I Came as a Stranger

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Fig. 8.1. Antonina and Florian. Photo by Aleksandra Pawloff for the exhibition Out of the Box at Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna.

1.

As a photographer, my subject is people. In my work, I am interested in the person beyond their appearance. I want to elicit from the viewer a feeling of connection with my subjects, to touch the viewer, not to please or shock them. Simultaneously, I work to reveal the unknown or unacknowledged, even darker, sides of my subject, sides that have been successfully suppressed in daily life. With the greatest of respect, I want to trigger the viewer's emotional engagement with the person pictured, wherever that person lives. In my experience, human beings are never fundamentally different from one another, whether I encounter them in a village in Niger or a park in Vienna.

Yet the 'otherness' of my subjects – their apparent or presumed difference – is often what informs much of the discourse around the present and future of Europe today, and it is what many people seem to fear. I have often wondered whether that feeling of not belonging or being regarded as an outsider is any less threatening than the feeling of having 'too many others' entering one's 'own' territory. Today, this fear of otherness emanates from right-wing governments and movements all over Europe. The mental mechanism of exclusion has always been the first step towards the mass murder of 'others' in a world that is quickly becoming smaller. But what might have been a survival strategy that worked in the Stone Age, when we roamed large spaces in small groups, is no longer valid in the multicultural world we live in today.

What could be a more appropriate place for thinking about us and others than the museum, which has long functioned as a repository for things unknown, a place for the 'adoration of the exotic'? Just think of all the people coming to admire the Penacho in the Weltmuseum Wien. What better place to reconcile us with the presumed otherness of others? Such a task of reconciliation is not straightforward, nor can it be achieved by merely exhibiting things that have until only recently been catalogued according to Western scientific categories. Indeed, such practices have long been criticised as an expression of the symbolic power over and subjugation of the other, enacted through belittling eyes. We could even suggest that this outmoded gaze corresponds precisely to the way we look upon strangers today, upon places and nations represented by the museum in uncritical and unreflective ways.

2.

I vividly remember walking into Block 17, the Austrian memorial place in the Auschwitz concentration camp, in 1999 and being faced with the words: Austria was the first victim of National Socialism. It has taken until 2009 for the Austrian government to reconsider this view of ourselves as victims and to acknowledge the undeniable enthusiasm with which many Austrians collaborated with the Nazis. In

that year, Block 17 was redesigned as a memorial, acknowledging Austria's complicity in Nazism. In 2013 this display was closed and a new concept is still being developed. Such approaches to history have been changing in the last two decades and Austria, always slower it seems, follows this trend.

The Weltmuseum Wien, Austria's largest ethnographic museum, reopened last year with a radically new approach. It moved away from being a heritage museum focussed on the past towards a people-centred place, aware and willing to take up the responsibility that comes with recognising that a 'museum is a political space that can influence the way people conceive and understand one another and the world they live in' (Onciul 2013, 81). It was with this commitment that the museum organised the collaborative exhibition Out of the Box – Moving Worlds.

In this exhibition, the museum invited thirty people of different backgrounds, all based in Vienna, to choose objects from the museum's collections to which they felt some connection. The group was comprised of academics and artists, in general open-minded and well-educated individuals, and many were friends or close acquaintances of the guest curator who selected the participants. Compared to a similar project, Creatures of Earth and Sky, described by Serena Iervolino (2013) as an intercultural dialogue project with African migrants living in Parma, Italy, the people involved in Out of the Box represented an intellectual and cultural elite.

As both a participant in and photographer of the project, it was my task to document the emotions, whether curiosity, surprise, or enthusiasm, of each person as they came into contact with the object that they had chosen. Feelings arose and thoughts were triggered about what 'home' and 'origin' mean. Did the encounter with the object elicit a longing for home or questions about origins? Did participants think about where they are from and how they define themselves in relation to their chosen object? Why did they choose that particular object and not another? The objects stopped being mere objects and gained significance for each of us, while at the same time we gave the objects meanings they did not previously have. The outcome – written texts and the video-recorded interviews – was a highly professional and thoughtful reflection on origins, home, and roots/routes in connection with the chosen objects.

3.

For me, as a politically engaged photographer, a question that frequently arises in my work is: how can I reach out to and involve a large variety of people in what I do, including people who may be afraid of the otherness of the so-called stranger? I am especially interested in reaching those who, due to their fear, 'are not willing to look at each other as human beings', as Timothy Zaal, a self-proclaimed white supremacist-turned-pacifist, says in the Museum of Tolerance, where he talks to visitors every week (Golding 2013).

One year ago I started a project that I named 'Fremd bin ich gekommen' (I Came as a Stranger), a slight alteration of the first line of the poem Good Night from Die Winterreise written by Wilhelm Müller (1823). This work was forbidden under Metternich's authoritarian regime (1809-1948) and was set to music by Franz Schubert, who stood in opposition to that regime. I have been photographing and interviewing people with a migrant background, defined in Austria as having a father or a mother born outside Austria. They make up one-half of the Viennese population. I have spoken with grocers, construction and health care workers, musicians, teachers, cleaning personnel, managers, pizza delivery workers, students, professors, the old and the young, men and women. I have walked into restaurants, bookshops, barbershops, tramways, bakeries, and clothing stores. I have written to schools, homes for the elderly, and hospitals, and have asked people to work with me. I have portrayed people of a specific district and exhibited that work in their district. Then I move on to another district. I have focussed on local neighbourhoods because they constitute familiar environments where people can recognise each other and feel safe.

Vienna, like every city in the world, was created thanks to people coming from other places and has always been a lively combination of people of different nationalities. By showing portraits alongside personal biographies, and doing so in neighbourhoods and among neighbours, I hope to make viewers see that there is no need to fear newcomers. Very soon they too will be part of Vienna, just like the people in my portraits who speak about what home means to them, how they relate to Vienna versus their country of origin, how they were treated by the Viennese as children, what they love and what they fear. Each story is unique, emotional, surprising, and thoughtful. I do believe that 'the very personal is what changes people's consciousness', as Shirley Gunn, a South African activist and director of the Human Rights Media Centre in Cape Town, argued in a 2011 interview with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience[1].

The places I choose to show these works have a very low threshold of exclusion; they are where people go in the course of their everyday lives, such as adult education centres or public administration buildings. The hospital is an ideal place. I cannot think of a place where people come more randomly, have more time available, and are at the same time vulnerable, closer to 'the crack in everything' that is 'how the light gets in' (Leonard Cohen, 'Anthem').

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1 '"The Very Personal Is What Changes People's Consciousness": An Interview with Activist Shirley Gunn', International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, accessed 1 June 2018. https://www.sitesofconscience.org/en/shirley-gunn/.

4.

In contrast to those in the museum, the objects in my exhibitions are not things but people and their lives. I am convinced that people who are heard do not need to scream. I have photographed all over the world, doing reportage in a wide range of situations, from NGOs in Africa to homes for the elderly in Vienna. Each time I experienced how important it is for people to be recognised, to be listened to with respect and interest – especially for those whose opinions have never been sought or who have never been made the centre of anyone's attention. This gives them joy.

A museum, which, according to the International Council of Museums,[2] is 'a permanent institution in the service of society and its development', should aim, in particular, to reach out to those who do not accept the fact that 'we do live nowadays in societies that are pluralistic and there is no way back' (Charim 2018). And ethnographic museums are special places in this regard: they can play an unparalleled role in facilitating openness and acceptance among people in this transition from presumed homogeneity and familiarity into the plural societies in which we now live. They need, however, to first deal with their difficult past of looking at and collecting artefacts of so-called primitive cultures. Only then can they become living 'sites of conscience' in the present day, sites for working through history.

The question, however, is: how should museums take up this role? How might they be places for open encounters between the local and the stranger, the fearful and the feared, without fixing these roles as unchanging or oppositional subjectivities? Technically, this could be achieved by inviting people randomly to participate, to contribute their stories, and to talk about what is important to them; this could materialise in an object they select from the museum or an object they already own. This was the context of Out of the Box. Adopting this method could draw new and different people to visit museums, which through their involvement would become a place of their own.

Another option is to bring the museum to the people. I am all for pop-up exhibitions in hospitals in shopping malls or in train stations, confronting audiences with the theme of the place they are in. How has suffering been depicted or denied? In what ways have notions of gender, of masculinity, for example, changed over the last one hundred or three hundred years? How has shopping changed over the centuries? What is the experience of being forced into exile or to flee one's homeland or migrate from one land to another? How did and do we frame some people as belonging and others as outsiders? If a viewer is confronted with the fact that my grandparents or my friends' parents had to leave their country, would that invite empathy and a change of perception? I think it can. Of course some museums have been trying these strategies for some time, even if not always in a progressive manner or with success.

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2 See https://icom.museum/en/activities/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/.

I think that the only themes that really touch and connect us with others are those that are both personal and universal, those that on one level or another are true for every human being, even if differently so. Marshall Rosenberg[3] and his technique of nonviolent communication had a decisive influence on my approach to photographing people. He argues that people all over the world are driven by a set of basic universal needs such as autonomy, acceptance, community, emotional safety, physical nurturance, play, and respect. Fear and hatred are the result of one of these needs not being met. I think museums need to create exhibitions with universal themes that touch both on an emotional and an intellectual level, opening up to heterogeneity and similarities, instead of foregrounding community or group differences, which inherently emphasises differences between 'us' and 'them'.

5.

I find the concept of 'communities', which interests many ethnographic museums, very questionable. Is it not presumptuous for a museum to 'choose' a community about or with which to make an exhibition if the wish does not come from the community itself? We do have to face the fact that our world is changing, our western societies cannot be classified or explained in terms of communities anymore, and problems cannot be understood or solved by this kind of categorisation. In the plural world we live in today, one's own identity does not come naturally, if it ever did. Instead, increasingly we are required to make decisions about being religious or non-religious, about food, sports, and culture, regardless of where we come from and how long we or our ancestors have lived in the country.

Out of the Box has been important for my artistic practice. It has made me realise that I was limiting myself to my own project 'Fremd bin ich gekommen'. I thought that by addressing people with a migrant background, I was working openly, without favouring specific communities. Now I realise that by choosing one group I have been excluding others: those who regard themselves as non-migrants. I realised that at times I too have felt like a stranger in the world, and that suffering from a physical impairment could lead to feelings of outsiderness. And I know from my year-long work with homeless people how much they suffer from not being seen as belonging to our world. I do not need to have a foreign passport or parents born in another country to feel like a stranger. The project has pushed me to expand 'Fremd bin ich gekommen' to non-immigrant Viennese as well. To feel like a stranger, in this way, is a universal theme, even if we are strangers in different ways. To feel like a stranger is much more precarious, even life threatening for some. Not being heard or feeling afraid are subjects that interest me and that are relevant for each and every one of us. There are wonderful objects that can be

3 Presented during training session in Vienna in 2017.

used to battle fear in the world, ranging from prayer book to cuddle blanket. These could be a feast for a museum.

I do believe that museums, if they want to make a difference, have to be both about something and for someone (Weil 1999). They cannot be mere spaces of research, collection and preservation and they do not need to become a place for inappropriate social work. They do have a responsibility that goes further. As the Austrian writer Peter Waterhouse (2018) said in an article for Falter, a Viennese weekly journal, when he recently resigned his lifelong membership of the prestigious Austrian Art Senate to protest against the right-wing political programme of our government and their cultural plans: 'There is no such thing as a culture nation (Kulturnation) because culture is never national'. Humanity is never national either.

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Fig. 8.2. Itai. Photo by Aleksandra Pawloff for the exhibition Out of the Box at Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna.

Fig. 8.3. Otto. Photo by Aleksandra Pawloff for the exhibition Out of the Box at Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna.

Fig. 8.4. Sabria. Photo by Aleksandra Pawloff for the exhibition Out of the Box at Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna.

Fig. 8.5. Samira. Photo by Aleksandra Pawloff for the exhibition Out of the Box at Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna.