

Book Review

Wolfram Kaiser, Stefan Krankenhagen and Kerstin Poehls, *Exhibiting Europe in Museums. Transnational Networks, Collections, Narratives and Representations*, New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016 [hardback 2014], paperback £24.00, pp. viii+238.

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Europe - or at any rate the European Union - certainly has seen more optimistic times. During the last decade or so, the abstract ideal of an 'ever closer union' has become increasingly burdened by cumbersome details of *realpolitik*: amongst these the financial crisis, the refugee situation and, most recently, the United Kingdom's decision to pursue 'Brexit'. This book, which focuses on the subject of 'making Europe' (76) in museums, was researched and written within this discursive climate, yet its authors clearly attempt to maintain a pro-European stance. Originally published in German to mostly positive reviews in 2012, the English version, which constitutes volume 6 of the 'Museums and Collections' series, can now disseminate its findings to an international readership.

Kaiser, Krankenhagen and Poehls aim to analyse the various 'processes of Europeanisation occurring in museums, exhibitions and collections' (4), based upon a formidable list of 95 museums/exhibitions visited and 68 curators/politicians interviewed between 2007 and 2013. They begin by critiquing the field of European Studies in which - according to them - most works focus on the politics transpiring in or the policies emanating from Brussels. By contrast, the authors are interested in the importance of culture as well as history and also include non-state actors in their inquiry. Concerning Museum Studies, their diagnosis observes a scholarly preoccupation with regional, national or global perspectives. In response, the authors advocate a European frame of reference.

Conceptually, the book understands the museum - in by now well-established New Museological parlance - as 'an institution central to the public self-representation of European (nation) states' (6) and 'an arena for the negotiation of future social orders' (6). Regarding the geographical range of the investigation, the authors admit a certain bias which favours larger countries such as Germany and France which each have a centuries-long tradition of museum policy and practice. The case studies then zero in on history because, they argue, the related debates over identity and belonging are much more vigorous than in the domains of art or technology.

In doing so, the initial chapter 'Musealising Europe' addresses three projects with rather divergent trajectories, and articulates these as (eventually) 'failed processes of attempted Europeanisation' (21). The *Musée de l'Europe*, Brussels, was founded in 1997 and staged several temporary exhibitions, but could not achieve sustained political support from European institutions. Similarly, the *Bauhaus Europa*, Aachen, developed a promising historical concept and architectural design, but became history itself in 2006 after a local referendum resulted in opposition to such plans. Only the *Musée des civilisations et de la Méditerranée (MUCEM)*, Marseilles, came to fruition in 2013 after moving from Paris to the shores of the Mediterranean, but somewhat lost its European focus on the way.

The people behind such projects are the topic of a lucid third chapter titled 'Networking Europe'. Besides covering organisations like the *European Network of Museums* or the *European Museum Academy*, the authors reveal the importance of more personal factors connecting curators across borders - such as guest fellowships at partner museums abroad

or an affiliation with the 'Erasmus generation' (60). Also exposed is a Catholic-conservative network of politicians and historians from Germany supporting the official *House of European History (HEH)*, Brussels, which after several delays opened its doors to the public in May 2017.

For the fifth chapter on 'Narrating Europe', the authors return to this museum by unveiling internal discussions - with the *HEH* eschewing the broader public - about its permanent exhibition. An early concept earmarked almost three quarters of the floor space for contemporary history, yet problems quickly arose around bones of contention such as the comparison between National Socialism and Communism or the differences between founding members of the European institutions and later arrivals. For most existing institutions like the *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, Berlin, European matters still seem to be 'a museal appendix at most' (128) - but quite ironically receive more attention in national museums of countries with a strong history of Euroscepticism, such as Denmark and Switzerland.

Kaiser, Krankenhagen and Poehls close their argument with a compelling plea for more 'narrative tolerance' (195) and less political interference in exhibitions about Europe than otherwise practised. Including diverse - and potentially critical - perspectives could help national museums to overcome the task of identity formation which was part and parcel of their original mission statement (see, for example, Aronsson/Elgenius 2015; Knell 2011; Ostow 2008). Yet from my point of view, it remains doubtful that public sponsors would voluntarily forfeit such a wide audience for their specific versions of Europe's past, present and future.

All things considered, *Exhibiting Europe* offers a mostly readable contribution to the subfield of Museum Studies interested in the politics of display (see, for example, Luke 2002; Dubin 1999; Macdonald 1998). While this approach obviously cannot do detailed justice to the poetics of display, the reviewer time and again wished for a more thorough investigation plus visualisation of exhibition details driving the respective narratives. Unfortunately, the timing of this publication means that the authors missed the chance to include some significant developments which - such as *MUCEM*'s opening and *HEH*'s advancement - have taken place since the book's German edition of 2012. Therefore, judgement is still pending at present as to whether museums dealing with Europe want to and will be able to avoid the manifold pitfalls of identity politics.

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