities regarding children under five years of age.[7]

But who were and how were *gastarbeiters* "made" and in what way does their labor migration relate to contemporary (labor) migration? What and how could we learn from *gastarbeiters* about contemporary paths of migration (paths which the author of the following text has also walked) as well as about post-neoliberal

postmigration (European) societies? And what are the answers to these questions if we look to and work with art? How should this search for possible answers within art production look in the first place? These are some of the questions that comprise one axis of and for the curatorial and art education platform, which formed on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the recruitment agreement between socialist Yugoslavia and West Germany, entitled *no stop non stop* (2016–2018).8

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no stop non stop developed from a feminist friendship, which also spurred *GUESTures*, a publication of the art-research-archival project with Yugoslav women guest workers by Margareta Kern and its Munich presentation, an edition of the *Living Archive*.9 Margareta Kern's project and feminist curatorial methods, which I have been researching and working with practically and theoretically – with the City of Women Festival Ljubljana, the curatorial collective Red Min(e)d and beyond – have also led to my critically and productively working on and with art production against the backdrop of a public commemoration of the so-called German *gastarbeiter* Agreement.

GUESTures, which created a unique stage for oral herstories by women *gastarbeiters* from socialist Yugoslavia, who came to West Germany in the course of the Recruitment Agreement – organized in a public/state-private/industry kind of way to work in telecommunications factories – shared methods and structures with the *Living Archive*. *GUESTures* juxtaposes archival, documentary material with video art through different "(non-)working stations," where the public is encouraged to actively intervene into the archive: to select material and put it on display (via overhead or

slide projectors), thus making the archive come "alive." There is another "living" dimension to *GUESTures*, which functions as an interface with the public, on the one hand, and which transforms the art installation, a "dead" archive, into an event of lived knowledge, on the other. Within and from the project, Margareta Kern organizes collective readings, where the public can select material from the archive and read it out loud. For the *GUESTures* edition in Munich, we further developed that format by underlining the participatory aspects of the readings and merging it with a situative community curating, where new entries into the archive were generated, and thereby also the potentialities of knowledge within the archive/art work. The gathering with Munich-based migrant women of different generations and backgrounds was an event of encounters, joint-readings from the archive, and a discussion about history and the contemporaneity of lived migration. The gathering has deliberately only been documented through written testimonies that became part of the archive – a selection of which went into the publication *GUESTures* – for which the women engaged in the reading were also paid, because the archive that consists of their migration (her)stories and everyday postmigrational experiences is still traveling in different forms to various contexts as an artwork by the artist Margareta Kern.[10]

When compared to the testimonies of the older generation of women guest workers in the *GUESTures* archive, the paradigmatic shift in production and also governmentality becomes visible in the testimonies of women who migrated to Germany more recently, who joined the public readings. This was visible in the withdrawal of the production line, in which workers' work-life choreography was orchestrated even beyond the production line itself by collectively organized means (such as collectively organized travels,

accommodation, canteens, etc.), which appear violent in today's culture of individualism, because they provide the same standards for everyone. This was also seen in the descent of national collectively organized working bodies (unions) in/by which *gastarbeiters* were often not represented, despite some fruits of their struggle for labor rights also spilling over to them. This is also present in the emphasis on flexible, self-employed worker entrepreneurs and is increasingly manifested in technologies as the internalized governmentality of "today's post-neoliberal unfolding of authoritarian capitalism" (TJ Demos, 2017), in which the externalization (of costs) of reproduction and care work have been borne by the workers – often migrant care workers, especially women. The latter form of migration is bundled and interconnected through class, gender, sex, ethnicity, geopolitical origin, and race and happens quasi beyond a regulated public framework. However, no regulation is also a kind of a regulation. "Old" Europe needs "new" Europeans and "others." The migration of the latter in particular, the so-called "aliens" (to expose the brutality of the Schengen Agreement through its vocabulary), are pushed into illegality and thereby regulated in ways which Achille Mbembe (2003) and Marina Gržinić (2008) concisely describe as *necropolitics*.

Through its original material, *GUESTures* tells the story of a seemingly perfectly orchestrated migration, which was organized by two sovereign states that developed economic ties among which the *gastarbeiter* agreement was a part – following some of those sources, this was done instead of war reparations, which West Germany didn't want to pay to Yugoslavia. In this sense, the states were "agents" or mediators between the workers and industry, who took "care" of the smooth issuance of documents, the organization of medical checks (only the youngest and healthiest could go), etc.

Subsequently, the industry took over the management of workers: travel, dormitory accommodation, and food (for which the amount was debited directly from workers' wages). Gordana, one of the guest worker voices in the *GUESTures* video, reports how after the death of Yugoslav President Tito, Yugoslav officials sent a request for workers in Germany to "attend" the president's funeral via television broadcast. However, the factory forbade the workers from stopping their work. Some of the workers, caught in the conflict of their civil duty towards their home country and the logic of capital, decided to stop working and attended the television broadcast of the funeral and were consequently fired.

Stop. Was one of the aims of the *gastarbeiter* agreement not to assure more social rights to citizens working abroad? This, and the question of how labor migration intersected with gender becomes even more complicated when we shift from *GUESTures* to analyzing another work on *gastarbajters*: the vampire novel, *Ljudi sa četiri prsta* (*People with Four Fingers*), which Miodrag Bulatović researched in Germany in 1974 and published a year later, and for which he won the literary award *NIN*. Bulatović's intense magical realist narrative takes us on a fare dodge from a rail station in a Yugoslav metropole to Germany and back. The main male character is Marković (renamed "Mark" by his compatriot slave keeper in Germany), raised in post-war poverty, as the son of a single mother. Marković's father was a military trumpeter, who played with the Nazi-collaborating army of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. His father escaped to post-war West Germany, and this put a strain on the family's precarious condition.

"Homeland, I no longer need your name. Homeland, let's settle, you and me: take everything you gave me, first of all my name, which I give back to you, so you can liberate me of your destiny and of your darkness! For, homeland, I am against you, because

you are immense and heartless, and I am insignificant and destitute, damaging you from within, you great, red apple! Homeland, my curse, you apple, let the worm leave you, and you grow and get bigger, become the greatest and most beautiful among the apples..." (*Ljudi sa četiri prsta,* 1976:7).11

Young Marković, the son of a war collaborator, decides very spontaneously to go with a friend to Germany in an overcrowded train, as do many other people. The friend quickly disappears during the journey, and Marković is thrown into a brutal whirlwind of exploitation, slavery, violence, crime, sadism (reflecting among other things the genealogy of the "Yugomafia" operating in the Benelux, francophone as well as German-speaking countries, which is based on networks of Alain Delon's former bodyguard, Stevan “Stevica” Marković), obsessions with the past, vengeance, and assassination attempts against Yugoslav institutions in Germany (reflecting assassinations by the Yugoslav secret service in the nationally organized diaspora, who Yugoslavia viewed as terrorists). He is also swallowed up by initially dystopian visions of his (socialist) homeland, which turn more and more positive, even utopian, through his precarious experiences in the West (mainly reproduced by Marković’s compatriots).

What we learn from the novel regarding *gastarbajter* migration is that it was massive. It was mainly from Eastern Europe. It was spontaneous and self-organized. It was precarious and its morphology was built on a legacy of forced labor. State-organized institutions even added to the precariousness as in the case of asylum seeker camps, which functioned as self-organized social recruitment centers for forced labor – often both criminal and utilizing slavery respectively. Entitling someone the right to waged labor or restricting the right to it is an obvious speech act. Slavery is thus also a performative act that acts as a parasite on the

performance of legal speech. In addition, as the agents of exploitation in the novel are mainly Markovićs compatriots, a stage for subjectivation in the novel seems to not be essentialized, at least not by ethnicity or nationality, but is rather depicted as structural: one is not born an exploiter, slave, or criminal. One becomes one.

In *GUESTures*, the home country – socialist Yugoslavia – recruited, organized, and sent women *gastarbajterice* to work for German corporations, where the state's agency was largely suspended. However, in *People with Four Fingers* we almost exclusively encounter male *gastarbajters*, who resemble brutally contemporary migrants, both male and female. National welfare states seem to play a minor role in their migration apart from adding to their precariousness due to restrictive administration, refusing in large part to organize their documents and status. Even in the novel's second part from 1977, *Peti prst. O onima koji nisu ušli u roman Ljudi sa četiri prsta. Putopis.* (The Fifth Finger. On the Ones that Did Not Make it into the Novel *People with Four Fingers*. A Travelogue.), which is a kind of *a posteriori* research lead towards the previous novel, we hardly find any women figures/informants. As displayed in both works, *GUESTures* and *People with Four Fingers, gastarbajter* migration was evidently also governed in gendered terms: women and men migrated differently, which has to do with gender constructions in both countries: in Socialist Yugoslavia, young women and their families obviously preferred organized methods of labor migration to more spontaneous ways, on the one hand, while German telecommunications and electronic industries in particular preffered female workers, on the other.[12] Whereas they shared (degrees of) exposure to exploitation in neoliberal terms following their migrations, it seems indeed that *gastarbajters* embodied what Louis Althusser called an *overdetermination*: "because when you believe that you have

understood the pillars of 'determination,' you don't know where exactly you are in reality, in front of reality, it can be that you are over-reality or under-reality. You should go up, beyond, or under" (Althusser, 1980). In order to be able to learn from the *gastarbajter*, we should first acknowledge their overdeterminantion, their being in front of reality, ahead of time. We should also acknowledge that their histories and herstories are not given. We need to mainly perform research with/from them and beyond the legal archives and official *histoire* that has stubbornly ignored their past, contemporaneity, and future. And we should pay attention to the representational framework as forms of knowledge (can) become knowledge itself.

Therefore, *no stop non stop* aims to create a space with artists and publics for encounters of evacuated his- and herstories which are rendered invisible or overwritten. It thereby works towards creating counter-public(s) with a rupturing potential.13 Discourse always has its materiality. The materiality could be the somatic/physical/psychological/economic experience of a migrant in a collective (situation) still defined by (mono-)national supremacy stretching from not (wanting to) understand(ing) (and not laughing) at jokes or proverbs from other "cultural" contexts to obvious intersectionality of ethnicity, race, and reproduction of social classes – respectively palpable in wage gaps and living situations, to name just two examples.14 However, if we seek a materiality emancipated from the given narrative frameworks of historical experience or "under-over-determinations," we should not suppress the inter-relational space that art practice can open if not squeezed into representational "determinations" (like exhibition, for example) by hypostatizing art into "accumulated knowledge about art" and "consumption capital" (Sholette, 2016:58). By "turning away from the realm of the exclusively visual and towards creative

practices focused on organizational structures, communicative networks and economies of giving and dissemination," we work towards a counter-public sphere (Sholette, 2016:60). Art practice and curating, if acknowledged as spaces of production and not mere representations of knowledge, are not only struggles for visibility but an event of an inter-relational space, which is (hopefully) uncanny and slippery enough not to be completely caught in processes of valorization and commodification.

"I don't tell everything, questions arise and do not get answered. Not everything is visible in a film. An incompleteness remains. I actually like that quite a lot." (Bilir-Meier, 2015:3,5).

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1 Translated from German by Katja Kobolt.

2 Translated from German by Katja Kobolt.

3 During the Nazi regime huge masses of the population living in Germany and Austria were murdered or emigrated due to persecution based on ethnic, political or sexual discrimination. On the other hand, both countries also lost a significant portion of the male population on fronts during WWII or due to its repercussions (camps for war prisoners, etc.).

4 While the German moniker *Gastarbeiter* acknowledged the alleged temporariness of migration, the notion of "postmigrant" points to the fact that migration could and in many instances is, an irreversible phenomenon – for migrant subjects as well as for the societies of their origin and the "adopting" countries that people migrate to. The term "postmigrant society" (*Postmigrantische Gesellschaft*) is a term promoted within German-speaking critical migration studies and has also been largely adopted by the state, i.e. predominantly educational and cultural agencies like the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung. The term attempts to underline that society is a dynamic and changeable phenomenon and that migration (should be) an agent of change (Foroutan 2015).

5 "Woman is the nigger of the world" is from a song by Yoko Ono and John Lennon from the year 1972, which Jelena Vesić interpreted in her talk on epistemological and representational violence, *Cordially Meeting the Other*, at Haus der Kunst, Munich, June 2017.

6 Mobility, especially labor mobility within the EU, has, one the one hand, been promoted by EU treaties as "free movement of workers" in the foundational Treaty of Rome (1957), policies (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union; Directive 2004/38/EC on the right of citizens of the Union and their family members to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States; Regulations (EU No 492/2011 on freedom of movement for workers within the Union) and programs, like the European Social Fund, EU Program for Employment and Social Innovation, etc. (Toplak 2017). On the other hand, the EU has taken huge endeavors (legal, political, structural, financial, architectural, repressive, and above all, military) to restrict inflow the and mobility of citizens from "third countries" or non-EU

countries (Toplak 2017, Bifo Berardi 2017, Vidović 2017, among others).

7 Figures from the Federal Statistics Office: https://www.bpb.de/nachschlagen/zahlen-und-fakten/soziale-situation-in-deutschland/150599/migrationshintergrund-iii

8 An initial collaboration by Katja Kobolt through Balkanet e.V. and Lothringer13 Halle (Munich), Suza Husse/District Berlin (Berlin) and Teja Reba/City of Women (Ljubljana) 2016–2018.

9 Red Min(e)d initiated with the Living Archive (LA) editions (2011–2015) as a platform engaged in (re-)defining curatorial and art exhibition (material) practices through a feminist work methodology. The LA edition in Zagreb (REDacting Trans-Yugoslav Feminisms conference, 2011) focused on political relations between feminism, contemporary art, and the (post-)Yugoslav space. The LA edition in Ljubljana (Alkatraz and Kapelica Gallery / Red Dawns Festival, 2012) was motivated by feminist strategies for creating and processing an archive of contemporary art as a living knowledge that affects the politics of everyday life. The LA edition in Sarajevo (public space, 2012) was contextualized by the politics of commons as a basis for forms of social re/production. The LA edition in Vienna (Open Systems and VBKÖ, 2012) critically approached the relation between center and periphery, putting into question the colonizing scope of the universalistic/particular binary oppositions that continually perpetuate the concept of othering. The Belgrade edition took place as the 54th October salon / *No One Belongs Here More Than You* (2013) and challenged visual and discursive methodologies of researching, re-thinking, and presenting the subject of (non-)human nature and forms of (social/political) imagination.

The Munich edition of *GUESTures* took place as a continuation of the LA project (Balkanet e.V., Galerie Kullukcu & Gregorian, 2013). Following the impetus of the Living Archive, which co-created its own community like a *polis* or like a true space between people who organize themselves for acting and speaking together on art commons and political freedom, Red Min(e)d moved towards a new practice in 2017: the symposium. The symposium appears here through its primary meaning of off or semi-public space, where people gather to eat, drink, dance, and talk or simply spend time together around specific or everyday life topics. The difference this time is that the symposium is for everyone. http://redmined.org/

10 Projects and publications webpage: http://guestworkerberlin.blogspot.de/

11 Translation by Katja Kobolt.

12 See more on this subject in Margareta Kern's article in this issue.

13 In the last decade, various interdisciplinary research and artistic projects have worked actively against the continuing absence of need for a new narrative (Bojadžijev 2008), which would not repeatedly objectify and marginalize the "ones having more home(s)land" (Yildiz 2009), but are rather told and co-written by the “speechless” (Rancière 2007): *Kanak Attack* (1998–), *Projekt Migration* (Cologne, 2002–2006), *Xenopolis* (Munich, 2005), *Crossing Munich* (Munich, 2007–2009), *Wienwoche* (2012–), *Langer weg der Gastarbajt* (Vienna, 2016), *Decolonize Munich* (Munich, 2013), *Ajnhajtclub* (Vienna, 2016), *They Were, Those People, a Kind of Solution* (2016–2018), as well as the *Berliner Institut für empirische Integrations- und Migrationsforschung* at the Humboldt University

in Berlin, the Research Center for Migration & Globalization at the University of Innsbruck, etc.

14 On the intersectionality of migration and class, there is some basic information and figures from the German Federal Statistics Office on so-called “migrant background” in relation to income or real-estate ownership, from which it becomes clear that "migrant background" statically means earning less and living in smaller apartments whilst paying more for them.

https://www.destatis.de/DE/ZahlenFakten/GesellschaftStaat/Bevoelkerung/MigrationIntegration/Migrationshintergrund/Tabellen/MigrationshintergrundNettoeinkommen.html

http://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/kurzdossiers/205190/die-postmigrantische-gesellschaft