

ISO 6346: ineluctable immigrant

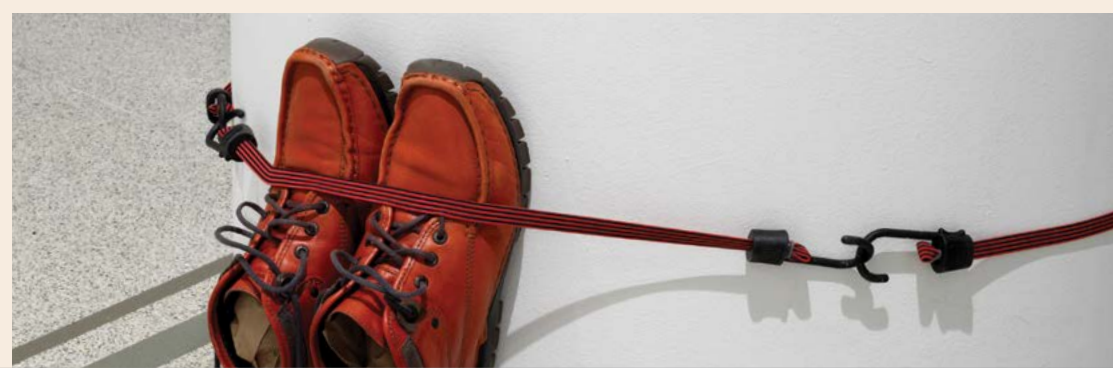
ELLEN ROTHENBERG

FEBRUARY 6–APRIL 13, 2019

The James
Gallery

THE
GRADUATE
CENTER
CITY UNIVERSITY
OF NEW YORK





Katherine Carl in conversation with Ellen Rothenberg

KC: Starting with the specific place of this research project, I see the location of Templehof as a metaphorical archive. It contains so many layers of history and use; I imagine that so many stories would tumble forth if this place could speak. How did you access this knowledge through artistic means by engaging with objects of architecture, documents, infrastructure? What emerged from traversing the terrain and from observations and conversations?

ER: Tempelhof is not an archive. It's a large site in the middle of Berlin, the largest urban green space in the city. It's not contained or categorized. It's open and accessible space... but it also functions like many other sites in Berlin. There are multiple histories embedded in the site reverberating those pasts. It's the site of early air demonstrations by the Wright brothers and has a long military history. It was the site of slave and forced labor; the site of one of Europe's largest buildings, the airport terminal built by the Nazis—the same airport used by the allies during the Berlin Airlift; the site of housing for refugees from the east in the postwar period; and now, its current uses... as a site for art and cultural events, recreation, and refugee housing in the aftermath of the 2015 influx.

In many ways, Tempelhof is the opposite of an archive: messy, open, porous, a site for multiple uses... one doesn't access it through a database but through uncontrolled entrances; and it's huge: 300 hectares in the middle of the city.

I was introduced to the refugee center at Tempelhof by Dr. Felicitas Hentschke, but my real focus of engagement was behind the airport buildings near the airfield itself: the construction site of refugee housing for more than 1000 occupants that remained in progress through spring and summer of 2017. I was viewing everything from the perimeter, through a fence. These became my limits, but also a structure for looking and thinking.



Hole, 2018
30" x 30"
Ink-jet print mounted on Tricell panel



Green Passport: EXPIRED, 2018
36" x 24"
Ink-jet print

What does the infrastructure of the site—the holes, wires, etc.—come to signify in the actual site and in the act of displacing the site into the gallery setting? By making these items—which are sculptural and tactile—into a photograph, the strange holes and wandering wires seem to utter the beleaguered wish for the housing to be more than it is—to be a real support structure for the lives inside, to be a sturdy abode. Yet it reveals this architecture to be rhetoric, showing how inadequate and feeble the pretensions are, how unstable all of this is.



New Citizens! (blue), 2018
12" x 16"
Ink-jet print

I wasn't sure *what* I was looking for. Instead of locking onto objects, features, or specific subject matter, I honed a working method, returning on multiple occasions, producing an extended presence, using the camera as a viewing and a note-taking device. I must have produced two thousand images over the course of four months.

What emerged from my continuous return was a response to watching the construction of these minimal, modernist, modular structures. I was transfixed by the activity of construction. They arrived flat-packed, but then took shape, volume, and interconnection by workers from Eastern Europe who were told not to talk to the public. That heightened the observational aspect... all the while behind me were runners, bikers, people on skateboards, a set of parallel acts and activities.

The only identifying information about what was going on was a sign ironically identifying the site as *Tempohome*, temporary housing for refugees.

Through that method, the photographs became my own research archive... a secondary site, helping to define what I saw.

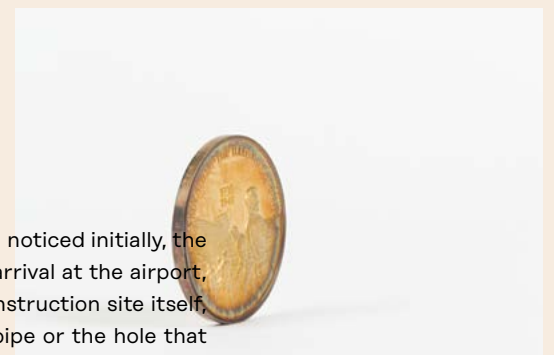
That's a very good way of putting it...

In some ways it was the temporary infrastructure that I noticed initially, the portable sinks for refugees to wash themselves upon arrival at the airport, the lockers that were everywhere, and then on the construction site itself, the specificity of the infrastructure details: the drainpipe or the hole that went through the tarmac to support fence poles. They became places of indeterminacy. Whereas the gas and electrical systems—the wiring, the monitoring placed on the containers—echoed the state systems of control and surveillance.

I don't see the transposition of the site into the gallery as a simple one, since it also includes objects and images of immigration from the archive at the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership.

As for the desires that you speak about, that perceptive view on your part... perhaps I wasn't consciously aware of that at the time. For me, it was a vast network of modular systems, and I was trying to understand what was being produced. It was hugely expensive for something that was temporary and echoed so many of the histories—camps and prisons... not homes, exposed and fenced off at the same time... demarcated, observable.

The image of the spinning coin thoroughly transfixed me. The coin at once commemorates Israel's heroic illegal immigrants as its agile mobility provides a counterpoint to the structure (albeit temporary) of the *Tempohome* installation. Your choice to include this politically charged object in the form of a photograph serves to slow it down so that viewers may reflect on the original meaning of the phrase and how this meaning has changed over time. What did you intend with the selection of this particular coin and its presentation as a photograph? This leads me to ask further questions about the construction of history through such an object: How is commemoration lived today? On social media? What slower modes do we have to build with? With the glut of images speeding at us, and right past us constantly, what advice do you have for reading images slowly today and creating images with friction that act on the viewer slowly?



Illegal Immigrants (no. 1–4), 2018
36" x 24"
Wall mounted ink-jet print

My intention is to put these multiple objects, spaces, historical moments, and conditions into dynamic relation with each other. I intentionally decided not to include actual historical objects or documents from the archives and to photograph all archival materials in an oblique way in order to highlight the systems and hierarchies at work in the production; passports, immigration documents, letters of safe passage, all of these state produced documents are only seen from the outside. This oblique view, the enlargement of the image, the shift in scale from the original object to the represented image, they all do the same thing. They indicate my own distance and decouple the specifics of history or fixed historical stasis. They put these objects and images in conversation with the present. What does it mean to valorize illegal immigration at one point in time and put it in conversation with the current negative politicization of migration and immigrants not only here, but in many places in the world?

By slowing down, I see it perhaps more as an unpacking of the tightly layered meanings, ironies, and reverberations between all these moments in time.

It's in the space of the gallery that the slowing down occurs... it's a quiet and contemplative space. I employ that as a given, a place to consider all these interactive images, spatial elements, bodily habitations, architectures, presences, and absences.

The photographs themselves are presented in different modes: adhered directly to the wall, on substrates of cardboard presented as objects, conventionally mounted, scaled as architecture, and placed within the architecture of the gallery space—not in a linear narrative condition but, rather, a more open-formed relationship.

The floor plan demands an embodiment of space. The viewer occupies the space at scale, projecting oneself in these containers... all within sight of 5th Avenue and 35th Street in a building that is currently encased within temporary scaffolding and plastic fencing, not unlike the condition at Berlin's *Tempohome*.

I see the installation here at the James Gallery as a jumping off point for communal activity about immigration, whether historical or contemporary, as well as imagined future inhabitation. This is similar to your project *elsetime*, in which the installation became a hub of performance activity related to your oeuvre. Because the site of Templehof is so charged, what does it mean to transpose it to the gallery space? Along similar lines, having *ISO 6346* physically span the gallery space recalls the site-specific installation, *Common Assembly*, that DAAR created in the gallery in 2012. Though they investigated a different topic of the Palestinian Parliament, the act of translating a charged site in a gallery space creates a friction that I find generative and possibly hopeful, but also vexing. What meaning is made by deliberately "objectifying" the *Tempohome* site and placing it in the gallery? How did you envision the installation would carry the layered, lived, political realities of that place that are evolving and dynamic?



Detail of *Tempohome Stack*, 2018
19.5" x 13"
Wall mounted ink-jet print



Al Capp: Let's Git a Mob Together, 2018
15" x 22"
Ink-jet print

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ELLEN ROTHENBERG BIOGRAPHY

Ellen Rothenberg's work is concerned with the politics of everyday life and the formation of communities through collaborative practices. From her performances to her installations and research projects, Rothenberg has probed formal boundaries for what they can *produce*, designing responsive structures that encourage participation. Her work has been presented in North America and Europe: at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the Museum of Fine Arts and The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; The Museum of London, Ontario; The Neues Museum Weserburg, Bremen; Royal Festival Hall, London; The Brukenthal National Museum, Sibiu, Romania; among others. Awards received include NEA Regional Fellowships, The Bunting Institute Fellowship at Radcliffe College Harvard University, The Massachusetts Artist Foundation Fellowships, Illinois Arts Council Fellowships, and grants from The Charles Engelhard Foundation, The LEF Foundation, and NEA Artists Projects. As Adjunct Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and inaugural Faculty Research Fellow at the Institute for Curatorial Research and Practice at SAIC, Rothenberg has produced a hybrid pedagogy in her teaching. Working with established communities, and forming new ones, has become an essential part of her working process. She has worked in collaboration with the Chicago Torture Justice Memorial Project, Future Force Geo Speculators, and *Chelen Amenca*, Romania. *SHADOWED!*, a new book on Rothenberg's work, was published by The Green Lantern Press in 2018.

THE JAMES GALLERY

The Graduate Center, CUNY
365 Fifth Avenue at 35th Street
New York, NY 10016
centerforthehumanities.org/james-gallery

Hours:

Tue-Thu, 12–7pm
Fri-Sat, 12–6pm
Free and Open to the Public

The Amie and Tony James Gallery, located in midtown Manhattan at the nexus of the academy, contemporary art, and the city, is dedicated to exhibition-making as a form of advanced research embedded in the scholarly work of the Graduate Center across multiple disciplines. The gallery creates and presents artwork to the public in a variety of formats. While some exhibitions remain on view for extended contemplation, other activities such as performances, workshops, reading groups, roundtable discussion, actions, salons, and screenings have a short duration. The gallery works with scholars, students, artists, and the public to explore working methods that may lie outside usual disciplinary boundaries.

Curator: Katherine Carl
Installation: Lanning Smith
Design: Sonia Yoon

Special thanks to:

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Inside images: *ISO 6346: ineluctable immigrant*, 2018, installation views, Spertus Institute, Chicago. Photos by Tom Van Eynde.

Top left:
Detail of *Tempohome Stack*, 2018
19.5" x 13"
Wall mounted ink-jet print

Bottom left:
Drainpipe, 2018
27" x 18"
Ink-jet print mounted on Tricel panel

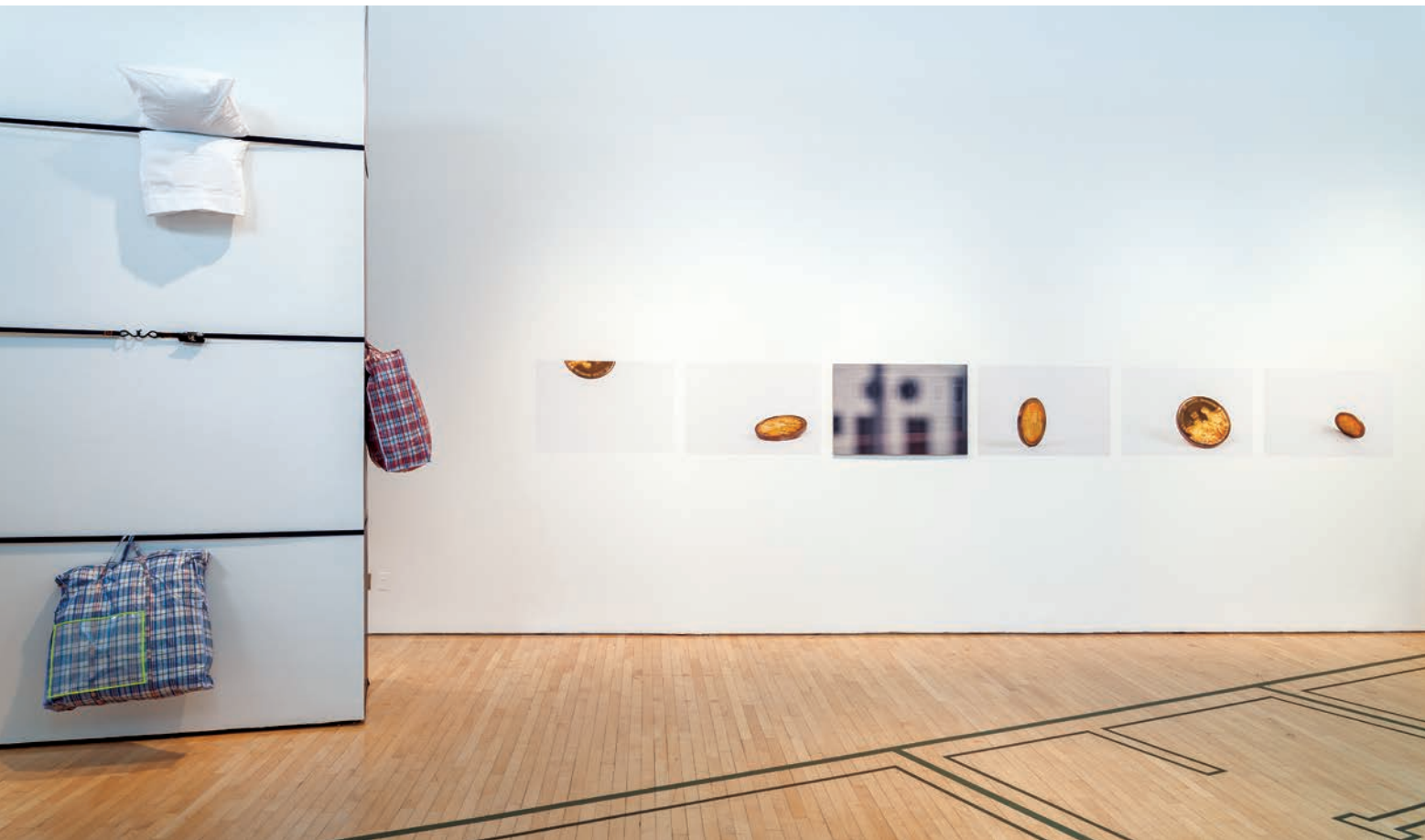
Top and bottom right:
Detail of *Carrier*, 2018
dimensions variable
Documents, shoes, pillow, mailbox, ratchet straps, bungee cords

Middle right:
Infrastructure Wall (detail view: Fit auf dem Feld), 2018
24.4" x 96"
Ink-jet prints, cardboard, and
Tricel panels mounted on wooden frames



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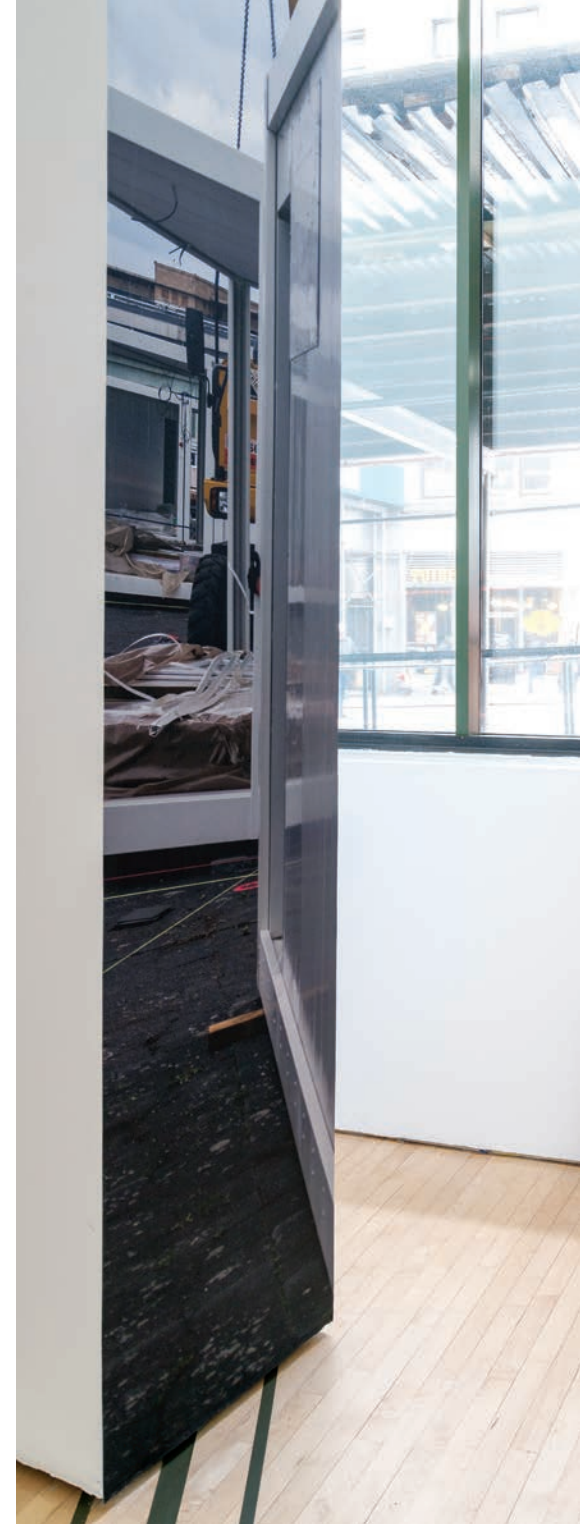


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Ellen Rothenberg, *ISO 6346: ineluctable immigrant*
Installation views at the James Gallery,
The Graduate Center, CUNY.
Courtesy of The James Gallery and the artist, 2019.
Photos: Cary Whittier.