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Europe, Blurred: Migration, Margins and the Museum

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Abstract

More and more museums all over Europe are discovering migration as a topic for exhibitions. These exhibitions on migration question notions of objectivity or of European universalism. This article looks at a broad range of recent exhibitions and museums that address the topic of migration. Taking into consideration their varying scope and institutional context, this text argues that exhibitions on migration tell several stories at once: Firstly, they present stories of migration in a certain city, region or nation, and within a particular period of time. For this purpose, curators make extensive use of maps – with the peculiar effect that these maps blur what seems to be the clear-cut entity of reference of the museum itself or the exhibition. To a stronger degree than other phenomena that turn into museal topics, 'migration' unveils the constructed character of geographic or political entities such as the nation or the European Union. It shows how, hidden below the norm of settledness, mobilities are and have always been omnipresent in and fundamental for European societies. Secondly and related to this, exhibitions on migration add a new chapter to the meta-narrative of museums: implicitly, they challenge the relevance of the nation - specifically, of both the historical idea that initiated the invention of the public museum (cf. e.g. Bennett 1999) *and* the political fundament of European integration today. They provoke questions of settledness, citizenship, or contemporary globalisation phenomena that are equally implicitly put on display. The consequent effect is a blurring of the concept of the nation-state. Finally, migration as a museal topic conveys a view on how the institution of the 'museum' relates to such a fuzzy thing as mobility, thus provoking questions for further research.

Keywords: Migration, museum, exhibition, Europe, map, object, reflexivity, meta-narrative

Europe, Blurred: Migration, Margins and the Museum

More and more museums all over Europe and inside the European Union in particular have been discovering migration as a topic for temporary exhibitions, and a number of museums on migration have been founded since the end of the twentieth century in the UK, Germany, Scandinavia, the Balkans, the Benelux countries and elsewhere. How and why is this phenomenon being showcased in this way? In this paper, I will analyse the ways in which migration is put on display in temporary exhibitions. The latter operate in modes that differ from those of museums, with their permanent exhibitions. In addition, national historical backgrounds and current political debates that surround the exhibitions and influence them vary widely. Yet because temporary exhibitions are and are also expected to be more courageous when it comes to a provocative thesis or metaphor – as they are points of departure for trends and wider processes of societal (self-)understanding – they create a 'discursive disturbance' (Korff & Roth 1990: 21). It therefore seems to be worthwhile to summarize some commonalities that can be observed in their current modes of display. There are two main reasons to focus on such temporary results and ongoing movements inside the museal space: One the one hand, I attribute to these exhibitions a role within a pan-European discourse on the European societies' relation to migration. On the other hand, temporary migration exhibitions already influence the self-understanding, and work behind the scenes of existing as well as emerging museums as well, and thus have a major impact on what historically is a genuinely European invention.

Migration is 'overdetermined': It is a topic that is accompanied by so many – in part mutually exclusive – expectations that criticism from one side or the other is guaranteed (Leggewie 2011: 162ff.); – it also implicitly questions some traditional principles of museal work. Traditionally, the work of museums is closely linked to the notion of settledness. This is reflected most strongly in the ways that collections are organised. Here, objects are linked to a geographical place. They invite both comparisons over time and comparisons between two or more geographical spaces – but they also veil movements across borders that might be equally characteristic of those places. Objects without a genuine geographical place do not fit into such traditional collection systems, and it is through them that the normative impact of collection systems is unveiled. For exhibition visitors, museum displays might be even more closely connected with immobile, placed objects: The movement of things is stopped by glass panes it is in the showcases that things 'end up'. Most of them stopped moving a long time ago.

The following three aspects shall serve to establish a broader picture of how the topic of migration arguably challenges the ways in which museums have traditionally operated. They also form the structure of this article: firstly, one impact of migration as an exhibition topic might be a blurring of the imagined nation states and consequently of Europe. This happens against a background where transna-

tional social spheres, international connections and cooperations seem to be so all encompassing that academic discourse almost tends to take them for granted. And yet, the nation state is still an undeniable category beyond the surface of everyday life, something which the reintroduction of national border controls by some countries inside the European Union and the Schengen area in 2011 reminds us of. The aim behind this retrogressive move is the regulation and management of migration at a time marked by both an economic crisis and an ever increasing number of immigrants and transit migrants, especially from Northern Africa, crossing the outside borders of the Schengen area. This is even more evident in the case of the museum, an institution invented precisely to help construct the nation as a meaningful point of reference and as a category to organise the world.

Secondly, the way in which migration may question the nation as a conceptual framework materialises in the ways objects are selected for museal displays. In contrast to traditional questions – concerning the place of invention, of production, or of use of an artefact – other aspects become relevant and justify its inclusion in a display: what may a particular thing reveal about the motion of ideas, human beings, knowledge or conflicts? What story of migration or mobility justifies its being placed in a showcase? The shift that is indicated by such questions highlights the ongoing renegotiation of the role of objects. Does migration steer museal institutions towards regarding objects as *symbols* rather than as *epistemic objects* – things that embody 'what is yet unknown' and that therefore provoke new questions (cf. Korff 2005, Rheinberger 2006: 28)? In what follows, we will see how displaying mobility makes it more difficult to *place* objects and to fit them into traditional collection systems.

These two aspects consequently lead to a more general, third, dimension: not only the nation as *the* historical paradigm of the museum is challenged, but also the *place* and *space* that a certain museum and its displays relate to, be it the city, the region, the nation or Europe. If practices of mobility are in focus, these seemingly well-defined entities are undermined or ask at least for redefinition under new auspices.

Discursive Movements

The museum is not the only institution mirroring a conceptual development and increasing interest in mobility: in the humanities and social sciences as well as in public discourse all over Europe, migrants and migration were for many years – and sometimes still are - perceived as both external and extraordinary phenomena. Migrants figured as the Other, as an undifferentiated collective that seemingly allows for a division between 'Us' and 'Them'. Even today, the dominant imaginations of the migrant within these debates are linked to precarity – both with regard to economy and education or social status. In other words: the cosmopolitan, upper-class, financially independent and polyglot dandy of the early twentieth centu-

ry rarely figures in debates on migration today. Only occasionally do we meet his contemporary incarnation, the middle-class 'multilingual gourmet taster' (Werbner 1997: 11; cf. Grillo 2007) or the Green Card holder equipped with a Diploma in Biophysics or Computer Engineering. This narrow view of migration, ignoring the diverse practices and modes of mobility (Urry 2008) seems to broaden: although immersion and integration are still frequently seen as migrant responsibilities, slowly and surely it is being recognized that migration has been an essential part of European societies for centuries and will not cease to be so.

In contrast to the focus on immersion and integration that builds on a model of societies as closed and stable entities, more recent studies within the field of anthropology and social sciences in general indicate a shift: they not only describe and analyse transnational social spheres, but also attempt to characterize migrants and migratory networks or milieus as an avant-garde, both when it comes to transnational milieus and to Europeanization (Balibar 2005, TRANSIT MIGRATION Forschungsgruppe 2007). Viewed from this angle, migrants are considered a crucial factor within the European Union, something that has stimulated a debate on their position in relation to effects of globalization and all-encompassing mobility. Although the mobile individuals themselves do not assume their role intentionally, the effects of migratory practices playing out at the geopolitical margins of Europe put migrants at the very centre of Europeanization processes, and attribute to them a significant impact on changing European nation states. This view differs substantially from research agendas and publications on European integration and Europe as a geopolitical space, in which the impulse of Europeanization is frequently taken to originate from the field of political power situated in Brussels and Strasbourg (Abélès 1992; Shore 2000). In contrast to the rather privileged European citizens who professionally engage with today's and tomorrow's European actuality in those cities (Poehls 2009), migrants bring questions of citizenship and human rights to the fore on an existential level (cf. Hess 2005; Römhild 2007; Schiller & Çalar 2009; Lenz 2010).

Temporary exhibitions and museums of migration navigate in this contested field of Europeanization, and they do so along with political parties and activists, scientists from various disciplines, media and public opinion – a broad field and a complex discourse with numerous participants where nothing even close to a consensus has been reached (and where any such consensus is probably not even desirable). Its omnipresence effectively turns migration into a classical 'boundary object': It is a phenomenon of wide-ranging importance for society that (a) is under constant negotiation and (b) involves the cooperation of a broad range of interests and stakeholders (Star & Griesemer 1989; Trompette & Vinck 2009). Museums and exhibitions on migration are still *marginal* within the museal field in the sense of Homi Bhabha's use of the term. He regards precisely the margins as centres of activity. According to Bhabha (2000: 7), such 'margins' mark the space from which the impulses for political discourse originates, often evolving from

experiments. In this sense, the issue of migration does indeed seem to demand experimental approaches with respect to both aesthetics and narratives. It might thus set its imprint on future museal practices.

Mapping Migration

Let us dwell upon this notion of marginality and start with an object that – if considered an object at all – falls under the category 'marginal' within museal representations of migration. Placed in the preface or introductory chapter, next to the entrance or behind showcases with the 'real' objects, exhibitions of migration make extensive use of geographical maps. Analogous records of the geographical surface of the world on the one hand, maps are on the other hand inevitably abstractions since they are a 'result of selection, omission, isolation, distance and codification' (Corner 1999: 215). Since their inception, maps reflect the appropriation of space, they tell stories about what the world looks like or what it should look like, although they generally omit *who* is telling this particular story (cf. Rogoff 2000; Schlögel 2006; Jacobs 2008). Bold arrows on large maps are generally used to make visible the historical omnipresence of migration, smaller arrows follow the path of one individual migrant, even smaller acronyms refer to the institutional players involved.

At the *Cité National de l'histoire de l'immigration* (CNHI) in Paris, so far the only *national* museum on migration within Europe, the visitor is confronted with maps even before entering the exhibition. The maps here depict migratory routes and flows throughout the two centuries.

CNHI, Paris – photo by the author.

They show migratory movements from the countryside to the growing cities within France, routes from Europe to the Americas or within Asia, and visualize the migratory movements from the former colonies to France. Here, the contours of Europe are still congruent with what is familiar to all of us from geography lessons in school and from atlases. Quite a different idea of Europe emerges from a photo essay that is on permanent display in the following room at the *CNHI*. We see Kingsley Abang Kum's route from Cameroon to France, 'documented' by Olivier Jobard (cf. Jobard & Sanglier 2006). While it remains unclear whether the protagonists really exist, the narrative unfolds in a realistic, journalistic manner, inviting us to share Kingsley's story from the departure from his family home, travelling by various means of transportation, with endless hours of waiting and unknown further steps, until he debarks from a bus in the centre of Paris. The photographs are accompanied both by diary entries and by maps. The maps that Kingsley draws during his journey indicate how Europe as an *ex ante* dreamland both moves out of sight during his trip and morphs its shape as he approaches Europe's geopolitical borders. The manually drawn maps convey the high hopes with which the word Europe is connoted: while we as exhibition visitors can follow Kingsley's gaze beyond the horizon, we cannot spot him in the crowd any longer once he has arrived in Europe – a place that no longer seems to be the dreamland. The combination of these rather different representations of space not only gives an impression of how the crisis of representation since the 1980s has had its impact on the museum. It also indicates the affinities between sociocultural history as told in the museal space and the arts, where maps have, for instance, been used by Situationists or Fluxus artists as material and as a genre to create new kinds of space, to provoke a more playful perception of space, and to problematize the highly constructed nature of space (Corner 1999). Although very discreetly, the maps at the *CNHI* suggest the creativity underlying these maps, namely the creativity of migrants on their transit route.

A scribbled instruction on how to move through Europe inspired museum curators in Rijeka in Croatia for the show *Merica. Emigration from Central Europe to America 1880-1914*.[1] In this exhibition, we see individual stories and routes of migration. They are complemented by depictions of those agencies, railway and shipping companies along the route that allowed for mobility and made their profits from migration. The display is here arranged like 'a labyrinth, but with a way out' (Merica 2011).

Screenshot Merica, Rijeka.

The inspiration for this display comes from a small piece of paper: next to a curved line, it contains precise instructions on where to change trains and where to buy the next train ticket on the way from a small village in Croatia to Udine and then further on westwards. Written for someone 'who does not know where they are going, who does not know the routes' (Emigration from Central Europe to America 1880-1914 2011), this map shows neither national boundaries nor visa or control mechanisms. Very much in contrast to today's realities, border controls were then unheard of in this part of the world (cf. Schlögel 2006). Two fundamental aspects of mapping are translated into the exhibition: Firstly, the show highlights the high degree of creativity embedded in finding or inventing a migratory route (Corner 1999: 217): The migrant himself who imagined himself in a different *space* and *place* and the helpful person who provided this person with an improvised map – both imagined new paths towards a different way of life. On the map itself, the amount of information has been reduced to a level sufficient for taking the next step towards *Merica.* Secondly, the mazy exhibition design might

confuse visitors. This intended effect provides evidence of the necessary reading skills without which any map is useless (Corner 1999: 214f).

The creative potential of maps has been used by artists (cf. Rogoff 2000) and also in migration exhibitions to a degree where the category of geography reveals its constructed and limited meaning. Curators, artists and ethnographers aim to unveil how geopolitical decisions on borders, historical as well as contemporary discourses on migration in Europe, political institutions, NGOs and political parties as well as migrating human beings form the discursive *space* in which migration takes place. In those projects, the space of migration does not appear as a clear-cut entity, but rather as a blurred field of activity where various interests meet and conflict with each other. MIGMAP[2], for example, completely abstains from geography as a basis for mapping migration. This cooperation between artists and social scientists partaking in the exhibition/research project PROJEKT MIGRATION in Cologne in 2005 provides visual solutions to the problem of mapping migration that are both strange and very familiar at the same time. The team of ethnographers and artists map the players of migration, discourses, places and political decisions and use aesthetics that are reminiscent of weather forecasts, underground maps or of web pages with an overwhelming amount of cryptic abbreviations (cf. Spillmann 2007).

The 'weather forecast' map, for example, visualizes how areas of 'high' or 'low' pressure overlap in relation to public discourse on human trafficking and how this in turn collides with neo-liberal political aims. 'Weather fronts' keep discourses on asylum and illegal migration apart, while the discourse on smuggling seems to overlap or interfere with the 'cloud' of illegal migration as well as with trafficking. Through all these constantly intersecting and elusive weather systems move streams of ideas based on or opposed to racism, as well as discussions on Human Rights, political attempts to reduce organized criminality or to lead a 'War on Terrorism'. Here, the common visuals of weather reports are used in order to represent the tradition of spacializing political positions. On the 'tube map', political decisions on how to govern and to manage migration in the EU form the various stations. This map invites the visitor to take a trip on the various 'lines', following the decisions and their inner logic that is unveiled through the chronological arrangements of the 'stations'. Connecting stations reveal the interdependencies between political fields and actors. At the same time, the metaphorical tube is not visible from street level – in contrast to the discourses that are visible but seem to be beyond human reach. Political decision processes take place 'underground'. Invisible from street level where the common citizen and thus the exhibition visitor lingers, the map tells us, political decisions in the European Union follow certain timetables, mechanisms, involve technical knowledge and are embedded in a complex structure that is meant to be used over a longer period of time. In an intriguing way, therefore, (neo-) functionalist ideas of how the Euro-

pean Union has been built by the spirit of political 'engineers' are driven to the extreme.

Of course, the tube map and the weather report are closely linked: physically, they both belong to the realm of every day life of many museums visitors and as cultural codes they are equally familiar to most European citizens and thus easy to interpret. The key aspect that relates them to each other, however, is a statement that addresses both Europe and the public perception of migration: firstly, neither the European Union nor Europe is about geography - perhaps it never has been. Margins and boundaries are the effects of political decisions, of discourses, and are as such not meaningfully connected to the borders we find drawn in traditional maps. This position corresponds to the way European borders are being 'performed' today: EU border control, to an increasing degree executed by the EU agency FRONTEX, takes place outside of the EU as well as inside, on motorways, at airports or train stations. Borders function as filters, they can no longer be regarded as lines that some are allowed to cross and others not (cf. Fischer-Lescano & Tohidipur 2007; Buckel & Wissel 2010; Laube 2010). Secondly, migration opens up a space that extends somewhere between the discourse clouds and the tube tunnels of politics – the every-day social space of migration. This space seems to become more visible through the aesthetics of tube maps and weather forecasts.

Within the context of exhibitions of migration, maps generate a peculiar effect: while on the one hand clarifying the social phenomenon of mobility, on the other hand they literally *undercut* the meaning of geopolitical boundaries. In doing so, they blur national and European boundaries. Instead, the ways in which mobility towards, within and departing from Europe are represented, display something else: maps in exhibitions on migration direct our attention towards the question of how borders – as 'socially performed conceptual entities' – generate the difference they mark (Green 2010: 261). In that sense, the whole idea of numerous (not all) exhibitions on migration is generated from a more often than not marginal object: a map. Once maps are employed as a means to set the tone for the things on display and once they have been freed from their attributed objectivity, they unveil the illusion of neutrality – and even of universalism – that has guided representational work in the museal space since its inception. Curatorial activity is, in the case of migration most explicitly, a political activity.

Migrating Objects

When the Kreuzberg Museum in Berlin opened its first permanent exhibition in the early 1990s, personal belongings of migrants – such as teapots, a silver bowl traditionally used in the *hammam*, or working tools – were the central objects on display. Their purpose was to connect the stories inside the showcases to the life going on immediately outside of the museum. In a similar way, a small grass-

roots museum in Skala Loutron on the Greek island of Lesvos displays festive clothing, salt and pepper shakers, letters, official certificates and jewellery.

All of them were donated by Greek migrant families who had to leave their homes in Asia Minor in 1922 (cf. Clogg 1992: 47ff) in exchange with the Turkish population on Greek territory. Similar examples can be found all over Europe: personal objects have always been more or less present in exhibitions on migration. In contrast to the way political debates, movies, or print media operate, these three-dimensional objects allow for a *physical* and simultaneous *multi-sensory* perception of the materiality of migration. The object of migration that continues to be the 'classic' is the suitcase (Baur 2009; Poehls 2010), used so frequently that it has turned into heavy luggage in itself.

Inside the museal field, the debate on how, where, why and for whom museums of migration should be founded revolves around objects, and specifically objects that have been donated by migrants or their families. One possible reason behind this might be the fact that these objects often communicate primary emotions such as melancholy. This quality seems not only to be distinct from a certain understanding of 'professionalism' inside the museal sphere. The objects also seem to be inconsistent with exhibitions inspired by a more theoretical approach where the curatorial emphasis is not put on strengthening or highlighting the aura of an object or its minute details, but rather on the cultural debates or social background, resulting in a more or less explicit political statement. Through their material qualities and peculiarities, epistemic objects might strengthen this approach by entering into a kind of dialogue with the beholder, resulting in further questions rather than definite answers. It is hardly surprising that the material qualities of salt and pepper shakers rarely lead to them being placed in the category of epistemic objects. This is seldom the case with objects in migration exhibitions in general. For instance, a staff member at the museum in Skala Loutron informed me at a showcase where the above-mentioned objects were placed on small velvet pillows that 'the objects in themselves have no value' (Field Notes 2011). Here she was not only referring to the monetary value, but also to the objects' ability to generate questions beyond an initial emotional impulse. Today, object donations are only accepted 'when there is a special story connected to them' that would then be documented and become part of the collection together with the object (ibid., 2011). As their melancholic trait suggests, such traditional 'objects of migration' can be considered as symbols or anchors for stories that have to be told in order to make the object meaningful to a third person. Otherwise, they simply point to a place and time elsewhere that remains unrelated to the here and now of the display.

It might be for this reason that many migration exhibitions either look for alternative ways of dealing with objects or try to avoid them completely. The exhibition PROJEKT MIGRATION that was shown in Cologne in 2005, for instance, abstained almost completely from using objects and created new representative

forms such as the maps mentioned above. From a similar political perspective, namely one that focuses on the normality of migration rather than on its claimed exceptional status, the initiators of *Crossing Munich* decided not to exhibit objects as museum objects in showcases, but to make them part of the exhibition design: in Munich in 2009, curators initiated cooperation between artists and ethnographers at a very early stage. Voluminous plastic bags with colourful stripes in blue and red – perhaps the most clichéd objects of contemporary migration – figure here as part of a larger installation and narrative. Instead of being put into a showcase or used as vessels for other, perhaps even more clichéd objects that might have been transported in them, the bags have been attached to each other and mounted to resemble the architectural shape of Munich's Central Train Station. The Central Station was one of the main places of arrival for guest workers from the 1960s onwards. This presentation turn the bags into de- and reconstructed parts of the exhibition design, and adds an ironic twist to the show: the blue, red, and white striped bags confront the visitor with his or her *expectations* of what migration and its material omnipresence stereotypically 'looks like' in every-day life (cf. Leggewie 2011: 167). Similarly, between commissioned pieces of art, soundscapes, media installations and more traditional showcases with shoes and other objects, the Museum of World Cultures in Gothenburg found a way in its recent exhibition *Destination X* to include the most powerful and therefore omnipresent symbol of migration: the suitcase.

Destination X, Museum of World Cultures, Gothenburg – photo by the author

Instead of mounting them as in, for example, the permanent exhibition in the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester as a giant arch, or placing them in a kind of diorama as curators chose in the touring exhibition *C'est notre histoire* in Wroclaw in 2009, the suitcases were attached to each other to form a giant sphere. Together, the cheap and expensive, colourful and black suitcases formed the globe. They hinted at various modes of movement, forced or voluntarily, on a tight budget or with luxury equipment. In doing so, they extended the metaphorical reach of the suitcase that has traditionally been employed to hint at the (cultural) luggage that migrants brought with them, which they unpacked at their final destination to see what its worth might be under new living conditions or that helped them – through the presence of heirlooms – to keep the past alive.

The Museo Diffuso in Turin provides another example of the possible effects of the omission of objects in a migration exhibition. In a temporary exhibition shown in 2009, contemporary as well as historical photographs were used in order to contrast the physical vanishing of borders in the Schengen area with the prison-like situation of migrants in one of Italy's largest detention centres on the outskirts of Turin. The protagonists of the exhibition, the migrants inside the detention camp, expose their possessions to the photographer's gaze and thus to the exhibition audience. However, there are no three-dimensional objects inside the exhibition space. The atmosphere of contemplation that traditionally characterizes the museal space is absent. Instead of directing our gaze towards a showcase, we are allowed, almost like voyeurs, to have a look at the tiny personal space that migrants in the detention camp have at their disposal. The black and white photographs seem to add to a sense of political urgency to the show, recalling reportage in a magazine. This specific example reminds us that the specific *atmospheric* effect of objects in exhibition spaces – beyond their resistance against being used as epistemic objects – might be investigated further, and beyond the thematic focus of this article.

In conclusion, the topic of migration seems to generate from within itself a questioning of how to tell stories in a museal space, how to engage the audience and how to convey information or knowledge. As the few examples that were analysed here indicate, these questions often revolve around the role to be attributed to objects. Objects of migration are often personal heirlooms and bear qualities that are different from a classical epistemic object. They symbolize an additional individual story that needs to be told in order to encourage questions and invite contemplation. The key question is thus whether a museum aims to address its audience on a personal level by departing from individual stories or by referring to a more abstract theoretical level based on political debates – both can be found in migration exhibitions. Naturally, both modes are not mutually exclusive in practice, but their differences are especially visible in migration exhibitions. Indeed, they mirror the way a museum sees its role in society. The debate

on how to represent migration in the museal space thus implies a challenge to the way museums perceive themselves.

Museums in Movement

'Everyone' within the museal world suddenly seems to put migration on display. In the UK, archives and museums jointly work for a more 'inclusive' approach towards cultural heritage; in Germany, the local museums of history in Frankfurt and Stuttgart are being completely reconceptualised, the same applies to the city archive and museum in Munich. Museums in Scandinavia, in the Balkans and in Greece are also turning their attention towards mobility. What are the reasons behind this phenomenon? Are they just pragmatic? Is it the search for new funding or for cooperation that is leading museums to focus on migration? Or is the aim to attract new, significantly younger and more diverse audiences? All of these aspects are of importance for the current turn to migration in museums. The degree to which this is the case depends on the urban (or rural) context of the respective museums and on how much the museums are dependent on external funding and cooperation for their survival. Migration is a buzzword, and hardly any cultural institution in Europe that seeks funding on the regional, national or EU level – be it in the field of performing or fine arts – can be successful without hinting at the migration dimension of the specific project or the impact on intercultural dialogue of its general activity. This trend is both to be welcomed and very general. However, the increasing presence and explicit mentioning of migration in museal displays also indicates some more fundamental changes that exceed the area of funding or cooperation contracts. Specifically, there seems to be a need to make the relation between a preserved past inside the museum and complex realities outside the museum more *explicit*, and focusing on migration is apparently an appropriate way to do this.[3] Migration as a classical boundary object that involves various stakeholders and thus implicates ongoing discussions might not force all museums to begin raising their voices in a political debate, but it might very well strengthen the need for a clear and recognizable position that a museal institution takes in the 'general weather situation' of migration discourses that MIGMAP outlined. This means that museums might be asked to convert the implicit worldview that both its institutional traditions and the collections stand for into an explicit political position.

This might imply a farewell to the usual processes of 'dissociation, classification, storage, acquisition of meaning' (Lidchi 2006: 98) that were traditionally applied to things on their way into the museum. The initial *dissociation* of things usually meant either spatial or temporal distance from their origins. Yet neither time nor space separates migration and its objects from the European reality in 2011. Quite to the contrary, the exhibitions presented above reflect how the museal space opens up to current political debates that are anything but 'dissociat-

ed': Firstly, exhibitions have often functioned as an 'outpost in the vast land of exemplification' (Benjamin 1980: 527)[4] – that is, a place where ongoing debates crystallize in a three-dimensional way. This is particularly the case with exhibitions on migration in Europe. Secondly, museums have also always been places where ideas about the future are presented if not produced. This holds especially true for our context: migration is a core field of EU policies, it represents a major challenge for any traditional understanding of nation states, and it is certainly a phenomenon that brings questions of citizenship, human rights and 'belonging' to the fore. These two aspects were usually veiled behind the semblance of universalism and the way in which museums historically meant to represent the world in an 'objective' manner: they presented themselves as rather detached from ongoing political debates, commenting maybe from a distanced position outside. The museums and exhibitions we have seen, however, have moved away from this position: they are not outside, but – whether this is intended or not – in the very middle of a political process. In this sense, exhibitions on migration reflect how the process of musealization is today accompanied by a more explicit demand of self-reflection and self-positioning that museal institutions are provoked to undertake by the public, the media, funding institutions, other exhibitions that have been successful in one way or the other, and by political debate. The exhibitions we have seen reflect how a self-reflexive and budding version of cosmopolitanism that is closely linked to the concept of transnationalism is slowly but surely being incorporated into exhibitions: 'Europeanness' (Delanty 2005; Beck & Grande 2007).

Conclusion

Generated both from within and from discourses outside the museal field, exhibitions on migration question notions of objectivity or of European universalism. In doing so, they show how various public spheres and discourses interact, and thus encourage museums to play a more central role in the ongoing self-reflection of European societies.

Exhibitions on migration tell several stories at once: firstly, as we have seen, they present stories of migration in a certain city, region or nation, and within a particular period of time. For this purpose, curators make extensive use of maps – with the peculiar effect that these maps blur what seems to be the clear-cut entity of reference of the museum itself or the exhibition. To a stronger degree than other phenomena that turn into museal topics, 'migration' unveils the constructed character of geographic or political entities such as the nation or the European Union. It shows how, hidden below the norm of settledness, mobilities are and have always been omnipresent in and fundamental for European societies.

Secondly and related to this, exhibitions on migration add a new chapter to the meta-narrative of museums (Bal 2006: 15): implicitly, they challenge the rele-

vance of the nation. More specifically, both the historical idea that initiated the invention of the public museum (cf. e.g. Bennett 1999) *and* the political fundament of European integration today. They provoke questions of settledness, citizenship, or contemporary globalisation phenomena that are equally implicitly put on display. The consequent effect is a blurring, or 'un-writing' (Rogoff 2000: 38) of the concept of the nation-state.

Finally, migration as a museal topic conveys a view on how the institution 'museum' relates to such a fuzzy thing as mobility, and it leads to a number of aspects that deserve the attention of both museum professionals and researchers.

Further research could give a clearer picture on how the museal space allows art and cultural history to interact with or to contradict each other in a productive way. Furthermore, exhibitions on migration contribute to a larger extent than other exhibitions to a meta-discourse on the current role of museums in Western societies, and they do so by contesting the predominant role commonly attributed to objects. Here, it will be interesting to see how collection systems can be extended towards a greater attention for mobility. Finally yet importantly, exhibitions on migration more often than not explicitly address future developments in society instead of reflecting primarily on the past. They do so by relating migration to urban developments as well as by placing (metaphorically speaking) national and European political discourses *inside* the showcase. Despite varying contexts, there are some traits that are common for many exhibitions. Their sometimes veiled, sometimes explicit gaze into the future has always characterized museums – here, it becomes explicit. It will be interesting to see how this will affect the museum as an institution embedded in urban space, in Europe, and yet aware of global phenomena.

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Notes

1 Merica (2011)
2 MIGMAP (2011)
3 Exactly the other way around, political activists use travelling exhibitions as a means to present their ideas to a broader audience – making use of the strengths of the medium 'exhibition' and its seemingly 'detached' nimbus. Thus, the open-air exhibition *Traces from Lesvos*

through Europe (cf. the documentation in: Traces from Lesvos through Europe 2010) that was held in the Migration Detention Centre at Paganí (Lauth Bacas 2010) on the island of Lesvos, for example, presented individual migrants with their dreams and plans for the future. The exhibition was anything but neutral or detached from political discourse.

[4] Benjamin coined this for commercial expositions, but I argue that his judgement also applies to our context.

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