

Exhibiting Europe. The development of European Narratives in Museums, Collections and Exhibitions

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Banu Karaca has recently observed that „while we can find a conflation of culture and politics, that is ‘culture talk in the EU sector, the cultural sector has increasingly been ‘talking Europe’”¹. In the museum sector, this European „talk“ is at the moment conflated with a willingness to also „do Europe“. For over a decade we have been able to witness the development – and failure – of projects to create European museums such as the Musée de l’Europe in Brussels, the Bauhaus Europa in Aachen and the European Parliament’s own House of European History soon to be realised. For about the same period, already existing museums have been reorienting their exhibitions towards a more „European“ narrative. Thus the former Museum für Volkskunde in Berlin has changed its name to Museum Europäischer Kulturen and is currently undergoing a rearrangement of its collection, while the former Parisian Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires has moved its collection to Marseilles and will be opening in 2013 as the Musée des Civilisations de l’Europe et de la Méditerranée (Mucem). A redefinition of collections does however not only happen in individual museums, but also, on a larger scale, online – most importantly with the launch in 2008 of Europeana.eu aiming at „making Europe’s cultural and scientific heritage accessible to the public”². These redefinitions of collections and creations of new museums are accompanied by the organisation of museum professionals into networks for the exchange of objects, ideas and good practice examples such as the Museums of Europe Network or the Network of European Museums Organisations (NEMO).

This emerging musealisation of Europe and Europeanisation of the museum sector served as a starting point for the conference „Exhibiting Europe“ which was held at the Inter-cultural Museum in Oslo from the 7th to the 9th of April 2011. The conference served as the conclusion of the Research Project „Exhibiting Europe. The development of European narratives in Museums, Collections and Exhibition“ which was hosted by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology and financed by the Research Council of Norway under its programme Assigning Cultural Values (KULVER)³. The conference organisers observed that „any museum representing the history and histories of European integration has the inherent potential to be an important forum for defining a common European heritage and Europeaness not as a national, but as a trans- and supranational culture and identity“. Consequently the conference aimed to analyse if and how discourses on Europeanisation are put on display, how they manifest themselves in permanent and temporary exhibitions and in which way they affect the planning of new museums and transform the policies of existing ones. The conference was organised around three panels – Europeans on display, Centre and Periphery and Collecting Europe – each portraying a different museal approach to the challenges of a „common“ European heritage and identity.

The opening lecture „After the End of the Grand Narratives: Representing European Heritage“ was given by GERARD DELANTY (Sussex). Delanty argued for a breaking up of the grand narratives and asked to focus instead on the spaces of encounter between cultures. In such a cosmopolitan narrative, Europe would become hyphenated with internal pluralisation. Delanty concluded his lecture asking about the possibilities of including such a cosmopolitan narrative into museums. This question was taken up by the commentator THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN (Oslo)

¹ Banu Karaca, „The art of integration: probing the role of cultural policy in the making of Europe.“ In: *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 2 (2010), pp. 121-137.

² <<http://www.europeana.eu>> (02.05.2011)

³ <[\(http://www.forskningssradet.no/servlet/Satellite?c=Page&cid=1224698024448&pagename=kulver%2FHovedsidemaldsidemal\)](http://www.forskningssradet.no/servlet/Satellite?c=Page&cid=1224698024448&pagename=kulver%2FHovedsidemaldsidemal)> (02.05.2011)

who applied Delanty's plea for cosmopolitanism to actual exhibitions, collections and practices of material culture. Looking at the peripheral spaces of Norway, he analysed the existence or non-existence of such a cosmopolitan narrative in exhibitions of the Sami and Kven populations in Finmark and Troms – regions traditionally marked by cross-border exchange and a multi-ethnic population.

That grand narratives are more and more broken up into series of individual stories was the underlying observation of the first panel Europeans on display. WOLFRAM KAISER (Portsmouth) showed that in the ongoing musealisation of the European integration process, we find a prominence of the biographical approach. This approach manifests itself in the introduction of the biographies of the so-called founding fathers of the European Union into exhibitions on European integration and the musealisation of their homes. Additionally, we find an introduction of non-prominent Europeans into exhibitions as „a narrative strategy of engaging visitors and transporting particular messages about the benefits of European integration and the EU“ as well as the invitation to visitors to become active participants in the narration of European history. Kaiser observed that the biographical approach might have the potential for bringing the contested nature of European integration and the EU to the fore, but doubted that the new European museum projects would be willing to introduce openly euro-critic voices into their exhibitions. Sometimes museum practitioners might however not get around redefining their exhibition aims according to the results of oral history projects, as ANNE OVERBECK (Münster) showed in her analysis of the use of oral history in an 2009 exhibition on Italian Ice Cream makers in Germany, at the LWL-Industriemuseum Zeche Hannover, in the conception of which she was involved herself. The practitioners had planned to talk about a transnational identity and a European citizenry in the exhibition on which they expected the interviewers, as seasonal migrant workers, to have acquired. What they did however find was a strong regionalism and an emphasis on their Italian roots on the part of the ice-cream makers. The very practice of recording and collecting

personal testimonies was analysed by STEFFI DE JONG (Trondheim) with reference to the use of testimonial videos in Holocaust and Second World War Museums. De Jong observed that the practices of recording, collecting and displaying testimonial videos results in a materialisation of the very act of remembering, thereby turning communicative memory into cultural memory. That the use of biographies is not only prevalent in exhibitions on contemporary history, but does also seem tempting for exhibitions that try to represent the *longue durée* of European history was shown by INES KESKE (Leipzig) who compared the level of Europeanisation in two exhibitions on the Hohenstaufen dynasty, one from 1977 and one from 2010. The following discussion led by GUIDO VAGLIO (Turin) and WOLFGANG KASCHUBA (Berlin) revolved around the dilemma between history and memory in terms of using witnesses in exhibitions. Even though their recounts might not always be historically dependable, the use of the biographical approach in the museum might allow a breaking up of the grand narratives.

The second panel, Centre and periphery, dealt with a trope of European integration that has lately got a lot of attention in museal displays of European history and culture: mobility and the interaction and exchange inside Europe and between Europe and its outside. KERSTIN POEHLIS (Berlin) looked at what has lately become a rather fashionable phenomenon, namely migration exhibitions. She observed that migration exhibitions contribute to a larger extend than other exhibitions to a meta discourse on the current role of museums in Western societies and in this way fuel the current discussions on Europeanisation and the foundations of European culture. Migration exhibitions show Europe as blurred and they mostly do so by subverting a former symbol of a clear-cut definition of territoriality: the map. The interaction between museums and other institutions in the development of a European memorial culture and European discourses was also the subject of the three following papers. LJILJANA RADONIC (Vienna), analysing the establishment of the Jasenovac Memorial Museum in Croatia, showed the influence that the Europeanisation of the Holocaust has on the memorial cul-

ture of an EU candidate country. She observed the existence of certain aesthetic and narrative standards that influenced the exhibition in Jasenovac: the treatment of the Holocaust as a moral lesson from which „we Europeans“ have learned and the focus on victims illustrated through lists of names. This orientation towards Western standards leads to a revision of the particularities of the Croatian case, marginalising the genocide against the Serbs and the Rom and sidelining the deeds of the Ustaša regime. WALTRAUD BAYER (Graz), looking at the exhibition Europe – Russia – Europe shown at Moscow’s State Tretyakov Gallery on the occasion of the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the representation of the EU in the Russian Federation and the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome observed the problems that arise in the definition of European cultural heritage. Allowing countries to select a maximum of four works highlighting at the same time their national art historical contributions and their contribution to European unification, the exhibition generally avoided masterpieces and the representation of inner-European disputes, so that the result appeared too shallow and politically correct to the public. TORGEIR BANGSTAD (Trondheim), focusing on the European Route of Industrial Heritage, analysed how the inclusion of individual heritage sites into routes allows a presentation of the individual sites as interrelated and connected as common European heritage. The following discussion which was introduced by KLAS GRINELL (Gothenburg) and NIKOLAI VUKOV (Sofia) centred around the contemporary shift from the use of the epistemic object towards the use of objects as symbols. Furthermore, the question of when Europe can figure as an appropriate scale for narrating a specific story was brought up.

Exhibiting Europe implies the existence of a collection of objects that are connoted in some way or another as European. To analyse this framing of objects as European was the subject of the final panel Collecting Europe. Considering 21st century collecting methods, how should the process of Europeanising objects and displaying them be evaluated? That collecting Europe does only very rarely mean putting together a collection of new ob-

jects became clear from all four presentations. Collecting Europe is, on the contrary, mostly an act of redefining and reorganising objects from already existing collections. GABRIELA NICOLESCU CRISTEA’s (London) analysis of the museal practices of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest showed how this redefinition does work on the small scale. Already in 1990, only three months after the Romanian Revolution, work began to re-install an ethnographic exhibition in what had formerly been the Museum of the Communist Party. Under the leadership of the Romanian artist Horia Bernea, a Europeanisation of the existing ethnographic collection took place in which the national agricultural heritage was put in relation to a „common“ European Greek and Roman and Christian ancestry in the Mediterranean area. On a larger scale, the redefinition of already existing collections does mostly take place online. Websites such as Europeana.eu which formed the subject of NANNA BONDE THYLSTRUP’s (Copenhagen) paper or the virtual exhibit project of the *Inventing Europe*⁴, presented by ALEC BADENOCH (Eindhoven), reassemble items from already existing collections under the heading „European“. Thylstrup observed that Europeana.eu can be interpreted as an attempt by the European institutions to create a bulwark against an emergent „Americanisation“ of indexing regimes, copyright laws and digital governance as it is primarily carried out by Google. What exactly a „Europeanisation“ of indexing regimes might look like was shown by Alec Badenoch. Badenoch, one of the collaborators of the *Inventing Europe* project, illustrated the potential of digital collections to embed objects into multiple stories, inviting the visitor of digital heritage to surf and discover ever new aspects of an object. In the case of *Inventing Europe*, the metadata that the objects are embedded in is however still chosen and defined by a limited number of scholars and museum professionals who define the objects’ European added value. STEFAN KRANKENHAGEN (Trondheim/ Hildesheim) in his paper introduced the concept of the relational object in accordance to Bruno Latour’s re-signification of

⁴ <<http://www.inventingeurope.eu/invent/>> (02.05.2011)

things. By this, Krankenhaus aimed to grasp the theoretical implication of the somehow fashionable collection strategy of participative collecting and link it to discourses about Europeanisation. He showed that objects, gathered by curators through outreach-programs, rather than representing epistemic value first of all represent the reassembling of the social. Defined that way, participative collecting can be inscribed in processes of Europeanisation with their focus on democratisation, participation and the border-crossing of social gatherings.

The concluding discussion, which was introduced by BRITA BRENNÄ (Oslo) and ISABELLE BENOIT (Brussels), put into question the role of Brussels as the centre of an ongoing cultural Europeanisation as it has for example been advanced by Cris Shore. The process of Europeanisation should rather be seen relationally as a multi-directional movement of adaptation and interpretation in which individual actors, networks, museums and the European institutions cue and influence each other. The discussion as well as the conference in general benefited from the large amount of international museum practitioners who participated and initiated a fruitful dialogue between the academic and the museal field.

Conference overview:

Opening Lecture

Gerard Delanty (Sussex): After the End of the Grand Narratives: Representing European Heritage.

Introduction by Kjersti Bale (Oslo) and comments by Thomas Hylland Eriksen (Oslo).

Panel I: Europeans on Display

Wolfram Kaiser (Portsmouth): From Great Men to Ordinary Citizens? The Biographical Approach to Narrating European Integration History in Museums

Steffi de Jong (Trondheim): The Figure of the Witness in Second World War Museums

Ines Keske (Leipzig): How a Swabian Dynasty Became European. The Two so-called Staufer Exhibitions of 1977 and 2010 in Comparison

Anne Overbeck (Münster): Is Everything that Moves a European? On the Chances and Risks

of Using a Biographical Approach to Display Abstract Phenomena

Comments and Discussion by Guido Vaglio (Turin) and Wolfgang Kaschuba (Berlin)

Panel II: Centre & Periphery

Kerstin Poehls (Berlin): Europe, Blurred: Migration, Margins and the Museum

Ljiljana Radonic (Vienna): Croatia - Exhibiting Memory and History on the 'Shores of Europe'

Waltraud Bayer (Graz): Europe - Russia - Europa

Torgeir Bangstad (Trondheim): A Future in Ruins: Post-Industrial Landscapes as Deterritorialized Heritage

Comments and Discussion by Nikolai Vukov (Sofia) and Klas Grinell (Gothenburg)

Panel III: Collecting Europe

Stefan Krankenhaus (Trondheim/Hildesheim): Collecting Europe. Together? Strategies and Aporia of Collecting Today

Gabriela Nicolescu (London): Insertions: Experiments of Art in an Ethnographical Museum

Alec Badenoch (Eindhoven): Harmonized Spaces, Dissonant Objects, Making Europe? National and Local Collections in a Collaborative Digital Platform

Nanna Bonde Thylstrup (Copenhagen): European and the Differences between Public and Commercial Digitization in Europe

Comments and Discussion by Brita Brenna (Oslo) and Isabelle Benoit (Brussels)

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