

## **Exhibiting Europe**

### **The Development of European Narratives in Museums, Collections, and Exhibitions**

By Stefan Krankenhagen

‘Unity in diversity’ – the motto of the EU reflects the closed circuit of the European self-image. After its enlargement to include 27 member-states, anyone who wishes to discuss Europe now explicitly or implicitly represents and analyzes the EU, too. In this sense, the contemporary construct of *Homo Europaeus* (Schmale 2001) cannot be avoided. In order to achieve legitimacy for the current and future transformation within Europe, traditions, historical images and the political presence of Europe blur into each other: thus, the reasons for, the course and the aims of Europeanization cannot be separated from each other analytically.

The development of European narratives in museums, collections and exhibitions accordingly provides an exemplary field of inquiry for understanding Europeanization as a cultural process. This process is both affected and promoted by state and societal actors that collaborate on the European and nation state level, as well as on regional and local levels. The present edition of *Culture Unbound* thus tracks and analyzes contemporary Europeanization and contemporary musealization processes. Both of these processes are, of course, not coextensive, but they certainly do react to each other. What happens, then – to ask our question – when the indistinct image of a European history and presence meets the ‘identity factory’ of the museum (Korff & Roth 1990)?

It has become commonplace to define Europe as the place that evades all definitions. According to Edgar Morin ‘Europe is a concept with many faces that cannot be superimposed on each other without creating an indistinct image’ (1990/2009: 210). The French thinker can appeal to prominent pioneer thinkers such as Georg Simmel and Paul Valéry (Delschen & Gieraths 2009), each of whom declared the ‘impossible definition of Europe’ (Landwehr 2007) to be its destiny. Europe thus becomes a continuous process, a non-place in the real sense of the term, a Utopia. ‘Is there a completely new “today” of Europe?’ This question was posed by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1992: 12) at the end of the twentieth century.

At the same time, Europe *has* been defined – and probably more often and more directly in the last twenty years than in the history of the continent hitherto. Yet, while the cultural elite understand Europe in the ‘difference *with itself*’ (Derrida 1992: 9, italics in original), politicians and senior officials in the European Union (EU) proceed in an incomparably more prosaic manner. Europe is, according to the European Commission (2007), ‘an unprecedented and successful social and

cultural project', one that can appeal to common cultural and historical root, as Jean-Claude Trichet (2004), the President of the European Central Bank has emphasized:

Although not all of us are necessarily aware of it, all Europeans exist in a unique cultural atmosphere that is jointly influenced and inspired by the poetry of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Baudelaire among many others. An atmosphere that is also shaped jointly by the thoughts of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Erasmus, Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, Kant, Kierkegaard.

Europe is imagined as a common historical and experiential space whose abundance is ostensibly captured by the unique characteristics of the continent. Thus, from the many histories of Europe, there emerges the ordered and ordering image of a European 'unity in diversity', of an imagined property of Europe as the legitimation of its present and future political composition. In this sense, Hans-Gert Pöttering, the former President of the European Parliament (EP), understands the future House of European History, which was initiated by him, as a reinforcement of Europe's cultural integration. 'The House of European History will bring Europe's history alive for everyone, but especially young people, and will thereby help promote an awareness of European identity.'<sup>1</sup>

With this, two apparently irreconcilable positions confront each other. On the one hand the reflexively cultural-philosophical view of the pitfalls of essentialist ideas of Europe throughout history and in the present day; on the other hand the at best naive, at worst hegemonic projection of imagined communities of cultural and historical unity and superiority in the name of Europe. From this perspective, the process of Europe's integration represents a repetition of the nationalization processes of the nineteenth century under post-national conditions.

## **II. Making Nations, Making Europe**

The political pitfalls of a construction of cultural unity – whether in relation to the nation or to Europe – continue to be practically tangible in the present day. For example, in the plans currently being developed in countries like Poland, France or the Netherlands for their own national history museums. Thus, France's President, Nicolas Sarkozy wants his plans for a national history museum to be understood as an answer to the French identity crisis diagnosed by him and others, the purpose being 'to reinforce national identity' (quoted from Chrisafis 2010). The Dutch social democrat Jan Marijnissen presented a similar argument in 1994, when justifying the founding of a national history museum for the Netherlands on the basis of the loss of societal cohesion (interview Byvanck). The identity factory of the museum is politically positioned in this way: as a moment of the compensation for post-national and post-modern insecurities.

The academic fields of cultural science, social anthropology and ethnology have reacted to this situation. In his analysis of the cultural-political and symbolic interventions of Europe since the 1980s, Cris Shore (2000: 50-53) refers to three

particular features of this new iconography of Europe. This is, firstly, teleologically oriented and thus committed to the nineteenth century conception of history. Secondly, the symbols of the new Europe replicate those of the old national states. And, thirdly, a paradoxical situation is arising with regard to the construction of a cultural unity of Europe that is simultaneously already present and still to be created. Susan Sontag once described this process as ‘the Europeanization not of the rest of the world, but [...] of Europe itself’ (quoted in Morley & Robins 1995: 88), in which a common European culture and history has become the condition for and the strived-for result of the cultural policy of the EU. As a fourth feature we can add the danger of an implicit exclusion of specific ethnic and social groups, such as immigrants or religious minorities, by means of a possible ethnocentric conception of European identity and history (Bhabha 1998; Str ath 2000; Eder 2001; Balibar 2005).

In line with the criticism of the convergence-oriented policies of the EU institutions formulated here, the few works of political science (Theiler 2005; Littoz-Monnet 2007; Staiger 2009, 2008) that have dealt with European cultural policy have concentrated on the EU level and on the role of various state actors. This highly constricted point of view often leads to the perception that the EU cultural policy primarily involves ‘top-down symbolic dynamism’ that is only then aimed at generating a ‘bottom-up’ process of cultural identity-formation (Theiler 2005: 4). Shore (1999: 63) has strongly criticized this supposed attempt to create a more strongly pronounced common European identity on the basis of a larger cultural feeling of togetherness. This involves a

characteristically top-down, managerial and instrumental approach to ‘culture building’ and its assumption that ‘European identity’ can somehow be engineered from above and injected into the masses by an enlightened vanguard of European policy professionals using the latest communication technologies and marketing techniques.

In practice, however, this clear juxtaposition becomes blurred, in the same way that the normatively argued critique of the leading role of Brussels in the cultural sector proves to be untenable. For the making of Europe is to a large extent characterized by competition and cooperation between various state and societal institutions on the European, national and regional levels. Here the actors in the cultural sector do not merely react passively to the pressure to fall in line (Caporaso, Green Cowles & Risse 2001) that emanates from political and economic integration in the EU, rather, they act themselves, driving forward, modifying or blocking the processes of Europeanization. Although the European institutions do not have a cultural-political executive (Gordon 2010), in the last 20 years a knock-on effect on cultural actors in the member states has developed in such a way ‘that the cultural sector has increasingly been “talking Europe”’ (Karaca 2010: 125). New research on the negotiation of the European cultural heritage (Vos 2011) or on transnational subsidy programmes in the arts (Karaca 2010) confirm this development.

Europe can thus be as little thought of apart from economic and political integration as it is completely subsumed in these processes. In all of the forms of Europe there instead takes place a continual ‘blending of the idea of Europe with the cultural-political project of the EU’ (Poehls 2009: 10). This necessarily results in asynchronicities *in* Europe: related according to generation to societal and individual experiences of Europeanization; geographically related to the linking of everyday experience and institutionalization to Europeanization; historically related to the national, regional and local memory narratives and their possible convergence in and through Europe; culturally related to the various ethnic preconditions for Europe; institutionally related to the relevance in terms of content and the structural influence of the European institutions.

It is these asynchronicities that become tangible in the collections and exhibitions in Europe's museums. ‘Today [museums] are part of the re-negotiation of what it means to be a nation in a late-modern world of migration, internationalisation, and globalisation and, in Europe, a growing community: namely the EU’ (Aronsson 2010: 556). Yet the demand to measure the Europeanization of the museal field has not been met by current research. The book *Europa ausstellen. Das Museum als Praxisfeld der Europäisierung* (Kaiser, Krankenhagen & Poehls 2012) takes up this issue in greater detail.

## Exhibiting Europe

Building on the seminal works of cultural science (Vergo 1989; Pearce 1990; Karp & Lavine 1991) and history (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983), museum science has provided a constructivist perspective since the beginning of the 1990s. The functions of cultural objects in the processes of nationalization and colonization in the nineteenth century (Stewart 1984; Pomian 1987; Handler 1988; Kaplan 1994; Clifford 1994; Pearce 1995) have been the focus of interest alongside detailed studies on national history of museums (Korff & Roth 1990; von Plessen 1992; Raffler 1997) and the production of classification criteria of the modern age (Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Bennett 1995). In recent years, these perspectives have been broadened, principally by comparative studies on national museums (Knell et al. 2010) as well as works on transnational places of remembrance (Macdonald 2003; Williams 2007; Ostow 2008; Wahnich, Láštiová & Findor 2008; Aronsson 2010) and the influences of migration on museal constructions of identity (Baur 2009). What is missing however, is genuinely transdisciplinary perspectives that productively links together the processes of Europeanization and musealization. The essays in this volume are intended to address this gap.

For the museal self-image changes in step with society, as Klas Grinell (2010: 178), curator of the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, has stated: ‘Many nationalistic projects are today under re-evaluation under pressure from

globalization, large scale immigration and regionalization.’ As he shows, due to growing cultural and ethnic diversification in society, museums today no longer possess a comprehensive power of representation. This is an observation that can be applied to the Europeanization of the museal field: there is no longer any single narrative that is so powerful as to be capable of establishing itself as a new master narrative – including any European master-narrative in a museum.

Instead of this, museums today are understood as an arena (Karavanagh 2001), a place of negotiation (Aronsson 2010) and a ‘*conquest of the future*’ (Imhof 2008: 49, italics in original). As such, the museum is – to speak with Nietzsche – leaving the realm of antiquarian history and becoming an actor of the present and future. Europe can be written into this discourse and serves as a watchword of modernization for museum theorists and museum practitioners alike, as all of the articles in this volume demonstrate in different ways. The manner in which the watchword ‘Europe’ is used in order to initiate, legitimate and possibly realize various innovations is shown by the essays in this volume.

Torgeir Rinke Bangstad’s article *Routes of industrial heritage: on the animation of sedentary objects* gives an example of how museological discourses and Europeanization sometimes go hand in hand. In his investigation of industrial heritage routes and the way they functionalize and animate remaining sites of previous industrial enterprises, he traces the European Route of Industrial Heritage back to its German blueprint, the Route Industriekultur. Analyzing the loss of meaning of already abandoned factories, the links between local and trans-local connections in heritage routes, the role of routes in rethinking cultural identities, and the new ethics of conservation, Bangstad’s article offers an understanding of cultural routes as an object of the reanimated circulation of the most heavy, sedentary objects conceivable.

Another attempt at modernizing both museological practices and the idea of national or regional spaces is the highly contested field of virtual exhibitions. In his article *Harmonized spaces, dissonant objects, Inventing Europe? Mobilizing digital heritage*, Alexander Badenoch presents a twofold argument. Badenoch shows, firstly, how a European (self-) perception and the construction of European identities are centred on forms of mobility. This cultural path dependency makes it more feasible for European agents in the heritage field to design a common European vision of a mobilized collection in the virtual world. Challenging this harmonized notion of digital heritage, secondly, the article presents insights into the making of the collaborative online exhibit *Europe, interrupted*. This platform, of which Badenoch is the chief curator, reveals various forms of technological transnational entanglement as well revealing rather than concealing the navigation of dissonant objects in the virtual world.

Digitizing objects and collections is not only an attempt at harmonizing cultural visions of Europe. It is, as Nanna Thylstrup reveals, to an even greater extent part of a global competition in relation to property rights and technical standardization.

Her article *The digital dimension of European cultural politics: Index, intellectual property and internet governance* shows why and how the internet has become a central issue of EU politics. The digital collection Europeana here serves as a kind of flagship for European politics to negotiate and promote cultural, economic, legal and political paradigms for the future.

Just as digitizing Europe, mapping Europe has become a frequent rhetorical figure within cultural studies. Rarely, however, has it been taken as literally as in Kerstin Poehls' article *Europe blurred: Migration, Margins and the Museum*. In her analysis of recent exhibitions of migrant life and migration, the object of the map is assigned a central role. Covering a large geographical range, stretching even outside of the space of the European Union, the article conceptualizes migration as a *boundary object*. The uses (and misuses) of maps in these exhibitions are meant to blur both the cultural and the geographical borders of Europe, making the museum an important actor in the political discourse. Likewise, and as a structural motif of Europeanization, dealing with issues of migration might change, as Poehls believes, the exhibitionary complex itself.

Ljiljana Radonic's article again follows memory politics between universalization and Europeanization. *Croatia – Exhibiting memory and history at the 'shores of Europe'* traces how the tendency to establish standards for new European Holocaust memorial museums affects both national and local policies of commemoration. Based on examples from Hungary and on a detailed case study of such policies in Croatia, the author explores the local responses in adopting and adjusting this tendency in accordance with the prevailing national history narratives. The article pays particular attention to the failure to develop the memory of perpetrators and crimes in the background of initiatives to commemorate the victims and to maintain victim narratives.

In conjunction with Radonic's topic, the article *Is this us? The construction of European Men in 'It's our history'!* examines the confrontation with the ruptures of Europe's past. Steffi de Jong takes up a highly relevant phenomenon of both public and museal significance, namely the figure of the witness. In her article, she shows how witness accounts in museums and exhibitions around Europe are inscribed into a European narrative and the construction of a European memory. Her main thesis links the use of witnesses in historic exhibitions to the post-modern turn in museology as well as to the process of finding a common foundation for a European memory, embedded in the cultural politics of the EU institutions. Building on the assumption that the witness is a socially constructed and legitimized figure of post-Holocaust discourses, a microanalysis of two exhibitions of the Musée de l'Europe traces the pitfalls of a European memory narrative.

Wolfram Kaiser's article, finally, deals with what one could call the founding problem of exhibiting the contemporary history of Europe: the lack of drama and its preoccupation with treaties rather than stories. *From Great Men to Ordinary*

*Citizens? The Biographical Approach to Narrating European Integration History in Museums* identifies biographical approaches in museums and exhibitions as ways to meet this challenge. Hence, the article distinguishes between different varieties of the biographical approach that differ with regard to who features in the exhibitions and how the biographies are presented. Contrasting those approaches to each other, the author opts for narrative pluralism where conflicting views of Europe co-exist and argues that the history of Europe will not – and should not – produce a new historical master-narrative.

The articles in this volume are the result of the international conference *Exhibiting Europe. The development of European narratives in museums, collections and exhibitions*, which took place from 7-9 April 2011 in Oslo. My thanks go to all of the participants for the productive atmosphere. Thanks to Gerard Delanty for an inspiring key-note lecture. Particular thanks go to the commentators Brita Brenna, Isabelle Benoit, Klas Grinell, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Wolfgang Kaschuba, Guido Vaglio and Nikolai Vukov. Thanks also to Hans Philipp Einartsen of the Interkulturellt Museum Oslo for organizational assistance and to Steffi de Jong, Anja Loy and Torgeir Rinke Bangstad for further support. Finally, I would like to convey my appreciation to the Research Council of Norway, which supported *Exhibiting Europe* as part of its KULVER-programme. Thanks to Kjersti Bale, the chair of the KULVER-programme board for the introductory words to the conference, whose results are collected here.

**Prof. Dr. Stefan Krankenhagen.** Born in 1969, PhD in 2001 with a work about cultural forms of representation of the Holocaust at the Universities of Hildesheim and Georgetown, Washington, D.C. Between 2001 and 2005 lecturer at the Humboldt University in Berlin. 2005-2011 Associate Professor at NTNU in Trondheim, Norway, teaching German and European cultural studies and history. Since 2011 Professor for Cultural Studies and Popular Culture at the University in Hildesheim. E-mail: [krankenh@uni-hildesheim.de](mailto:krankenh@uni-hildesheim.de).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> EP Bureau decides to set up a ‚House of European History‘, press release, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?language=en&type=IM-PRESS&reference=20081216IPR44855> (accessed 11/09/02).

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