

Born in Europe:
an International Programme on Representing
Migrant Experiences in European Museums

Udo Gößwald



Born in Europe: an International Programme on Representing Migrant Experiences in European Museums

● **Udo Gößwald**
Director, Museum Neukölln, Germany

'Born in Europe' was initiated by the Heimatmuseum Neukölln in the year 2000 as a joint project with the Portuguese Association of Company Museums (Aporem), the Lisbon Water Museum, the National Museum, Copenhagen, the Danish Women's Museum, Aarhus, the Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art, Vienna and the National Museum for World Cultures, Göteborg, supported and funded by the European Union under its Culture 2000 programme, (see: <http://www.born-in-europe.de>), and with friendly support from the Museumspädagogischer Dienst, Berlin and the office of the Europe representative in the local administration of Berlin-Neukölln.

It aimed to address issues relating to current cultural changes in Europe in several different ways, all focused around the question of what being born in present-day Europe means for people of different ethnic origins. There is no doubt that an educated and progressive Europe has to rise to the cultural challenges presented by migration and globalisation. Museums can play a leading role here, since their collections can reflect the effects of integration or disintegration achieved by a society and the ruling political constellation at any given time. Furthermore museums in Europe can use documentation and presentations, events, special forms

of publicity and educational measures to ensure a comprehensive debate on those current problems deriving from conflicts in identity with individuals and social groups, and especially among migrant populations.

In doing so, we need to understand that our European heritage is not a mono-cultural one, but in contrast is very complex, and has been shaped by ethnic, religious and cultural differences and migrations over many centuries. As the Hungarian writer and Karlspreis laureate György Konrád put it: "Europe is a place which is the home of both the constitutional state and of human rights, but it is equally the place where a love of one's homeland does not conflict with an interest in the [European] whole." The Swiss writer Adolf Muschg has argued against precipitously becoming merged in a single 'European identity'. Instead, he advocates understanding Europe as a metaphor, one embracing both living in peace and security while being open enough to receive new impulses, which in fact enrich and constitute the feeling of being at home.

For hundreds of years migration movements within Europe have affected regional and national cultures, have enriched their diversity, their specific crafts, the architecture, literature and the arts in general. Crossing borders has been a necessity for many whose economic

future seemed hopeless, for those who wished to practice their religion without persecution and, of course, for many forced into exile for their own safety because they fought for social rights, democracy and freedom in their home countries. The coming and going of peoples in large numbers has been an important experience of European societies. Traces of migrant cultures can be found in almost all European museums, but their meaning and worth in terms of Europe's cultural heritage have not been fully recognised yet.

In order to connect with the search for identity in Europe and Europe's future potential, in 2000 the Museum Neukölln, Berlin, initiated a five year project called 'Born in Europe', which aimed to reflect on the issue of birth and migration in a museum context. When dealing with children and birth you face a complex of expectations, hopes and worries about the future at the same time. Birth, as a process of delivery, sets the child free and at the same time creates a lifelong bond. Children are the future: they also reflect wishes and hopes. Birth can therefore be a metaphor for a new beginning and hope, a symbol that life has to go on and that a person has to take action in life. Many children of recent migrants have been born in Europe. How will their different ethnic, religious and cultural influences shape Europe's future identity?

Identifying what may be called a European cultural identity is a process, an open, complex and unfinished game - always under construction. However, each discussion about identity carries the risk of provoking an aggressive and narrow-minded attitude about the 'other'. That is why the project "Born in Europe" set out to promote the idea of a new Europe, which I would like help to develop, following closely the ideas of Ash Amin, an urban ethnologist and geographer who teaches at

Durham University in England.

My vision of this new Europe is like a gateway, which is being supported by two pillars. One pillar has its foundation in the Greek word *ethos*, defined as the habit of regular stay or shelter. The pillar itself is the principle of hospitality, which was found in medieval cities as sites of refuge and hospitality for travellers and those in need of sanctuary. The second pillar is founded on the tradition of the philosophy of Socrates according to which we are not born free, but only reach freedom through dialogue and engagement. This incorporates the principle of mutuality as the basis on which identities are formed. 'Freedom follows from engagement with and publicity for the stranger in and among us, not least because without the stranger constituted as the 'other', the self cannot be defined(1). The third element of the gateway, its roof or connecting top, should be dedicated to the individuality of each human being, respecting the differences in habit, gender, longings and behaviour of each individual and certainly to foster his infinite potential for creativity.

To accept difference is a cultural good that has to be fought for. None of this is achieved by itself. The aftermath of the European conflicts of the 20th century which did so much to oppress individuality, still cast long, dark shadows. An alternative idea of Europe should therefore be located within a philosophical ethos, one that will promote empathy and engagement with the stranger as the essence of what is to be 'European'. This is what I would like to call the 'Gate of Europe'. However, he who comes through the door as a stranger should not forget to greet, says an old Chinese proverb. The stranger does well to adapt to his new surroundings, to learn about its heritage and to contribute what he thinks to be helpful. Hospitality can only be offered for a limited amount of time; integration is always a two-way street.

To understand the different approaches to the very complex subject, I would like to document the structure and content of one element of the 'Born in Europe' international cooperation programme - the exhibition "Born in Europe - New Identities", organized by the Heimatmuseum Neukölln, Berlin, but shown at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin from August 20th to October 17th 2004(2). This set out to promote a debate on the origins, identity and future in Europe, clearly showing that indifferent tolerance is not enough in relations with people of various ethnic and cultural origins. Instead, it is high time for us to identify and address the fears and expectations across Europe, with the aim of improving the basis for mutual understanding and achieving genuine acceptance of the 'other'.

As the major part of the overall joint museum project photographers and curators of each partner museum had visited local migrant families from all over the world with new-born babies and documented their everyday life. The exhibitions were the result of this work: from all the surveys 98 photographs were chosen and presented as a European gallery of a special kind, which was showing in various partner museums between 2002 and 2005.

The exhibition had three elements or 'chapters' as follows.

The Gates of Europe

The main aim of this part of the exhibition was to address the question of Europe's borders. This question relates not only to the geography, but it also carries important cultural and historical aspects: "What Europe means to us, is determined by our behavior at its borders", as the

Swiss writer and former president of the Academy of Arts in Berlin Adolph Muschg put it. Though travel and migration within (and indeed beyond) Europe was mostly very open up to the emergence of the concept of the powerful nation-state in the latter part of the 19th century, from the early 20th century onwards crossing borders became increasingly difficult, even though this may appear to have been a necessity for many whose economic future seems hopeless, for those who wish to practice their religion without fear of persecution, or for those who cannot find political rights, democracy and freedom in their home countries. While there is now freedom of movement within the 'Schengen' countries of the European Union, for others, the gates of Europe are been restricted more and more even for refugees and asylum seekers, and many of these, together with much larger numbers of what are classed as economic migrants, feel forced to enter the EU illegally, and often risk their lives in the process.

The first installation within the 'Gates of Europe' part of the Exhibition was by Anna Henckel-Donnersmark. Approaching the exhibition the visitor found a combination of two TV sets standing quite close to each other. One showed a small blue boat in the open sea, which would become identified as a refugee boat tossed back and forth by the waves in an endless loop. The other showed a close-up of rapidly flowing water indicating dynamics and the flow of life. Seen simultaneously the pictures evoked an uneasy feeling, symbolizing fear and hope at the same time, making both life and death possible options.

The visitor then saw a series of sixteen pictures by the Spanish photographer Matias Costa. These mainly showed African refugees in the Spanish enclave of Ceuta



Figure 1: View into the exhibition "Born in Europe - New Identities" at Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin(21.8. - 17.10.2004)



Figure 2: Maxan and Matisan, born November 4, 2001 in Berlin with their parents from Sri Lanka
Figure 3: Lucas, born December 27, 2001 in Berlin with his parents from Brazil

on the coast of Morocco, but others were of migrants arriving on beaches in the southern part of Spain, or in the refugee camp of Sangatte, France. With his pictures Costa gave a face to all of those who have risked their lives attempting to reach Europe, and show the anxiety and uncertainty of people in desperate situations. (More than 4,500 people have died attempting to reach a European coast.)

The Austrian artist Harald Schmutzhard used three monitors in his video installation "Border Rescue" aimed at provoking empathy with fugitives at the borders of Europe. One showed the dates, numbers and locations of refugees known to have suffocated or drowned on their way to Europe. Another showed films published on the Internet which were intended to help fugitives to find their way across the border between the Czech Republic and Austria, but combined with the sound of heart beats. The third video was of a water basin in a zoo with seals swimming around, except for one, which seemed to be lying dead in the corner. The visitors, especially children, notice this animal and waited until it came back to the surface and is 'saved'.

Searching for identity

The second unit of the exhibition focused upon the heritage of young people of different and often hybrid cultural backgrounds in particular, and aimed to define their identity in Europe anew. Very often migrants experience a social and cultural reality which feels like living between two different worlds. For those living in Europe as refugees the question of their identity is especially difficult, because their precarious legal status makes stable relationships to other people and their

surroundings very complicated. But this can also be a problem for people whose family have been living in a European country already for several generations: the expanding European Union provokes questions relating to their own identity as well.

The installation 'Identity Checkpoint' of Peter Kees referred to basic questions of identity and heritage. An office-like situation with a desk and two chairs in the style of the 1970s gave the notion of being in the *Ausländerbehörde*, an institution where migrants are registered and questioned when entering a European country. Peter Kees had tried out the process of registration used with passers-by in Berlin, Budapest, Bratislava and Prague. On a sheet of paper they were asked to indicate their identity according to their ethnicity, and their personal, social and self-assessment of their identity. Also, each interviewee was photographed with a camera used for ID-cards and asked to give a piece of genetic material sufficient to make a DNA test. The results were remarkable and showed how seriously involved people became in trying to give an adequate description of themselves. It was evident that most of them began to realise how much their identity was a specific construct which while it does include real migrant experiences where relevant, it also depends to a great extent on self-projections and inner wishes. The installation was definitely a significant confrontation with the 'Other Self' and inspired many visitors to think about their own identities, and in what sense they see themselves as Europeans with a migration background.

The video work of the French artist Sylvie Blocher 'I and Us' (which had been chosen for the Biennale in Venice in 2003), focused on very personal aspects of



Figure 4: Melissa, born September 28, 2001 in Berlin with her father from Turkey



Figure 5: Togoldor, born in Berlin, with her mother from Mongolia

finding one's identity. Together with the group *Campement Urbain*, which consists of architects, sociologists and the artist herself, this work had been created in *Beaudotte* on the outskirts of Paris, a suburb where many migrants live. The residents were involved in the art work by asking them to stand in front of a video camera with identically black T-shirts on which a short phrase had been printed in red letters. The content of the phrases were very personal, referring to wishes, hopes and anxieties or political statements. It definitely took some courage to show these in public. Shown as a 3m by 4m projection, the exhibition visitor was confronted by a special kind of intimacy that immediately touched the visitor and provoked an inner dialogue with the figures. Also in this installation the stranger was approached with a special form of empathy and respect. Having seen the section about the arrival of anonymous people to the coasts of Europe, the visitor was this confronted with migrants in a very direct and personal way.

The members of an under-18 soccer team from *Tasmania Gropiusstadt* in Berlin-Neukölln, and who play in the highest division of the German Junior League, was the object of a portrait series by the Italian photographer *Denise Vernillo*. This showed a group of young men from Berlin, most of whose parents have migrated to Germany from Turkey, Bosnia, Serbia and Poland, and who dream of becoming stars in the European soccer leagues. Their main goal is to play football professionally: this will take a lot of discipline and they have a hard path ahead of them. This section of the exhibition seeks to show identity as something young people work for, something they want to achieve.

The interactive multimedia application by *Andrea Behrendt* dealt with pupils of a 10th grade school class of a local gymnasium in Berlin-Neukölln. The pupils were asked to describe their families' heritage by marking the birth places of their parents and grandparents and their own on a world map. When clicking on each pupil on this map an oral comment was given, relating also to photographs and objects that the student concerned had chosen to be a part of their social memory. Some of the objects were shown in the exhibition. In this very special way personal memory was linked to experiences of migration and family heritage. The video *'Wir liegen dazwischen'* ('Being in between'), also directed by *Andrea Behrendt*, shows the search for identity by six young girls living in Berlin among different worlds of influence.

In the video *'Heimat Europa'* by *Anna Henckel-Donnersmark* bi-national couples from Poland, Belgium, France, the United States, Japan and Germany who have decided to live in Berlin, talked about cultural enrichment and what Europe means to them. However, they also talked also about the difficulties of living in Europe, about language barriers, xenophobia, and about being seen as the eternal stranger. However, they still try to fulfil their dreams in the new surroundings with their partners and children.

Born in a new country

With the birth of a child in a European country many migrants are quickly confronted with the traditions and cultural habits of their new surroundings. Very often the families experience a lack of social relationships, which

were generally much stronger in their countries of origin. On the other hand the expectations towards their own future and that of their children now that they are living in Europe are being articulated very clearly. As already explained, the major part of the joint museum project 'Born in Europe' consisted of photographers and curators from each partner museum visiting five migrant families from all over the world and with new-born babies in each of the cities of Gothenburg, Copenhagen, Berlin, Arhus and Lisbon, and documented their everyday life.

As a result of the work in the five centres 98 photographs were chosen and presented as a European gallery of a special kind which was shown in Gothenburg, Arhus, Lisbon and Copenhagen. In the case of Berlin the decision was made not to present the photographs hanging on the wall in the normal museum or gallery way, but to leave them lying on the ground or leave them leaning against the walls. In this way a long narrow aisle was created in the middle which was meant to provoke associations, for example about the difficult passage of birth.

This installation also referred to the instable situation of the many migrants who have not yet found a place where they can settle down and hang their family photographs on the walls of their house or apartment in the normal way. The effect of this presentation was that people walked through the display around extremely carefully, while looking down physically on the pictures. They did not necessarily mean that they were looking down on these people in the metaphorical sense, but instead it was hoped that the arrangement would lead to the visitor looking very intensely at the photographs, with

affection and sympathy.

On the white wall above the photographs the names of the new-born children were written, together in each case with the names of their parents, their place of birth and with the country of origin of the parents. In addition one key sentence was displayed from the interviews with each immigrant family shown reporting on their own situation, as in the following five examples:

"The most difficult thing is the feeling that nothing belongs to us; it seems as though everything is borrowed" (Brazilian family living in Lisbon)

"There are many things you can complain about, but it's very important, that you are allowed to complain" (Turkish family living in Arhus)

"We don't feel at home here, but we feel even less at home there." (Palestinian family living in Berlin)

"We thought we could live as a free family in Denmark" (Afghan family living in Copenhagen)

"My children are going to learn both Kurdish and Swedish; they will grow up here, and they will grow up as Europeans" (Iraqi-Kurdish family living in Gothenburg)

At the end of the gallery the visitor was confronted by a quote in large letters from Kofi Annan, at the time the General Secretary of the United Nations:

"The integration of immigrants that have become



Figure 6: Togoldor, born in Berlin, with her mother from Mongolia
Figure 7: Yussra, born July 31, 2001 in Berlin

permanent members of the European societies is essential for its productivity and for human dignity. The message is clear: The immigrants need Europe, but Europe also needs immigrants. A closed Europe would be a poorer, a worse, a weaker, an older Europe. An open Europe will be a more just, a stronger, a richer and a younger Europe keeping in mind, that we have to manage immigration well. Immigrants are a part of the solution, not a part of the problem.^[3]

The responses towards the project overall and the exhibition in particular have been very encouraging. The exhibition attracted a mainly young international audience, including many with a migrant background. People quickly felt encouraged to speak about their own view of things, triggering many emotional reactions. Birth, life, development, the search for identity, evoking memory in order to articulate anxiety, hopes and wishes towards the future were, as was hoped, key elements of the "Born in Europe"-project.

I see this as a dynamic and open cultural project that is just beginning. Activities of this kind should continue to develop and be supported, demonstrating engagement and empathy for the stranger among others, and to help ourselves to foster a new, broader, idea of Europe and European culture. 🇪🇺

NOTES

1. Amin Ash, From ethnicity to empathy: a new idea of Europe, 24. July 2003 at www.openDemocracy.net
2. Other showings of versions of the exhibition included the Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art, Vienna, April-October 2002, Water Museum, Lisbon, September 2002, Museum of Ceramics, Loures, Portugal, December 2002 / March 2003, and the National Museum for World Cultures, Göteborg, Sweden, June 2003.
3. Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General: Speech to the European Parliament on the occasion of receiving the Andrej-Sacharow-Award, Brussels, 29. January 2004