



PROGRAMS

Thursday, February 1 | 5:30–8 pm

Opening Reception

Spertus Institute

Thursday, March 1 | 7–8 pm

An Evening of Readings and Performances

Writer and translator Nathanaël, writer and translator Jennifer Scappetone,

and writer and code artist Judd Morrissey

Poetry Foundation

Sunday, March 4 | 3–4 pm

Gallery Talk

Artist Ellen Rothenberg and curator Ionit Behar

Spertus Institute

Wednesday, April 4 | 6–7:30 pm

Cecilia Vicuña: Performance on Migration and Movement

Chilean artist, writer, and activist

Spertus Institute

Programs are free.

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THE HOUSE OF EVERY INDIVIDUAL SHOULD BE FOR HIM A PERFECTLY SECURE REFUGE AND SHELTER'

By Bettina Klein

Containers and Nissen Huts

In the fifteen-minute walk from my apartment in Berlin's Kreuzberg district to Tempelhof Field, I pass through a narrow street where the imposing brick buildings of the former police headquarters stand across from a series of tightly arranged office containers. Each of these tiny shops, which have just enough space for a desk and two chairs, provides the same service: the printing of license plates. Micro-economies like these can be found in makeshift architectural spaces around the world. They are partly a result of a precarious economic situation, partly an expression of planning pragmatism, and they span a range of uses, including examples that function as fashionable pop-up shops, such as London's Boxpark Shoreditch as office architecture and Sugoroku Offices in Gifu, Japan. They reflect back to a decades' old idea of plug-in cities, such as the never-realized housing capsules from neo-futurist British architectural group Archigram in the 1960s and '70s.

Shipping containers—like those used internationally for transporting goods since the 1950s—have largely replaced tents, shacks, and corrugated iron sheds as the most ephemeral, compact architectural form. Being low cost, weather resistant, standardized, and easy to set up and dismantle, they are regularly used when flexibility and thrift are required, be it accommodations for construction workers, temporary school buildings, kindergartens, or student residences. But the containers also embody modernity and mobility: in Berlin, *Platoon Kunsthallo*, an art and event space constructed out of 33 stacked containers, has constantly moved from one gentrifying part of Berlin to the next until it appeared for sale on eBay last year. Hendrik Lehmann, editor at Berlin's daily newspaper *Tagesspiegel*, summed up the situation: "Viewed objectively, Berlin's containers currently house the city's already weaker groups: children, students, construction workers, refugees. Containers hardly serve here as placeholders for the future and they are also not an interim compromise. Instead, they represent the cowardice to discuss what a city really wants and needs to build."²

In 1916, Canadian engineer Peter Norman Nissen, who served as an officer in the British Army, developed a model for standardized, lightweight housing out of prefabricated components named "Nissen huts" after him. They were used for military purposes during both world wars. Following World War II, they served widely as refugee shelters. At the end of the 1940s in Hamburg alone, approximately 14,000 people lived in settlements created with Nissen huts. Occupants attested to the extreme cold in the thin-walled, poorly heated huts, adding catastrophic health conditions to the social stigma associated with living in refugee accommodations.

Tempelhof Field

Since 2010, the airfield of the former Tempelhof Airport has been used by all segments of the population as a huge recreational park for everything from picnics to urban gardening to sporting activities of all sorts. In winter, though, sleet and icy wind from the east turn it into one of Berlin's most inhospitable places.

In early December 2017, after a months-long search for a managing operator, another so-called "Tempohome" was finally opened here as refugee accommodations. Ten of these container settlements already exist in other locations around Berlin and another seven are still under construction. Of these, Tempelhof is the largest with spots for up to 1,200 refugees. According to the State Office for Health and Social Affairs, Berlin took in approximately 100,000 refugees in 2015 and 2016, a majority of whom were initially housed in community emergency shelters such as gymnasiums, former office buildings, department stores, and other public buildings. At the end of 2015, nearly 3,000 people were living in the hangars of the former Tempelhof Airport, densely packed into makeshift, 16 x 16 foot, open-top sleeping boxes of six bunk beds, separated by exhibition walls, each containing up to twelve people. Initially conceived as short-term and transitional, many refugees had to stay for up to two years in these accommodations, which were repeatedly criticized due to difficult hygienic conditions and lack of privacy.



Photo by Ingo Kratisch

Even after closing the hangars as an emergency shelter in December 2017, the Senate of Berlin still holds onto the asylum arrival center in Hangar 2. All new asylum seekers arriving in Berlin are sent there for their first three days. This was vehemently condemned in a recently published protest drafted by the Berlin Refugee Council:

During the all-important phase of their asylum procedure, asylum-seekers must spend their nights inside the twenty-meter-high aircraft garage with over 100 people and constant noise levels in open-top sleeper cabins without doors. They are given no time to arrive in Berlin and find their bearings, get a peaceful night's sleep, or be advised on the asylum procedure during the day. At the earliest, people are allowed to leave the hangar after the third day. Only then does LAF³ provide them with regular accommodations in Berlin (communal housing or preliminary reception centers).⁴

When compared to accommodations opened earlier in other parts of the city, Tempohome at Tempelhof is an improvement, with common areas, playgrounds, and sports fields. Nevertheless, at an open house day in early December, the sterile containers and a somewhat helpless attempt to generate a little village coziness by placing rustic wooden benches around the open spaces, gave the impression that nobody in this place will ever feel at home. But there is not much time left to feel at home here anyway: the 17-million-euro containers will have to be dismantled by 2019 since Tempelhof law prohibits permanent construction on the site.⁵

Furthermore, a high fence was set up around the container settlement for the security of refugees—the Senate of Berlin asserts—since, according to Federal Criminal Police Office statistics, accommodations for asylum seekers in Germany are attacked almost every day, despite a downward trend. The instances include raids, bomb attacks, and arson. Refugee camps are easily identified targets for xenophobic aggression. Given such facts, the need for the fence is understandable, and yet, as with so many of

these pragmatic considerations, an uneasy feeling lingers. An image is being created here that has nothing to do with the acclaimed "welcoming culture" of the Germans. Rather, it is much more about separation, ghettoization, and exclusion.

Moreover, the contemporary park-like impression is not an accurate reflection of the historical complexities of Tempelhof Field, which represents by no means a neutral terrain: located in the immediate vicinity of today's refugee camp was one of Berlin's first concentration camps, *KZ Columbia*, a former military prison used from 1933–34 initially as a Gestapo prison for mainly political prisoners. An early detainee account appeared in 1935 in the *Neue Weltbühne*, published in exile in Prague. It was written by Kurt Hiller, a Jewish author, pacifist, and socialist. Hiller was brought here in July 1933 from Gestapo headquarters in Prinz-Albrecht-Straße and remained, as he wrote, "almost three and a half months in this hell of blood and excrement."⁶

KZ Columbia was notorious for its brutal guards and torture. There were many prominent detainees, including communist youth functionary Erich Honecker; Robert M. W. Kempner, who was later deputy US chief counsel during the Nuremberg trials; and Leo Baeck, the rabbi and theologian for whom the Leo Baeck Institute is named. The *Columbia* building was demolished in 1938 to clear way for the monumental new construction of Tempelhof Airport that was commissioned by the Reich Ministry of Aviation. Tempelhof ceased operations as an airport on October 30, 2008.

An almost invisible and now badly neglected memorial, installed in 1994 on the opposite side of the street, offers a very slight public reminder of the *Columbia* concentration camp. The history of the forced labor camps that existed on the site between 1939 and 1945 was only publicly memorialized in 2012, when historical information panels were installed on the airfield.



Photo by Ingo Kratisch

New Neighborhoods

Today, containers used as emergency shelters do not always have a bad image. Refugee residents of the *Transit*, a residential ship opened in 2015 in Hamburg's Harburg district, describe their accommodations rather positively, which might be due to its manageable size, the location of the container ship near a residential and commercial district, and the numerous services provided by social workers and volunteers.⁷

In Berlin, a multitude of private initiatives are helping to plug the gaps where slow administration processes and standardized solutions are perceived as insufficient or inappropriate. These self-organized responses to the crisis are touching almost all aspects of life, helping with translation, legal support, language training, health advice, and child care. Some, like the above mentioned *Flüchtlingsrat Berlin e.V.* already existed long before the current crisis, since the early 1980s. Others have developed more recently. *Neue Nachbarschaft (New Neighbourhoods)* for example is a very successful project in Berlin's Moabit district. It was founded in 2013 by the artist and political activist Marina Naprushkina and has since become an important social meeting point with more than 400 active members and many supporters.⁸

I'm writing this text as a neighbor of the new *Tempohome*, at a moment where it is impossible to adopt a distant position and to understand all the complexities of the asylum politics in the city. There may be many sensible, administrative, political, and economic reasons for accommodating refugees in container villages. And for many refugees, these accommodations are a decidedly lesser evil than the far more precarious living conditions in communal housing centers. Yet it is hard to believe that in a city like Berlin—full of ambitious young architects, think tanks, and experimental residential projects—no better solution than that can be found.

Bettina Klein is a curator based in Berlin. She is Head of Visual Arts at the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program. Text translated from German to English by Erik Smith. With support from the Goethe-Institut Chicago.

¹ Corpus Iuris Civilis ("Body of Civil Law"), *Digesta 2*, 418 is the modern name for a collection of fundamental works in jurisprudence, issued from 529 to 534 by order of Justinian I, East Roman Emperor.

² Hendrik Lehmann, "Container-Architektur in Berlin," *Tagesspiegel* (January 21, 2015).

³ LAF, Landesamt für Flüchtlingsangelegenheiten, operating since August 2016.

⁴ Flüchtlingsrat Berlin e.V. press release, November 30, 2017.

⁵ <http://thfgesetz.de/>.

⁶ Source: www.thf-berlin.de

⁷ <https://www.welt.de/regionales/hamburg/article145800214/Hoffnung-statt-Angst-auf-dem-Wohnschiff-Transit.html>.

⁸ www.neuenachbarschaft.de.

ELLEN ROTHENBERG

ISO 6346:
ineluctable immigrant

SPERTUS INSTITUTE
FEBRUARY 1 TO APRIL 22, 2018

INTERVIEW WITH ELLEN ROTHENBERG

By Ionit Behar

IB | In the installation at Spertus Institute, you juxtapose, connect, and compare images of archival documents and objects from the Spertus collection—such as passports, state-issued identity documents, and immigration photographs—with images of the construction of Tempohome at Tempelhof, Berlin, one of the largest refugee settlements in Germany. How did you decide to work with these images?

ER | One could say that *ISO 6346: ineluctable immigrant* is being constructed between two cities: Berlin and Chicago, and two sites: the archive at Spertus Institute and Tempohome at Tempelhof. The work drifts and circulates between disparate geographies and multiple temporalities.

The impulse for the installation reflects the global refugee crisis. This crisis is unprecedented; the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has determined that there are more people displaced and on the move now than in any other time in history. Our initial conversations regarding the exhibition last winter coincided with the resurgence of xenophobia, overt racism, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and antisemitism both in the United States and in Europe.

IB | How did the research in the Spertus collection take place? What was the process like?

ER | The collection at Spertus is unique and complex with a wide range of objects and documents. Collections Assistant Tom Gengler and Director of Collections Kathy Bloch were generous guides with deep knowledge of the holdings. All the objects are identified by number and collection name. Some have brief descriptions and others thumbnail images.

I was intrigued by a particular description of an object without a corresponding image. The text described two sides: on one, a depiction of the Mediterranean and Black Sea with routes of blockade-runners; on the other, a barbed wire fence above the outline of the Palestine coast with blockade-runners bursting through. The description evoked current media images of refugees in boats and rafts crossing the Mediterranean in the opposite direction, traveling from Turkey and North Africa to Europe. Unexpectedly, this short descriptive text became a point of orientation for my research.

Also of significance was a Mexican passport and the immigration identity papers of Sonia Komsky, a Russian Jewish seamstress born in Kiev, who entered the United States via Mexico by herself in 1926. It contains a racialized description of her, detailing religion “Israelita” (Jewish), hair color “negro” (black), “cejas pobladas” (eyebrows bushy), and skin “blanca” (white). What was immediately resonant was her route from Mexico to the United States, a route across an increasingly contested and politicized border.

The historical reverberations of objects in the collection to our contemporary condition was striking.

IB | What does it mean when you take an object like a passport, usually attached to a specific function, and present it in a different way, paying attention to things like marks of the hand, fingerprints, folds, use, and wear?

ER | Historical documents are also objects invested with physical materiality, marked by use and cultural specificity. Passports and other documents of mobility contain detailed



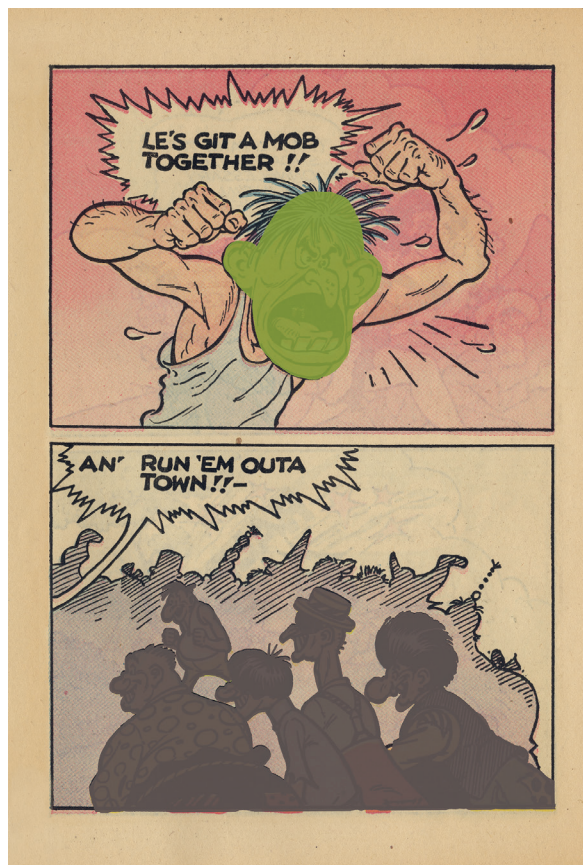
personal information and the multiple imprints of state sovereignty. They map routes of travel, immigration, and passage. Although the individual histories traced through the documents are fascinating, the essential and common element is their function: permitting or denying mobility, entrance, or departure. Almost all the documents share a terminology of identification, a characterization with an emphasis on physical characteristics such as race, religion, and occupation. The emphasis in the installation is not on the individual but on the systems of control and their inflection of consequence.

IB | Why have you used photographic images and not other materials? After all, you could have brought the objects and documents themselves into the exhibition, or used a different medium.

ER | The actual objects and documents speak to specific historical moments, places, and people. The installation and the images in it suggest a more generalized reading of historical continuities and reoccurring patterns that we are witnessing again today. This is not to say that one historical moment is identical or equivalent to another but that the photographic image shifts or destabilizes the temporal and circumstantial anchoring that the object itself embodies. The objects are photographed or framed at oblique angles or only partially revealed. An edge or a fragment intentionally registers distance between past and present and between the original object and its image. The construction images from Tempelhof and photographs from Spertus intersect, collide, and are superimposed within the architecture of the exhibition. Strategies of scale, repetition, and juxtaposition suggest an alternative reading of both sets of images.

IB | Although many of the objects you used are categorized under the term “immigration,” some come from other categories, such as “antisemitism.” For instance, Al Capp’s *Li’l Abner*, a satirical syndicated comic strip about characters in the fictional Appalachian town of Dogpatch, Arkansas.

ER | It was a surprise to discover *Mammy Yokum and the Great Dogpatch Mystery* in the collection. This 1956 comic book by Al Capp was commissioned by The Anti-Defamation League and features a story concerning difference, fear, racial discrimination, and mob violence. Of course from today’s perspective, Capp’s portrayal of Li’l Abner and his clan of “hillbillies” as poor, uneducated, rural people might be considered racist satire. However, this specific comic is graphically irresistible and relevant; it deploys Mammy Yokum as a feminist heroine teaching tolerance in her community and defending her different-seeming new neighbors.



IB | Since the 1990s, you have spent several months each year in Berlin. How does this inform your artistic practice?

ER | Berlin is an archeological site of the 20th century, a spatial consequence of extreme political symptoms. It has been my second city for more than 25 years and the location of both material and historical research for several projects. The city is a crossing point between east and west. Its sprawling urban space retains a certain intimacy and intensity from the years of its isolation as an island of the west, enclosed by the former East Germany. Now a unified city in a reunified country, it is changing quickly under the pressures of development, gentrification, and global capitalism. The city holds history close to the surface and Berliners have a unique level of engagement with historical and political issues. In the last two years, one critical shift has been the arrival of refugees, which peaked in 2015 with 1,000,000 people arriving in Germany, 80,000 of whom came to Berlin. This has prompted a debate on national identity and global responsibility. Currently, Germany has no official immigration law or policy; it only grants asylum. Issues of citizenship and pathways to legal status are not confined to Germany or Europe alone, but continue to be fiercely debated in the US and across the global community.

IB | Were you aware of Tempelhof and its historical tensions before you visited it for the first time?

ER | I was introduced to the refugee center at Tempelhof in May of 2017 by Dr. Felicitas Hentschke, a friend and colleague who has been volunteering there since 2015, as a member of *THWelcome*, a self-organized association of Berliners committed to refugee aid and support. Located in one of the hangar buildings in the former airport, *THWelcome* runs several programs including a café, sports area, mini-library, bicycle repair program, free clothing closet, German lessons, and programs for women. In late spring 2017, the government began the construction of

Tempohome Dorf, a “village” of more than 1,000 units made out of containers and placed behind the airport buildings on edge of Tempelhof Field. From May until mid-August, I documented the construction of container structures through the fence that surrounds its perimeter.

IB | *ISO 6346: ineluctable immigrant* is a thought-provoking title. “ISO 6346” refers to the international standard for identification and marking of shipping containers, such as those being used to house refugees at Tempelhof. Interestingly, the word “ineluctable” (meaning: *inescapable, unavoidable*) was first used in print in 1623, notably at the same time as the words “immigrate” and “migration.” Can you talk about how you arrived to this title and its significance?

ER | The modular units used for temporary housing at Tempelhof share almost identical dimensions to the global intermodal containers used for shipping. In the book *Shipping Container*, author Craig Martin writes about the standardized system that was developed to increase the speed and efficiency of travel and that became the international standard organization—the ISO code. These containers have become quantifiable units of global trade. “Ineluctable” refers to the unavoidable global movement of peoples. It’s a crisis that can’t be ignored, the refugees shouldn’t be rendered invisible, we need more humane solutions and to be aware of our own economic and political complicity regarding these conditions.

IB | In 2011, philosopher Giorgio Agamben wrote in his essay *What Is the Contemporary*: “the poet—the contemporary—must firmly hold his gaze on his own time, so as to perceive not its light but rather its darkness.” I think you are dedicating your life and practice to this “darkness” of time and space. Would you agree? Maybe you can talk a bit about your artistic relationship to the “darkness of time.” Do you see your work as political activism? Would you call yourself an activist?

ER | I would say that the work of the artist and poet is to address their time. The commitment is to activate participation, to work with questions, and create opportunities for conversations that might not happen elsewhere. In all times, especially “dark times,” it is critical to reach across communities, institutions, and borders to address our moment and to envision a different future. My working methodology is not singular but inclusive, a collective effort by many individuals and contributing institutions both local and international. The exhibition and related public programs include artists, writers, poets, filmmakers, activists, curators, and others—their contribution is essential and formative.

IB | Throughout your career your works seem to produce a common effect on the audience; there is no single message or subject but rather a set of questions posed as a way for the viewer to build their own meaning. Is your work more about experiencing than understanding?

ER | My installations are speculative, propositional, and intentionally open. They put into play a series of related perspectives and observations, with meaning constructed in the moments and spaces in-between. Rather than occupying an overly determined position politically or aesthetically *ISO 6346: ineluctable immigrant* is porous, non-linear with multiple thresholds and exit points. Understanding and experiencing are not deliverables but shared projects and everyone’s work.



ELLEN ROTHENBERG

Ellen Rothenberg’s work is concerned with the politics of everyday life and the formation of communities through collaborative practices. Her installations and public projects often employ the iconography of social movements and their residual documents to interrogate the mechanisms underlying contemporary political engagement and social dialogue. Her work—architecturally scaled installations, public projects, performance, collaborations, and writing—uncovers histories embedded in the present.

Rothenberg’s work has been presented in North America and Europe at institutions including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; the Museum of London, Ontario; The Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco; the Neues Museum Weserburg, Bremen; Royal Festival Hall, London; and the Brukenthal National Museum, Sibiu, Romania. Her awards include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, Bunting Institute Radcliffe College Harvard University, Illinois Arts Council, Massachusetts Artist Foundation Fellowships, and grants from CEC Artslink, Charles Engelhard Foundation, LEF Foundation, and NEA Artists Projects. She has worked in collaboration with the Chicago Torture Justice Memorial Project, Future Force Geo Speculators, and Chelen Amencia, Romania. Rothenberg teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she was recently appointed an inaugural Faculty Research Fellow of the Institute for Curatorial Research and Practice.

This exhibition is organized by Ionit Behar, Spertus Institute’s Curator of Collections and Exhibitions.