

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Exhibiting Solidarity Work: Temporary Displays and Their Potential To Trouble and Push Museums Representing European Mobilities

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Temporary exhibitions are excellent points of departure for looking at the ‘troubling’ effects that refugee realities, migration, and mobility practices have on European museums. Based on an analysis of the narrative strategies of four travelling exhibitions *Lichtblick*, *Yallah?!*, *Flight for life*, and *The Museum without a home*, the focus of this contribution is on representations of migration and solidarity work since the 2015 ‘summer of migration’. The article analyses the displays themselves and the venues, the places, and the spaces that are represented through them, and the ways in which the exhibitions relate to solidarity work. It is the aim of this article to sound these exhibitions’ potential to trouble and also to inspire museums in their work towards representing flight and mobility, as well as refugees and solidarity workers and the manifold ways in which they are part of today’s European realities.

Keywords: Solidarity work; European museums; Temporary exhibition; Migration; Voice

Introduction

Since the summer of migration in 2015, the tone in public and political debate has sharpened with regard to opening up long-term residence and work possibilities for refugees. National as well as EU policies predominantly focus on where and how to accommodate refugees and to how to prevent their arrival already beyond EU borders. Right-wing populist/extremist positions have become even more prominent, while numerous cultural institutions have made efforts to counter this by public manifestations, in protesting letters and through their programme. Expressions like „Willkommenskultur“ in the German-speaking context, or ‘solidarity’, have been the center of these discursive struggles. This article looks at how museums and exhibitions navigate in this context.

During joint field workshops (see Sandberg forthcoming) of the *Helping Hands Research Network on the Everyday Border Work of European Citizens*¹ and discussions between meetings

with NGOs in Copenhagen, Glasgow, Nijmegen/Kleve, and Hamburg, the tension between 'emic' and 'etic' fueled many of our conversations: How should activists' depiction of their work as either 'help' or 'solidarity' be represented in our analyses? The 'power relations, moral economy and ethical registers of "doing good"' (Sandberg & Andersen, introduction to this issue) caught our attention—be they framed as 'solidarity' in a Durkheimian sense, that is as a cooperative form tied to social norms and a common interest (Durkheim 1893), or as 'help' with a strong link to charity and, thus, a perception of social difference between those who are affluent enough to give to those in need. Evthymios Papataxiarchis argues that concepts like solidarity have lost their analytical strength anyhow – as they are caught in a confusion of emic and etic and as they are highly politicized.

Papataxiarchis suggests the concept of 'trouble' for a more complex picture and nuanced understanding of European developments today. To him, trouble is 'an all-pervasive factor in the decomposition and/or reconfiguration of mainstream, official political and economic forms and the generation of new ones' (Papataxiarchis 2018: 230). I depart from such a notion of trouble as it helps us to better grasp the complex and multi-level political and societal developments in Europe (Sandberg & Andersen 2020). Donna Haraway encourages us—as citizens and researchers—to 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway 2016: 1). To her, this means resisting the temptation to make 'an imagined future safe' or to '[clear] away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations' (Haraway 2016: 1). It is precisely these tasks that museums have long been engaged in. Throughout this text, I address temporary exhibitions as sites where new modes of 'staying with the trouble' are developed.

At the same time, I suggest not to jettison concepts such as solidarity, volunteering, or helping right away. Cetta Mainwaring and Daniela DeBono (2019) stress that solidarity work is an important emic category. As discussed throughout the joint field workshops of the research network and as reflected in the contributions to this special issue, these concepts allow us to unveil perspectives upon society, upon understandings of connectedness, and on who has the privilege to be regarded as an actor.

I hold that exhibitions on migration convey the troubling effects that refugee realities, migration, and mobilities into Europe have on museums as key institutions of societal self-reflection. Museums are places where trouble in European societies (and beyond) is being represented *and* where it originates from. Here, I will analyse four exhibitions that address migration and flight—all of them small, temporary, and recently on display in heterogeneous settings in Europe. In doing so, I take a closer look at how volunteers and their solidarity work are entering into the museal space, be it as producers behind the scenes or as protagonists of a museal narrative.

In contrast to public media, documentary film, literature, or performing and fine arts, exhibitions in and outside museums are still considered to be the domain of objects, that is, of telling stories through physical objects, things, and materials. Migration exhibitions or migration museums are an arena where power hierarchies and longstanding biases of representation are negotiated, leading to particular approaches of exhibiting (FHXB Friedrichshain Kreuzberg Museum 2019) and debates whether the museal spaces are at all adequate to tell stories about mobility through immobile objects (Poehls 2010, comp. Baur 2009).

Exhibitions have been *the* sites where a European gaze onto the world (Mitchell 1991) has been powerfully produced, disciplined, and cultivated for several centuries (Pomian 2007). In that sense, exhibitions and museums as institutions (Douglas 1986) still raise strong social and cultural expectations. It is important to note that migration exhibitions are frequently and deliberately *not* developed from a museum's collection. Nonetheless, the label 'museum'

or 'exhibition' is used, probably as this still refers to a high level of trustworthiness ascribed to museums or to a possibly balanced perspective on a supposed 'real world' that museums have for long been expected to represent (Bennett 1995, 2015).

Museums and/in Trouble

Issues of agency and power are at stake inside museums all over Europe (Bayer, Kazeem-Kamiński & Sternfeld 2017; von Bose & Förster 2015): The heated debate over these issues brings together critical voices from postcolonial and migration studies, historians, anthropologists, museologists, and art historians, as well as artists and art theorists in- and outside museums.² A museum's approach to migration both in history and today serves as a litmus test for its eagerness to address current discourse and a diverse audience. The demand for innovative approaches to museum collections is at the core of this process—vast amounts of objects have been assigned a fixed place once they entered the museums depot and database, regardless of their biography (Kopytoff 1986) and potential to represent mobile practices. Furthermore, there is a lack of diversity in museum staff as well as a need to speak to and to attract a broader, younger, and more diverse audience (Kravagna 2015;³ Chambers et al. 2014). Regarding museums as representational spaces does not neglect their nondiscursive, affective functions but clearly stresses 'the role of museums in the production of reflexive forms of knowledge and citizenship formation, as well [as] their activist role in society' (Message & Witcomb 2015: xxxv).

Apart from an activist approach generated *inside* the museum, Kylie Message (2020) explores the specific approach and strategies needed for 'the official collection of public activism by and for activists. She argues that this work 'continues to remain a little-known and vulnerable process today, despite the publicity that activist events, products, and outputs have attracted on national and global stages' (Message 2020: 4). Message's study investigates collections and documentations of and by the Occupy Wall Street Movement from 2011. Her findings do by and large apply to collections and exhibitions of the Summer of Migration 2015 as well: 'The practice of cause-based collecting has [...] generated some ethical issues around ownership, representation, authority, and agency that have been overlooked in the haste to collect the ephemeral protest and reform actions, movements, and rallies' (Message 2020: 4).

Message's book is one example out of a whole slew of publications (Bayer, Kazeem-Kamiński & Sternfeld 2017; Capurro & Lupo 2016; Dogramaci & Mersmann 2020; Grinell 2018; Janes & Sandell 2019; Landkammer 2016; O'Neill & Hooper 2020) that bemoan and challenge the traditional understanding of the museal space. Mark O'Neill (2020: 10) offers insights into the museal practices that are emerging to meet this demand:

Within museums, there are now explicit intentions to engage museum visitors' benevolent affections. The intellectual rationale for these intentions is derived from social history, with its focus on the lives of ordinary people, constructivist educational theory, and the pervasive belief that storytelling is a key feature of human nature and, therefore, critical for communication in all domains, from therapy to politics. All of these have resulted in a shift in museums from knowledge to narrative, and attempts to inspire engagement and empathy with the stories of individuals.

On the whole, he sees museums and exhibitions as 'active participant[s] in the rehabilitation of social trust and democratic participation' (O'Neill 2020: 13).⁴

The demands for a post-migrant (Langhoff 2011, Foroutan 2019) migration research agenda (Römhild 2014, Yildiz & Hill 2014) have been picked up by museum curators and museum

experts ‘behind the scenes’, and they are now also noticeably reflected ‘on stage’ in exhibitions and public events organized by museums. Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell (2019) have recently argued for ‘museum activism’, and published an emphatic call to the museum community. They suggest museums should direct their ‘practice, shaped out of ethically-informed values [...] to bring about political, social and environmental change’ (Janes & Sandell 2019: 1). As ‘agents to cultural change’, museums should finally prepare to meet three expectations: ‘open[ness] to influence and impact from outside’, ‘responsive[ness] to citizens’ interests and concerns’, and ‘transparen[cy] in fulfilling these two expectations’ (Janes & Sandell 2019: 15, comp. Thiemeier 2019). Taken as a whole, the debate amongst both museum theorists and practitioners reflected through these publications shows that museums and exhibitions are indeed deeply involved in ‘Europe Trouble’, be it as places of representation or as institutions where trouble (potentially) originates from.

Troubling Representations of Migration

I hold that especially exhibitions devoted to migration issues have an outstanding potential to challenge museums’ practices within virtually all core areas, from the manner in which they deal with collections, to the way they address the public, to aesthetic issues (Whitehead et al. 2015; Cimoli 2013; CAMOC 2017). Migration as a social process and political reality has the potential to change the ways in which Europe and its borders, European regions, and cities are being represented and their stories ‘told’ (Poehls 2010, 2011, see also Innocenti 2014, Lanz 2016, von Bose et al. 2011).

This contribution emphasizes a selection of exhibitions that relate to contemporary migration into Europe and refugees that arrived in Europe in recent years, particularly in and since the ‘summer of migration’ in 2015. The arrival of refugees and migrants not only affected political discourse and everyday life in society, but also challenged ‘museums [to] prepare and rapidly respond, [to document] acute situations like [in] 2015’ (Grinell 2018: 109).

Many museums, from small private and community-driven ones to city, regional, or national museums, foundations, and associations in the museal field have begun to develop answers to this challenge—so far, *temporary* exhibitions on migration outnumber *museums* with a clear focus in migration or flight by far. Still, the majority of museums ‘focus on the “insiders” history, depicting emigrants and immigrants as anomalies [and] tend to present migrants’ situation as personal traumas rather than effects of political structures’ (Grinell 2018: 109).

Against this background, I will look at four temporary exhibitions which have been on display in various European cities: *The Museum without a home. An exhibition on hospitality* (comp. Sandberg forthcoming) accompanied by objects from *The Refuweegee* (both 2018, Refugee Festival Glasgow, comp. Mainwaring, Mulvey & Piacentini 2020), the exhibition *Lichtblicke* (2018/19, Hamburg), *Yallah?! Über die Balkanroute* (2018, Göttingen/Potsdam/Frankfurt a.M.), and *Flight for Life/På Flugt* (2017, Copenhagen).⁵ What are the ideas and practices of solidarity (or sometimes help) that these exhibitions refer to? It is worth noting that an all-encompassing, comparative ethnography of the various exhibitions (comp. Baur 2009) was neither the aim of the *Helping Hands Research Network on the Everyday Border Work of European Citizens* during its field workshops in four cities in Northern Europe—Copenhagen, Glasgow, Hamburg, and Nijmegen/Kleve—nor is it the aim of this text. I rather attempt to bring together varying perspectives on migration, on solidarity, and/or on help as they were made the subject of exhibition displays and as they recurred in conversations with volunteers during our collective research. Looking at the ways in which they are put into effect in very heterogeneous settings, and the displays they result in, may unveil the troubling potential of migration and flight in the museal field for societal self-reflection and understanding.

Displaying practices of help and solidarity

The Museum without a home (2018, Glasgow) and *Lichtblicke* (2018/19, Hamburg) are two exhibitions that are typical for their genre: Firstly, they were invented, produced, and predominantly presented *outside* the museal sphere. Secondly, they convey very explicit political messages about flight and refugees to their audience, thus reinforcing the idea of exhibitions' 'activist role in society' (Message & Witcomb 2015: xxxv). Thirdly, they clarify that an impartiality of exhibitions has never been anything but perceived or imagined and that exhibitions are indeed *always* imbued with political messages. Yet, they proceed in very distinct ways.

Next to pictures of a stuffed toy, crayons, a jacket, and a backpack, *The Museum without a home* in Glasgow (2018) presents a skipping rope, accompanied by a text: 'Mimika lives in Ioannina in the north-west of Greece and owns a toy store. She wanted to visit the neighbouring reception centre and offer various toys, like this skipping rope, to the children that live there.' *The Museum without a home* calls itself *an exhibition of hospitality*—electing those acting out solidarity its protagonists and representing them via objects involved in this action. *The Museum without a home* consists of panels showing photographs and texts, and according to its introduction, it

has neither a specific location nor opening hours, while the objects it displays are not works of art, but items that Greeks offered to people in need of protection and support, and that played an important role in their everyday lives. These acts of solidarity are not unique to Greece. The 'Museum without a home' is growing (The Museum without a home 2018).

Originally initiated by the Greek Amnesty International and Oxfam (The 'Museum Without A Home – An Exhibition of Hospitality' 2016), the *Museum without a home* evolved into an internationally travelling exhibition, and on its journey through European cities, it was on display on the ground floor of Glasgow's town hall during the Refugee Festival Scotland in the summer 2018. The exhibition panels were accompanied by 'local' objects such as nappies, shirts, a cream jar, and letters, all donated by the Glaswegian initiative *Refuweegee*. Those objects were thought to be representative of the items refugees were offered upon their arrival to Glasgow. The introductory text as well as every text box highlight a key message: 'A small act of solidarity that deserves a big THANK YOU' (for an analysis of the implications of gratitude in this exhibition, see Sandberg forthcoming). Moreover, '[e]ach object is accompanied by a true story of solidarity and hope that reflects the power of people to make positive change' (The 'Museum Without A Home – An Exhibition of Hospitality' 2016). For the *Museum without a home*, the curator(s) chose objects and linked each of them to a Greek person we get to know by name (**Figure 1**). We do not learn anything about the migrants/refugees who receive the objects.

Throughout the networks' fieldwork visits, this topos was recurring in the exhibitions we visited and shone through in conversations with NGO activists: the solidarity work being done was highlighted, both to counter right-wing populist discourses and to make visible the informal and often invisible practices, and to convey and strengthen optimism and pride of the activists. Although solidarity as a concept aims to put all involved actors on the same level and alludes to some degree of mutuality (comp. Mainwaring, Mulvey & Piacentini 2020; Sandberg & Andersen 2020), the exhibitions and some conversations kept the other half of the interaction silent or invisible. With its intention to primarily say thank you to the countless helpers and individuals showing solidarity, the *Museum without a home* display turns invisible those who were addressed by solidarity work. Instead, it reproduces an image of the nameless refugee masses arriving on the shores of Europe. Neither the objects themselves are



Figure 1: Display detail, *The Museum without a home*, Photo: Kerstin Poehls.

employed to tell a story nor is there an overarching line of argumentation or documentation of contemporary migration or refugees' arrival. The gesture of appreciation towards solidarity workers clearly remains the exhibition's key point.

In sum, there are three aspects worth highlighting: Through the *Museum without a home*, NGO activists raise their voice in order to shed light on the manifold, mundane, and tiny everyday actions of solidarity and on the individuals carrying them out. Secondly, the *individuals who give* to those who are arriving and in need are in the foreground. This dominance becomes even clearer by looking at the one exception: a selection of letters, hand-written by volunteering Glaswegians, explicitly address refugees. Writers welcome those who arrive in a very personal tone and with references to 'how life in Glasgow' is (for an analysis of the Refuweege initiative that stands behind these letters, see Mainwairing, Mulway & Piacentini 2020). These letters clearly go beyond the general idea of *The Museum without a home* by tracing the communicative aspect of solidarity. Finally, the exhibition as a whole emphasizes the exceptional and instable state of those arriving while its audience presumably mainly consists of those living at home, be they involved in solidarity or help initiatives or not (Christidou & Diamantopoulou 2016).

A different approach was developed by the team and organization behind *Lichtblicke*: *Lichtblicke*—'gleams of hope'—was the title of a traveling exhibition featuring photographs by

20 young refugees from Afghanistan, Chechnya, Syria, and other countries who were brought together by the project *wirsprechenfotografisch* ('wespeakphotographic') in Hamburg's Altonaer Museum, one of the city's bigger museums. Together with a political scientist, an educationist, a designer, and a filmmaker, the prospective photographers were using cameras as a medium 'to approach their new home', 'to learn a new language' [both visually and linguistically, KP] as well as the 'work processes' of photography, and to start 'exchanging thoughts and impressions' with an increased awareness for their surroundings (Lichtblicke 2018). Their pictures and the accompanying personal and partly poetical texts were on display in 2018/19 (**Figure 2**).

For the presentation on the ground floor in the Altonaer Museum, cases and examples of flight, exile, and arrival throughout the centuries were added: As Altona, then a Danish neighboring city to Hamburg, guaranteed freedom of religion and trade, it became residence and home for numerous persecuted communities, such as Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, Mennonites, Huguenots, and Catholics.

The exhibition stands out due to several aspects: Firstly, in this exhibition the young refugee photographers raise their own voice. While they initially were brought together by an NGO with a certain idea of empowering them, the visitor is now invited to take their view when looking at photographs and reading texts. None of the photographers are mentioned by name (in contrast to the NGO activists), but it is their views on and encounters with the city of Hamburg that are in focus here. The photographs link the newly arrived photographers and (in case of Altonaer Museum and other venues) the majority of an audience that has been calling Hamburg their home for a long(er) time. Thus, connections, similarities, and the common ground of those behind the camera and those in front of the photographs are stressed. Home

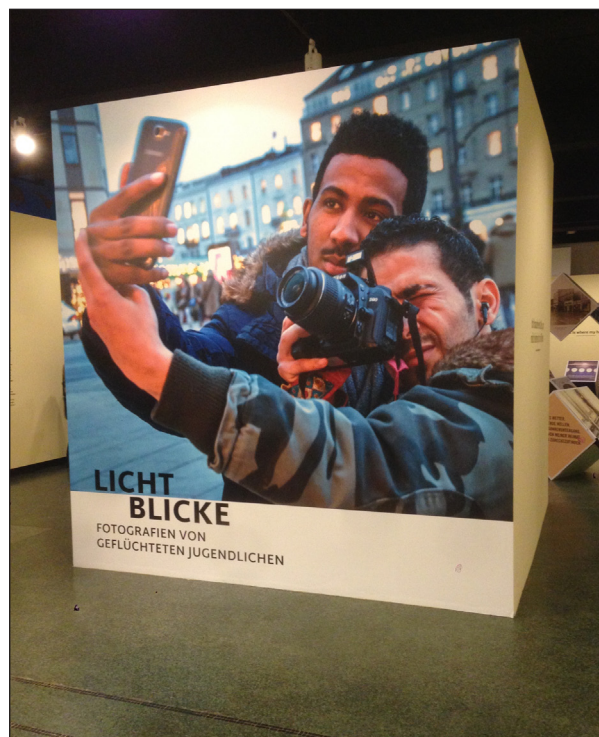


Figure 2: Display detail, *Lichtblicke*, Photo: Kerstin Poehls.

is implicitly understood as something that has to be made, or as a process—as ‘an ongoing relational tentative achievement’.⁶ Furthermore, this exhibition is a result of solidarity work: Instead of representing refugees as needy, this exhibition emphatically puts their perspective, their visual impressions, and their aesthetic competences into the foreground; it emphasizes the agency of all those involved in creating it; and it invites visitors to take in the photographers’ view. The exhibition makers chose to actively play the photographers’ social position and political status as refugees into the background. Ideas and acts of solidarity or help that were supposedly involved in the project are intentionally turned into something incidental not even worth mentioning. This elegant and playful move differs fundamentally from that of *The Museum without a home* and reminds us that social practices, such as those by solidarity workers, can be represented implicitly or explicitly and exhibited in contrasting ways.

Both exhibitions are a result of a collaboration between NGOs, associations, and only occasionally museums were involved. They were made by civil society actors from outside the museum and with very limited means, with the purpose of touring and constantly evolving, and both of them have been award-winning: *The Museum without a home* received two Gold ‘Ermis Awards’ and the ‘European Excellence Award’ as the best European NGO campaign in 2016. *Lichtblicke*, in turn, was awarded the ‘Education award’ by the German Photographic Association (DGPh) in 2017.

It is symptomatic that migration exhibitions such as the two in focus above do not originate from within museums—although one of them was presented in a museum for a limited time: As the title states, *The Museum without a home* does not have a clear place of belonging. It has been presented in numerous cities across Europe since 2016. *Lichtblicke* has been shown in changing versions in Hamburg since 2017. Instead of applying traditional strategies of a museum, namely seeking to attract people to come and visit, the organizers placed the exhibits where they would expect their target audience to come. This was most frequently the case *outside* the museal space. This active search for appropriate venues goes along with the explicit aim to contribute to public debate, to influence public opinion and knowledge about flight and migration: *The Museum without a home* was developed as a campaign, *Lichtblicke* as an educational project.

While *Lichtblicke* features photographs with impressions from the city of Hamburg—the place and space the photographers got to know better while working within the project and taking pictures—*The Museum without a home* focuses on objects that are frequently involved in solidarity work and, thus, recognizable by visitors of the exhibition. None of them took up the particular transit routes, the spaces that the refugees passed through, and the places where they were forced to wait until they could continue their journey to their current place of residence. Thereby, the exhibitions counter predominant visual representations of refugees’ spatial practice, namely pictures that show how they wait on railway stations, in corridors, in front of counters on their route to Northern Europe.

Although curators’ approaches resulted in different protagonists and key messages, both exhibitions make one thing clear: Contemporary ways of narrating and representing flight, mobility, and arrival have the potential to push museums into new directions. Invented as places where the movement of objects was (and is) put on hold, museums have only recently started working on finding ways of representing mobilities in all forms, including flight.⁷ Numerous temporary exhibitions highlight the extent to which migration has always been part of societies all over Europe (Lanz 2016, Poehls 2011), and museums are demanded to alter their three-dimensional narration created or reinforced through the use and interpretation of objects.

Lichtblicke and *The Museum* demonstrate that curatorial expertise is not limited to museum professionals and that diverse collectives have something to contribute to the museal and

exhibition realm. In that sense, the displays and how they came about push towards a deeper reflection on whom exhibition displays are representing for which audience, and whom they allow to speak for themselves.

Up to now, Grinell's argument holds true not only for exhibition on the present European societies, but also on their history: '[B]enevolent attempts [by museums] to address plights of refugees often hide the political utterance of these voices, turning them into passive victims rather than residents with legitimate and urgent demands for justice' (Grinell 2018: 109).

The formerly clear division of roles inside the museal space—knowing but mostly invisible curators on the one hand, an audience eager to be educated and/or entertained on the other—is dissolving (Bayer, Kazeem-Kamiński & Sternfeld 2017; Dewdney, Dibosa & Walsh 2013; Marstine 2017). Museum professionals react to claims that exhibitions are at last co-productions of a team of curators and visitors-as-prosumers, and that learning is a mutual process involving dissent. And they try to make use of or even refurbish their museum collection systematics to allow them better to bring up the objects and narrations that could link them to Europe's contemporary trouble. In this sense, museums are in trouble themselves, looking for ways to relate to a more diverse and troubled audience and a diverse museum staff has a key role to play here (Hollows 2019).

Representing Space/Spaces of Representation

In the context of migration and solidarity work, space is effective as it is produced through nation state and EU agendas and policies, on the one hand, and migrant practices on the other, and while these spatial practices (Schatzki 2015) take place on different levels, they are very much in conflict with each other (comp. Aparna et al. 2020).

Museums and exhibitions are continually evolving results of spatial practices as well, in a double sense as they attempt to represent *in nuce* and in a three-dimensional way what happens or happened in a space outside of them.⁸ The fundamental debate on the societal role of museums mentioned above, and whom they give voice to, as well as the exhibitions this article focuses on, reflects that the search for new spatial practices *inside* museal space itself is in full swing (von Bose et al. 2011). The conventional museum is in trouble in a very similar way as are the spaces it refers to—'Europe' being one of them.

I will subsequently introduce two additional exhibitions into the discussion: *Flight for life* (2017, Copenhagen) and *Yallah?! Über die Balkanroute* (2018, Göttingen et al.). I wish to highlight particular spatial practices through the exhibition settings they result in and to shed light on effects and potential tensions created by them.

Flight for life (2017, Copenhagen) 'takes you in the footsteps of the refugee'. In seven chapters from 'risking your life' to 'a new home, the exhibition visitors are asked to put her-/himself in the position of a refugee, making decisions about where and how to travel, what to take along, whom to trust, and so forth. Tents, blankets, a rubber dinghy, personal items, all those were recent acquisitions by the Tojhusmuseet (now Krigsmuseet/'War Museum'), a section of the National Museum of Denmark, and put on display in 2017 (**Figure 4**). The display was a result of its attempt to 'collect history while it was happening' (Engholm et al. 2018), surrounded by a large number of historical cannons. Some effort was made to recreate a setting and atmosphere that reminisced what had been in the news since 2015 and to move the audience back and forth 'between feelings and facts' (Engholm 2018). The exhibition rhetoric and the immersive approach that had been chosen may have quite a strong impact on the visitor: Direct speech and a lack of choice whether one really wanted to be approached as a 'refugee' may be received as intrusive and disturbing, or criticized as sensationalism.⁹ This intentional ambiguity is an explicit challenge for visitors, and implicitly it plays with the promise that exhibitions as a genre

have long time been giving to their visitors: The promise of representation in 3D spatial practices, objects and narratives—discourses—that can be found outside this setting, while at the same time creating either a possibility for emotional detachment, for distance, or for a bird's eye view. *Visiting* and *moving through* an exhibition is in that sense a very particular, highly corporal spatial practice beyond the social and cultural ritual.¹⁰ The ascription of a particular role, here 'the refugee' as individual human being on passage, obstructs any detachment and prevents the visitor from building a relation to the objects or the narration on his or her own.

The travelling exhibition *Yallah?! Über die Balkanroute* has been presented in Göttingen, where it was produced by university students, researchers, and artists, and in more than twenty cities since 2018 (**Figure 3**). With a concise activist approach and the ambition to



Figure 3: Display detail, Flight for life, Photo: Yallah?!



Figure 4: Display detail, Yallah?!, Photo: Gitte Engholm.

document 'the collapse and reerection of the European border regime' (Yallah 2019) in 2015, the panel exhibition follows refugees on the Balkan Route. Without ascribing a particular role to the visitor as human being, infrastructures and detailed mobility practices are in focus here: photographs and videos show railways and motorways, depict their situation and practices in camps and transit centers, show how trains and buses brought refugees from one city and country to another, and show how fences were erected.

Here again, the exhibition design does not rely on surrounding museum walls. Its collaborative mode of production resonates with the exhibition sites—in (or in front of) universities, libraries, and other public venues; in NGO offices and art spaces. So does the narrative style, for example on the last panel of the exhibition where the possibility of a more open society and the ongoing practices of solidarity are accentuated: Migration is ultimately taking place, that is the exhibition's main point, and it is in line with those who argue for an 'autonomy of migration'.¹¹ From this angle, experiences from summer 2015 and onwards prove that societal change towards more solidarity may happen if both exhibitions' visitors and many more contribute to this.

I find these two exhibitions symptomatic for the institutional framework they originate from. *Flight for life*, on the one hand, departs from the question how a museum generally devoted to history should go about 'collecting the contemporary'. It furthermore explores the limits of emotional speech and sounds the possibilities of addressing a young target audience by developing a narration that puts visitors into the shoes of refugees. Here, solidarity work is present through objects that were included in chapters on everyday life in camps ('from place to place'), on how refugees create 'order in chaos', and how they bridge endless 'waiting time'. Refugees' spatial practices are referred to in a way that disrupts visitors in their conventional spatial practice of an exhibition visit. *Yallah?! in turn* was conceived by activists from critical migration studies and in collaboration with artists who are or have been refugees themselves. The exhibition *Yallah?! was the result of the insight that refugees' voices can hardly be heard in Germany, that their mundane everyday mobility practices deserve attention, and that the word has to be theirs.*

In this regard, and although their aesthetics and rhetoric stand in contrast to each other, *Yallah?! and Lichtblicke* can be related to each other: both hand over the word to refugees and put their words into the established form of a traveling exhibition. In conclusion, they make use of the effects of the 3D setup—something that sets apart exhibitions from other materialisations of discourse. This proves even more powerful as it is refugees' spatial practices they tell about and the exhibitions hint at how an activist museum or exhibitions in contemporary Europe can empower refugees or be critical of a political situation (without implying that the exhibitions will have to be understood as solidarity work).

Troubled Europe, Troubled Representations

The Museum without a home, Lichtblicke, Yallah?!, and Flight for Life are a small selection of temporary exhibitions that were on the move all over Europe. They apply diverse narrative strategies, implicit and explicit views on solidarity, and different aesthetic approaches for conveying these views. They transpose refugees' spatial practices to the spatial setting of an exhibition in very different ways: through objects such as a rubber dinghy or a nappy, through mapping transit routes, or through bringing out refugees' gaze on their new home town, and through the emotional tone of the exhibition narration. The four exhibitions differ in tonality, in whose voices they make heard and in whom they address (comp. Smith 2017; Stoddard et al. 2015). They reflect varying understandings of where to socially 'locate' help and solidarity towards migrants in the European societies (comp. Whitehead et al. 2013). Finally, they differ in how outspoken they are as actors of

'troubling' Europe and/or its museal sphere and how they define the scope and audience of their displays.

Exhibitions cannot help a single human being to cross a border, to escape from inhumane conditions of a refugee camp, or to start a new life, but they do offer a contribution to a troubled Europe by 'stay[ing] with the trouble' (Haraway 2016: 1). I argue that this act of holding on to our troubled European present where issues of caring and belonging, of human rights and of citizenship, are at stake works on at least two levels: On a thematic level, temporary exhibitions on flight and migration as well as on help and solidarity help to keep political debate awake.

On another level, they strike a nerve and are troubling as they unveil the enormous need for more exhibitions, and even more so museums, to raise their voices in a troubled Europe, although this is 'traditionally out of character' (Janes & Sandell 2019: 18) for these only seemingly neutral institutions. While Europe has emerged as a category in museum work for quite a while now, not least pushed by funding programs that require and value European cooperation and are based on mobilities of all kinds inside the EU (see Kaiser, Krankenhagen & Poehls 2014), it remains to be seen how this can lead to more activist museums:

With a variety of notable exceptions, the museum community is not responding to the world, be it climate change, species extinction, or social justice issues such as poverty and homelessness. Instead, there is a preoccupation with attracting bigger audiences, along with a growing fascination with digital technology. Museums have their own distractions and internal agendas that preclude or discourage responding to the world (Janes & Sandell 2019: 18).

Against this background, the concept of trouble as both Haraway (2016) and Papataxiarchis (2018) suggest it to us does not offer a simple solution. Quite to the contrary, it calls our attention to an undissolvable ambivalence: All exhibitions analysed above can be simultaneously interpreted as *either* performances of virtuous engagement with the trouble without solving anything, even perpetuating constellations of inequality or reproducing positions of advantage and disadvantage. *Or* their 'staying with the trouble' can be valued as impulse towards unfolding 'courageous energy' (Janes & Sandell 2019: 18) and more innovative, and activist, museum practice.

Notes

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² Arguments frequently circle around ethnographic museums and how they should confront their history and collection, but essentially, these are *fundamental* questions about agency and power inside *any* museum. They are equally important to national, regional, and city museums and how they do (or do not) represent the diversity inherent to the society they (cl)aim to represent.

- ³ While it is not the aim of this article to represent this ongoing debate at large, Christian Kravagna (2015) offers a starting point and key arguments. Kravagna's article is followed by comments from experts inside and outside the museum, and this multitude of voices brings together conflicts, critical issues, and dilemma in a very concise manner.
- ⁴ Lately, also art historians Burcu Dogramaci and Birgit Mersmann (2020) have called for a reconceptualization of their whole discipline towards an 'anti-linear, multi-perspectival, and horizontal [...] recanonization of art history from a transnational or transcultural perspective' (10) that 'makes it necessary to rethink the role and systematization of museums [...] (11).
- ⁵ Visits to the exhibitions in Copenhagen and Glasgow were part of the joint fieldwork programme in May 2017 resp. June 2018.
- ⁶ Compare preliminary findings of the Research project HOMinG, <https://homing.soc.unitn.it/2019/07/25/paolo-boccagni-homing-at-mid-way-2-5-years-5-key-points/> [Last accessed 24 August 2019].
- ⁷ They will have to acknowledge and reflect that sedentarianism is a historical exception to the rule of mobility (Schlögel 2006, 2007), while sedentarianism is still powerfully inscribed into museal objects already through collection systematics that require a place of belonging (comp. discussions of spatiality and territorialities in Aparna et al. 2020).
- ⁸ While museums have since their inception been considered as (bourgeois) places of education, a setting where master narratives of e.g. the nation state and its boundaries should be and have been produced, staged, and conveyed (Knell, Aronsson & Amundsen 2011; comp. EUNAMUS 2019), their role is under scrutiny. Globalization and mobilities of all kinds cast the concept of linking cultural and social phenomena and, hence, objects to a certain territory into doubt. Also Europeanization as a cultural and political process implicates attempts to establish new master narratives and to substantiate them through objects in showcases (Kaiser, Krankenhagen & Poehls 2014), with the same ambivalent and tense relation to space that characterizes EU-Europe as a political construction site and idea at large.
- ⁹ Thank you to the members of the *Helping Hands Research Network* who made me reflect upon this.
- ¹⁰ Although it would certainly be worthwhile to investigate the visitors' views on all exhibitions mentioned in the article, and maybe even compare them, it is not my aim here. There is a vast number of museum visitor studies but also a lot of criticism to this often functionalist approach to exhibitions (comp. Dawson & Jensen 2011).
- ¹¹ One key argument of researchers arguing for an 'autonomy of migration' is that migration processes are driving the EU in front of itself be it concerning humanitarian questions or concerning citizenship (Bojadžijev & Karakayali 2007; TRANSIT MIGRATION Forschungsgruppe 2007; for revision see Scheel 2015).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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