Vienna Coffeehouse Conversations. An interview with Eugene Quinn by Gabriel Furmuzachi.

Eugene Quinn is a Londoner who lives in Vienna. He is an urbanist, a DJ, one of the founding members of the social intervention group Space and Place. He is a rebellious optimist, as he puts it himself. One of his projects is the Vienna Coffeehouse Conversations. Inspired by An Intimate History of Humanity, a book by the English philosopher Theodore Zeldin, he tries to bring people together and give them the chance to have meaningful conversations about how they see the world and about life in Vienna.

Where did you get the idea to do something like this? What made you think that people who do not know each other would happily sit together for a meal and talk not only about what it means to be a foreigner or a native in a city or in a country but also about their life and sometimes even about their hopes and fears?

Vienna is not a city which welcomes strangers. The locals are shy, intellectual and full of angst. It can be difficult for incomers to make friends or understand the soul of the city. But I know that there is lots of curiosity amongst the Viennese about the international community here – specially the U.N. office – and so we wanted to create a forum where insiders and outsiders meet as equals. In an age of right-wing intolerance, we wanted to send out another message – that Vienna is engaged and modern and open to the world. And for travelers, there is a fashion to go beyond the cliches and discover the real life of locals, instead of Sissi and Schnitzel.

What is your take on Theodore Zeldin's approach to life and human relationships? Many of his ideas about an alternative history of humanity are reflected in the special conversation menu which you hand out to everyone at the beginning.

Using a menu of questions to open up dialogue between strangers is a beautiful idea from Zeldin. I am drawn to people who reflect on life and develop individual thoughts. And those are exactly the kind of people who come to our events. We get more women than men, average age around 30, and people who read books and newspapers. Zeldin believes that the conversations we are having in 21st century are increasingly banal – about celebrities, sport or the weather.

What kind of questions do you have on the conversation menu? Could you pick one and tell us why did you choose it and why do you think it is relevant?

The questions are designed to build into a biography of yourself. They are deeply private, and people are often surprised how much they speak about very personal, touching subjects. But the atmosphere of the evenings builds trust in mutual revelation. They say that the Austrians are no good at small talk, but very good at big talk. The questions mean that you go straight for issues of family, friendship, power, money and ethics. A typical question: “Which part of your life was a waste of time?”

How do you get it funded? How many people are involved behind the scenes?

The evenings make almost no money. That is not the aim. We want a colourful mix of people, so we try to keep the price cheap – students, pensioners, artists – all are welcome.
How many people turn up usually and what kind of feedback do you get from them?

We get between 15-30 people each month (once or twice we had 60). All the feedback we get can be read on Tripadvisor. We actually got an award from that website, because participants rate our event so highly. One man said that he had told the person in front of him more than anybody ever, except his wife! People continue to email answers to the questions to each other for weeks after the event. We have so far welcomed people from over 60 different nations to come along and get to know Vienna better.

Were there people who were not happy with how the evening rolled? If so, what did they consider went wrong?

Well we get feedback on Tripadvisor in Japanese or Cyrillic and it can be tricky to find out what they said. Even where the person sitting in front of you is not the kind you would normally be friends with, it can be very interesting to get an insight into their lives. We have all read about the dangers of surrounding yourself with people just like you, whether on Facebook or in your work. Real life is diverse and complex and fascinating. A few people get annoyed when we have too many outsiders, and someone from Saudi meets someone else from China, instead of meeting the locals. But most months we have more Viennese than visitors.

How long is it since you've been living in Vienna? If you were to take part in a coffeehouse conversation, on which side of the table would you sit? Do you still find yourself a foreigner or do you think you have become a Viennese?

Even if I like this city more than many of my Austrian friends, I will never be a Viennese. In fact, I am not sure it is so good for your mental health to be Viennese. There is a stylish melancholy here which is deeply troubling to us, optimistic Anglos.

I usually do not take part in the conversations, and feel like a fraud, because my role is simply to introduce the concept, pair off the people and give them their conversation menus (we try to sit old with young, men with women, gay with straight and even left wing with right wing for maximum fireworks during the night). My job is finished after about 15 minutes, and the people become the show.

How would you describe your work, actually? Is it activism, is it art, is it social responsibility? A bit of all of the above?

Our urban culture group Space and Place explores the soul and identity of contemporary Vienna. We celebrate the city in all its modern complexity. I find the coffeehouses an important part of our evening (we have moved between 5 different cafés), because so many radical and avant-garde movements in art, literature, architecture, psychoanalysis and music were developed in these brown, intimate, bohemian spaces. We want to tell some new stories about our home town and open up new dialogue.

How do you get the people to come to the conversations? Do you make extensive use of social media? Are there people who came more than once?
Our project features in many guidebooks and has been written about in *The New York Times, The Guardian*, the *BBC*, etc. Of course, we promote it on Facebook, and in a Newsletter. But the best marketing is word-of-mouth – satisfied participants who tell their friends or buy tickets for their colleagues and family. And yes, we have had people come several times, because they answer the questions differently depending on who they are sitting in front of, and have had more time to reflect on the questions if they come a second time. And we heard about conversation partners who arranged to meet the next morning to answer all the questions. Some people spend two hours answering a single question.

*I know you are involved in many other projects. How many do you have going these days?*

We make 15 walks around Vienna, including a smells tour of the city, and a celebration of the worst architectural failures the city has made. We walk past all the beautiful buildings, and instead talk about the little loser structures that nobody ever talks about. There will be a book next year, and a remix of our social dining projects, plus an adult playground and we want to build on our film series, #HowToBeAustrian, where we ask immigrants to describe the little details of local life.

*Posted to the Center for Intercultural Dialogue:*